

PROSPECTS OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN INDIA

By W.

ON the basis of the growing economic crisis there is taking place in India a wide upsurge of the revolutionary emancipatory struggle. All the facts go to show that the extent of the struggle will increase, that it will embrace new forces of the toiling population and that simultaneously with its development there will develop new and higher forms of struggle.

The character, content and forms of mass activities show a number of peculiar features, which sometimes make it difficult to discern exactly what is actually taking place in the different strata of the population, what is the true relationship of the class forces in the country and along what lines changes are taking place.

The absence of a mass Communist Party gives its impress to the degree of political development of the working class, to the level of development of the class struggle and to the consciousness of the working masses. It also makes more difficult the task of a correct estimation of what is taking place inside the working class.

In 1930, as a year of new upsurge, there began in the history of the Indian movement for liberation a new stage of revolutionary struggle of the toiling masses. This new stage was bound to reveal, and did reveal, the strong and the weak sides of the Indian Labour Movement, it revealed the degree of political independence of the working class and demonstrated the elemental processes taking place in the proletarian movement.

The first conscious attempt on the part of the working class to mark itself off as a separate class independently from the Indian bourgeoisie occurred in 1927-29 in the form of the creation of Workers' and Peasants' Parties, of textile strikes in Bombay and political demonstrations.

The Workers' and Peasants' Parties arose, firstly, as a result of a portion of the revolutionary petty-bourgeois intellectuals passing over from the National Congress; and, secondly, from the political emergence of leading strata of the working class which understood the necessity of working class political

struggle. The Workers' and Peasants' Parties in their organisation represented purely leading, and mostly intellectual, elements. In different parts of the country they reflected the interests of different classes; in Bombay the working class, in Calcutta and Lahore the peasantry.

The Workers' and Peasants' Parties were not capable of carrying through to the end the line of separation from the National Congress. They remained, as a whole, political organisations of two classes—the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie. During 1927-29, they continued to remain politically and organisationally inside the National Congress, that is they continued to remain under the extreme flag of the National bourgeois front. This position had its effect on all the activities of the supporters of the Workers' and Peasants' Parties, especially in their relation to the Communist Party. The *Workers' Weekly*, the organ of the Indian Marxists, in its eighth number, characterised the Workers' and Peasants' Parties in the following words:

“The Movement of the Workers' and Peasants' Parties, in its basic fundamental theoretical principles, was a Congress Movement. It did not advocate the hegemony and leadership of the working class in the National struggle. It conducted its criticism while remaining on the basis of the platform of the Congress. It took part in the Congress apparatus. Its organisation was constituted on the basis of Congress principles, its programme was not a Communist programme, it reflected the petty bourgeois Socialism of the Indian petty bourgeoisie.”

This characterisation is entirely correct, and has been confirmed by the practical activity of the Workers' and Peasants' Parties. This can be seen by examination of a whole series of strikes and mass actions undertaken in these years, particularly the strikes in Bombay.

As relics of the old standpoints of the Workers' and Peasants' Parties, there remains the actual lack of faith in the active workers, the putting of the centre of gravity and leadership in individual leaders without attempting to

create a mass organisation, to attract workers into the Party and to carry on a struggle against the National reformist Gandhist stream which maintains its ascendancy over the workers in Ahmedabad, defending strike-breaking and not making any attempts to extend and develop politically even the strikes in Bombay itself. All this is primarily the result of lack of faith in the forces of the working class and in a narrow economic approach to the strike movement.

Even in the best of these parties, the Bombay organisation, this lack of faith in relation to the active workers was demonstrated. Even the best elements of these parties, who were supporters of revolutionary Marxism, did not understand that without drawing in the active workers it was inconceivable that it could be possible to create real mass red trade unions, to create a Communist Party and to lead the struggle of the toiling masses. They did not believe in the organising capacity of the leading workers, they did not see that this relationship to the workers was one of the most important obstacles to the development of a revolutionary proletarian movement.

The actions of the workers in various parts of the country, *e.g.*, the strike in Jamshedpur, testified to the enormous confusion created by the reformists. A struggle for leadership took place between two reformist cliques and finally the strike was betrayed by both of them; the workers were still so weakly organised that their struggle against one reformist was adroitly exploited by the other. The strike was not accompanied by the coming forward of the active workers and, in spite of all the sacrifice made by the strikers, it did not destroy the position of the reformists in the trade unions.

The most important political actions of the workers during this period were the First of May demonstrations, the demonstration against the Simon Commission and the demonstration in connection with the session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta (December, 1928). This last was a huge step forward. But even this step reflected the political dependence of the labour vanguard on the Congress. The workers' demonstration marching on the Congress in Calcutta and forcibly taking up their place there dispersed

peacefully after listening to the speeches of the members of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, Gandhi and other Congress leaders. The vanguard of the proletariat still cherished illusions in regard to the National Congress.

The end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930 led to something new in the Labour Movement on which it is necessary to speak in more detail. The first thing that must be noticed is the beginning of the growth of a Communist Movement. For the first time in the history of the Indian Labour Movement there appeared on the scene a Communist organisation with its own press, illegal leaflets and demonstrations, in which it clearly and definitely marked itