



CHAPTER III

Developing Working Class Struggles

Primarily Bengal & Bombay were chosen by the British as the centres for establishing modern industries in the subcontinent. They established their first cotton mill - Fort Gloster Cotton Mill, which later became known as Bowreah Cotton Mill, in 1818 in Bengal. First jute mill in the country came into existence in 1854, the year in which the first railway link was also in operation in Bengal. The first political participation by the working class in our country was witnessed in Mumbai in 1908 when Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a great leader of the nationalist movement was arrested and sent to imprisonment for six years by the British police. In protest Cotton Mill workers throughout the country including Bombay launched heroic total strikes and movements for five days on the streets and fought pitched battle with the police and military. Ganpad Govind, an illustrious son of the working class movement, was killed by the British force for his active part in the movement. Lenin in his observation of the entire episode from Russia hailed the incident as a politically conscious mass-movement by the Indian proletariat. [Ref. Inflammable Material in World Politics, Collected works-Vol.15, Page 184].

Working class in the country waged series of movements from 1918 till 1945-46. During this period it became evident that apart from their respective mills and factories workers extended their direct support to their counterparts in other sectors also. The workers entered the phase of modern working-class movement concept. During the last leg of World War I in 1917-18 the Indian working-class as a whole faced a tormenting situation: exploitation more severe, prices of essential commodities soaring two fold because of the impact

of the war, profits attaining newer heights but wages remaining stagnant. By the end of 1918 strikes by cotton mill workers in Mumbai made tremendous impact on the entire industry; by January 1919 all the workers of the industry numbering 3.25,000 joined the strikes. Then came sinister Rowlatt Act, - large number of workers throughout the country joined Hartal to express their united voice of protest and indignation against the sinister design of the British rule. This was completely a political movement. The working-class exhibited their strong sense of awareness. Many more movements raised waves. Rajani Palme Dutt, a prominent leader of International Communist movement, in his analysis of the scenario commented that Indian working class movement has entered the phase of modern working class movement. Number of unions and associations in the important centres like Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Madras etc. kept growing; finally leading to the formation of the AITUC in 1920.

To be more specific, preparatory phase for organized trade union movement started during 1900 to 1917 in the country. However, before that dealing with this phase, we should mention some working class actions, though sporadic, that took place in the nineteenth century:

1827- Perhaps the earliest known strike was observed by Palki Bearers in Calcutta and solidarity strike by Ferry workers in the Ganges and Drivers of Horse carts.

Then there were strikes by –

Tea Plantation Workers of Cachar, Assam in 1855-57.

1862 – Porters in Howrah Railway Station .

1873 – Masons in Bombay.

1877 – Empress Mill Workers in Nagpur.

1882-1890 – Strikes on several occasions by the workers in Bombay and Madras - all together 25 days.

Let us now deal with the **Unions and struggles during first two decades of the 20th century** before formation of All India Trade Union Congress :

Bengal Press Workers' Union, one of the earliest unions was formed on 21.10.1905. Industrial Strike actions were also built up one after another in this phase :

In September, 1905 – Workers of Burn & Company at Howrah, Calcutta Tramways Company, Coolies and Scavengers of Calcutta Corporation numbering 2,000,

In October of the same year - 950 Guards of East Indian Railway,

In August, 1906 - Workers of Clive Jute Mill of Budge Budge etc.

Wage increase and improvement of service conditions were the basic demands of all those strikes.

The material situation in India was ripe for industrial revolution as happened in the countries of Europe and America, but the rulers here decided otherwise. They preferred to retain the country's feudal economy as their captive market and continued to shift our agricultural products as raw materials for factories in England and sold their manufactured products here at their dictated prices. Highly skilled artisans of the country were virtually destroyed. Robbed of their professions, they had to leave their ancestral homes, become destitute, flock to cities and industrial areas in search of new livelihood like their counterparts of the peasant community. Those who got new jobs in mills and factories had to work for long hours under hitherto unknown unhygienic conditions, with a pittance

as wages, live in shanties or dingy sheds attached to the factory compounds. Conditions being too unbearable, many left jobs. Rest of the uprooted multitude remained unemployed and passed their days in abject poverty, hunger and diseases. Faced with the problem of workers leaving their jobs and resultant fall in production and profit the British government enacted 'Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859'. Hard experience of living in the cruel situation taught them to gather courage and face the situation squarely. Struggles built up - sometimes organized, sporadic many times, even strike actions took place. As the working hours were too long like their counterparts in other countries, here also their main demand was for reduction of working hours.

In 1918-19 urge for organized, united movement developed in different parts of our country. In 1918 Madras Labour Union and the Majur Mahajan with Gandhian philosophy were formed.

Some of the prominent Unions that came close on the heels were –

1919 – The Press Employees Association, Calcutta, The Calcutta Tramways Employees' Association, Punjab Press Association, Madras and Southern Maharashtra Railway Union, N.W. Railway Union etc.

1920 – All India Postal and R.M.S. Union, The Imperial Bank of India Indian Staff Association, The Burma Labour Association, The Oriya Labour Union, Bombay Port Trust Employees' Union, Indian Seamen's Union, Calcutta, Howrah Labour Union etc.

During 1919-20 –

Strikes of big dimensions came in quick succession. 17,000 workers of Woolen Mill at Cawnpore, 1,50,000 workers of

Bombay, 16.000 Railwaymen, 35.000 Jute Mill workers in Bengal, 60.000 Cotton Mill workers in Bombay, 16.000 workers in Sholapur, 30.000 Cotton Mill workers at Ahmedabad etc stopped work for varying periods on demand of wage rise and better service conditions.

The number of industrial workers in India under the Factories Act swelled from 85,100 in 1914 to 2.6 million by 1921.

One of the earliest, protracted and organized strikes was launched on 18.04.1928 by 18.000 workers of Tata Iron and Steel Works in Jamshedpur for almost 150 days. Gandhiji intervened at the invitation of Rev. C.F. Andrews, President of the union, held discussion with the management and came to an understanding to end the strike but this did not satisfy the striking workers.

AITUC - First Central Trade Union in the Country

All India Trade Union Congress was founded in a meeting on October 31 - November 2, 1920 at Empire Theatre Hall, Bombay. It was participated by 101 delegates representing 1.40.854 members of 64 unions from different provinces. Present amongst others were Motilal Nehru and Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel from the Indian National Congress, B.P.Wadia, Mrs. Annie Besant, Rev. C.F.Andrews, B.G.Horniman, K.F.Nariman etc. from Madras Labour Union, Smt. Namat Joshi – Physician and Smt. Abantikabhai Gokhale amongst women delegates. Mr. and Mrs. Jinnah were also present. Lajpat Rai, President of Congress at that time, was elected as President and Diwan Chamanlal as General Secretary.

Excerpts of his Presidential speech at the AITUC founding conference is given below:

“In the eyes of the world, we are a nation of coolies inferior in everything that distinguishes a mere animal from men. This

was a trick by which organized British capital managed to create a prejudice against us in the minds of the white workers of Europe, America and Africa. It was necessary for their purpose. Any bond of brotherhood or of mutual interest between the workers of Europe and America, on the one hand, and those of Asia on the other would have destroyed the spell by the force of which they exploited and sweated both. To the workers of Manchester was always presented the bug bear of the cheap labour of India. We in India were kept in fear of the competition of Manchester. The war, however, has broken the spell. The workers of Europe and America have now discovered that the cause of workers is one and the same all the world over, and that there can be no salvation for them unless and until the workers of Asia were organized and internationally affiliated, labour in Europe threatens to turn the tables over their masters, the employers and they recognize that the success of their movement demands a close association of European workers with the workers of Asia. So long as there is cheap labour in China and India, and so long as India is helpless to keep out foreign capital, and to prevent the latter using Indian and Chinese labour to the detriment of the European workers, the cause of the European proletariat is neither safe nor secure. The movement we are inaugurating to-day is thus of more than of national importance. It is a matter of international significance. The workers of India are joining hands and brains not only to solidify the interests of Indian labour, but also to forge a link in the chain of international brotherhood. The future is on the laps of gods and prophecy is unsafe but it may be safely predicted that the success of the movement to which we are giving birth to-day, may eventually turn out to be an event of world importance. The two employers of labour in our country are the government and the private capitalist. The government also is in its own way a big capitalist.

“The department of railways, post office, telegraph and channels and others are capitalistic and more or less commercial concerns. Both these classes of employers have all India resources at their disposal. Handicapped as labour is in many other respects, labour also must have an all India organization and all India propaganda to meet its opponents on equal ground’.

“The government of this country is wasteful and extravagant in the salaries and allowances it allows to its higher service. It would be bankrupt if it met the demands of the subordinate services and lowest rank of its employees also in the same spirit. Consequently to avoid bankruptcy, it sweats its lowest service in a way perhaps no other government on the face of the earth does. There is no country in the world which pays its higher civil and military services anything like the salaries the government of India does. In the whole of the United States there is only one man who gets more than 35,000 rupees per annum and that is the President of the United States. In Japan, even the prime minister does not get the amount. In India, there are dozens, mostly Englishmen, who get more than that amount. Compare the salaries post by post and you will find the standard extravagantly higher in India while living even now is comparatively cheaper. Yet within the last two or three years, the government has sanctioned enormous increases in these salaries.

“The worst feature of the situation, however, is the extreme disparity that exists between the salaries of the lowest services and those of the highest. The difference between maximum and minimum salaries in the United States and Great Britain on the one hand and India on the other is simply startling. In the United States, the lowest salary allowed to a clerk or a porter in government office is from about 1000 to 1200 dollars

a year, the highest allowed to a cabinet minister is 12,000 (US \$). In India, a cabinet minister gets Rs.80,000 a year besides allowances, while his ORDERLY gets Rs.120/ a year OR at the most Rs.180. In calculating the needs of a civil servant, the government of India shows a great deal of generosity provided for the education of his children, for the luxury of travelling to and from Europe, and secures him a high standard of comfort in India. But when it enters into calculation ascertaining the proper salary of postman or a telegraph peon or any orderly or a railway porter or signaller, it not only disregards all these considerations, but is mean enough to bring into account the earnings of his wife and his minor children. Such is the difference between man and man in the eyes of the Christian government. That there is difference between work and work, between mere manual work and skilled work, be assumed but is the difference so great as to justify this disparity between the economic needs of one from the other? To fight against such a system of inhuman inequalities the workers of India, whether in government or in private employ, require an all India organization to help each other by mutual sympathy, counsel and aid.

“The Indian capitalists must meet labour half way and must come to an understanding with it on the basis of sharing the profits in the reasonable and just proportion. It must be made worthwhile of labour to co-operate with the capitalist to advance and develop Indian Industries. If however, Indian capital wants to ignore the needs of labour and can think only of its huge profits, it should expect no response from labour and no sympathy from the general public. If labour must remain half starved, ill-clothed, badly housed and destitute of education, it can possibly have no interest in the development of Indian Industries and all appeal in the name of patriotism must fail. On these ground and several others it is desirable

that Indian labour should lose no time to organize itself on a national scale.

“The experience of the few strikes we have had in Bombay, Madras, Lahore and Calcutta, proves, beyond the shadow of a doubt that our workers are much more disciplined and self-controlled than the corresponding ranks of labour in Great Britain, United States, France and Germany. In Lahore, 50,000 railwaymen, kept up a strike for about seven weeks without having one case of violence, or injury to the property, against them. Even the capitalists admired their manner and method. The people of India are probably the most law-abiding people on earth, and if any government uses any repression against them, it only betrays its own weakness. That makes the people of India law-abiding is not the existence of fear or coercive laws, but their own innate and inborn gentleness and goodness. There must be something rotten in the constitution and nature of a government which needs martial law and military terrorism to keep such people in hand and to preserve order among them. The action of the government of India in preventing access of the people of India to the socialist and labour thought of the world is the least justifiable to all its repressive actions and should be unreservedly condemned.

“All concerned in the welfare of labour will have to work hard and in a spirit of sacrifice and co-operation. This spirit of sacrifice should particularly characterize the efforts of such brain-workers in the ranks of the labour, who are educated enough to lead the movement. Those who are not strictly wage earners but who feel for labour will have to give their time, talent and money for the improvement of the wage-earners’ lot. The government and the capitalists will both try to discredit them, but they must stand by the faith in them, and ungrudgingly give the best in them to the cause of humanity.

Pretending to protect the interests of labour, the government does not like interference of those who are not actually wage-earners themselves in the organization of the labour, because they know that unorganized, illiterate and unskilled labour is incompetent to fight its own battles and can easily be made to yield in negotiations between them and their educated, resourceful and wide-awake opponents. The workmen should not fall into this trap. For some time to come, they need all the help, guidance and co-operation they can get from such among the intellectuals as are prepared to espouse their cause. Eventually, labour shall find its leaders from its own ranks.”

A few of the AITUC affiliated unions at the time of the founding conference in 1920 :

Bombay Oil Workers’ Union, Bombay.

Indian Railwaymen’s Union, Bhopal.

Madras Tramway-men’s Union.

NW Railwaymen’s Association, Lahore.

Ceylon Workers’ Federation, Colombo.

Chaprasa Union, Bombay.

Labour Association, Jamshedpur.

Bombay Tramwaymen’s Union.

Girni Kamgarh Sangh.

Mechanical and Pumping Workshop Union, Madras.

Lokraj Factory Workmen’s Union, Jubbulpur.

Clerics’ Union, Rawalpindi.

Press Workers’ Union, Karachi.

Railway Workmen’s Association, Jhansi.

Mechanical Engineers' Assn, Amraoti.

Govt. Press workers' Peace Establishment Union, Delhi etc.

Splits in the organization – 10th conference of AITUC was held at Nagpur in 1929. Rifts within the organization on the question of involvement of AITUC in anti-imperialist struggle led to the formation of a separate trade union named Indian Trade Union Federation. In 1938 AITUC and ITUF patched up and were reunited. Another split took place in the 11th session of AITUC held in Calcutta in 1931. In 1931 the Communists separated themselves from the organization on the issue of defending the line of class struggle. However, they came back to the fold of AITUC in 1935.

Successive struggles followed the formation of AITUC: Railway workers in the South, Cloth mill workers in Bombay in 1928, and again in 1929 including those in Calcutta, Madras etc. went on strike for months together. Thousands of TUs were formed in different parts of the country. From 1921 to 1930 number of strikes took place in India were 1857 as per reports of the Royal Commission of Labour.

One of the earliest, protracted strikes was launched on 18.04.1928 by 18,000 workers of Tata Iron and Steel Works in Jamshedpur for almost 150 days. Gandhiji intervened at the invitation of Rev. C.F. Andrews, President of the union, held discussion with the management and came to an understanding to end the strike but this did not satisfy the striking workers.

Further Developments in Trade Union Front – Movements post-1930's:

In the '30's because of the impact of World economic depression exploitation of workers in the country mounted. Workers undaunted by the British attacks surged in actions that also strengthened national movement. Movements were

in galore particularly in jute, machinery, cotton, steel and many more industries during 1937-39. Innumerable workers went on strikes and lashed the centres like Kanpur, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, Jamshedpur, Madras, Calcutta etc.

80,000 workers and babus of Great Peninsular Railway went into a long drawn strike during 1930-1933. Port & Dock workers in Calcutta resorted to strike action on Nov 28, 1934. Working class throughout Bengal, especially in Calcutta, launched processions, rallies etc. on issues like August Movement, 1943 great Famine, release of freedom fighters of Azad Hind Foj, Rashid Ali Day, Naval upsurge, Army struggle, 1946 elections, Post & Telegraph strike of 1946 etc.

In 1937 in Bombay alone there were 88 strikes involving 1,09,858 workers causing 8,77,211 man days lost. In Madras – 61 strikes, workers involved 60,980, man days lost 6,65,404. In Uttar Pradesh – 15 strikes involving 63,350 workers. Bihar – 14 strikes, Punjab – 14 strikes, Madhya Pradesh – 5 strikes: and total man-days lost in those strikes were 2,50,000. In Bombay 90,000 workers took part in a historic strike action in protest against anti-working class 'Industrial Relations Bill' passed by the Congress regime in Bombay to sub-serve capitalists' interests. In Bengal between Feb and Apl, 1937 – 2,25,000 jute workers participated in long drawn strike action.

Post-1946 Movements - Just after the close of World War II industrial workers, office employees and peasant movements escalated. Independence movement also gained momentum from these movements and intensified further with countrywide protests against trial of INA prisoners, which, coupled with contemporary peasants struggles like Telengana and Tebhaga, and last but not the least, Navy Revolt panicked the British Government so much so that they had to start meaningful negotiations on transfer of power. And India became free on

15th August 1947 with simultaneous birth of Pakistan as an independent country.

Impact of all the above developments had a positive influence on the bank employees who had so long been passive onlookers to developments of trade union movement. Shedding their callous attitude, they came out of their shells, formed unions, set up all-India organization and changed their service conditions through powerful struggle in course of time.

But before we delve into a comprehensive discussion of the trade union history of bank employees, we propose to briefly mention in this chapter some other Central Trade Unions formed in 1947 and afterwards. In the next chapter we shall give a brief account of banking from the Vedic Age through ancient and mediaeval period and its transition to modern banking only as a passing reference.

A Few Other Central Trade Unions.

INTUC – Just on the eve of Independence, only three months before it, Indian National Congress, apparently to curb the growing influence of the Communists in the AITUC and form an organization subservient to the ideology of INC, engineered a split and founded **Indian National Trade Union Congress** on May 3, 1947 as its trade union wing affiliated with International Trade Union Confederation. Acharya J.B. Kripalani, the then President of the Indian National Congress, inaugurated the founding conference which was presided over by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Among the distinguished political personalities who attended the opening session were Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Jagjivan Ram, B. G. Kher, Aruna Asaf Ali, Ram Manohar Lohia, Ashoka Mehta, etc.

Under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, the founding leaders preferred to let the INTUC have an independent identity

with its own constitution, while at the same time functioning as an arm of the Congress.

Since inception, INTUC has been maintaining very close relationship with AICC. In order to have regular interaction between the INTUC & AICC on issues of mutual interests a five-member Committee was appointed by the AICC in 1967 with Gulzarilal Nanda as the Convener. During 2002, an Advisory Committee was formed under the Chairmanship of Pranab Mukherjee comprising three General Secretaries representing AICC and G. Sanjeeva Reddy, President, along with General Secretary and two Vice-Presidents. Later Dr. Reddy was included as special invitee in the CWC.

BMS – The **Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh** was founded by Dattopantji Thengdi on July 23, 1955. Formation of BMS was not the result of split in the existing trade union organisations, unlike in the case of almost all other trade unions.

HMS – The **Hind Mazdoor Sangh** was founded in Howrah on December 24, 1948, by the Socialists, who broke away from the INTUC, Forward Bloc followers and independent unionists. Its founders included Basawon Singh, Ashok Mehta, R.S. Ruikar, Maniben Kara, Shibnath Banerjee, R.A. Khedgikar, T.S. Ramanujam, V.S. Mathur, G.G. Mehta. R.S. Ruikar was elected President and Ashok Mehta General Secretary.

UTUC – **United Trade Union Congress** is a central trade union organisation in India. UTUC is politically tied to Revolutionary Socialist Party. UTUC was founded at an All India Labour Conference in Calcutta on May 1, 1949. The founding president was professor K.T. Shah, a member of the Constituent Assembly from Bombay, and the founding general secretary was Mrinal Kanti Bose, a former AITUC president from Bengal.

AIUTUC – **All India UTUC** was founded at a conference held in Kolkata on 26-27 April 1958, following a split in the United Trade Union Congress. It was known as UTUC-Lenin Sarani (where it had its offices) to distinguish it from the original UTUC. In 1985 it was renamed as ‘United Trade Union Centre (Lenin Sarani) and in March 2008 the name was changed as All India United Trade Union Centre (All India UTUC).

TUCC – **Trade Union Coordination Committee**, a central trade union federation in India, is politically attached to All India Forward Bloc.

CITU – Basically centering round the question of approach to the ruling class, the prevailing economic crises, need for united struggle to defend the interest of the working class etc. ideological differences within the AITUC was simmering against the dominant leadership represented by S.A.Dange’s class collaborationist attitude. Attempts and persuasions to correct the approach and set the organization on the correct path of working class friendly stand failed. Even democratic functioning within the organisation appeared to be missing, denial of affiliations and also disaffiliations of unions became rampant. Under such a situation a good number of General Council and State Committee members of AITUC held a Convention at Vasco da Gama (Goa) on April 9 and 10, 1970 and adopted a Resolution some extracts of which are given hereunder:

“A grave situation faces the militant trade union movement and all class conscious workers in the country. The AITUC, which over long years had grown as the rallying centre for all militant trade unions in the country for carrying forward the united struggle of the working class has ceased to be so due to the class collaborationist policies of the Dangeites and is

serving as an instrument in their hands for splitting the trade unions and disrupting the united struggles of the workers.

“These class collaborationist policies were marked out as the official line of the AITUC in the notorious ‘Two Pillar Policy’. The Government’s plans of capitalist development in collaboration with foreign monopolies and with the massive aid from America and other imperialists, whose bankruptcy stands completely exposed to-day, were eulogized as plans for “independent development” and the working class was asked to support the Plans. The working class was thus sought to be disarmed and prevented from playing its role of rallying the democratic forces against the danger of penetration of American imperialism on our economic, political, social and cultural life, and in the struggle against the Government’s Plans and policies in the interest of monopolists and big landlords.

‘This Convention, therefore, is of the opinion that a new All India Trade Union Centre should be established to carry on the struggle for unity and to rally the entire working class around consistent policies of class struggle, and for unleashing the united struggles of the workers against the offensives of the ruling class...’

Foundation Conference – Accordingly an All India Trade Union Conference was held in Lenin Nagar, Ranji Stadium, Calcutta on 28th, 29th and 30th May, 1970.

Jyoti Basu delivered his welcome address as Chairman of the Reception Committee.

Altogether 4264 delegates representing 1759 unions with a membership of 8.04.637 had joined the Conference. Moreover 116 delegates and 1134 observers had been sent by fraternal unions, making the total number of participation to 5514. And from the Conference **Centre of Trade Unions** was formed.

B.T.Ranadive summed up the conclusions of the Conference in the following lines:

“We are starting a new organization, out of the very needs of the workers’ struggles, out of the class struggle, to which we adhere...

“We are starting a new organization with a new line. We wish to give a new orientation to the T.U. movement. Every one of us must change his own consciousness, must be determined to give up the old consciousness and the old practice; then alone will we be able to carry on a correct struggle against the reformist line of all others. And what is our struggle? We have already stated that our struggle is for the unity of the working class, unity of the T.U. movement. That unity should extend to all workers...

“The revisionist line has brought disruption in the working class and it is our business and our duty to see that unity is restored in the ranks of the working class and that its fighting forces are organized. The struggle for unity is a serious struggle, it has to be carried on with great precision, with great confidence and in the bargain and in the process, the forces of disruption have to be isolated. Only then, our organization can really develop the fighting strength of the working class, can be an effective organ of the struggle to defend the working class and can be an effective organ to develop its consciousness further so that it can discharge its political obligations which history has placed on it. Only then we will be able to seize initiative in the common democratic struggle to replace the bourgeois-landlord Government by a genuine people’s government, and forge a durable alliance with peasant masses and other democratic forces and march to victory against the ruling classes who exploit the people and growingly yield to imperialist pressure”.

B.T. Ranadive and P. Rammurti were elected as President and General Secretary of the new committee from the Conference.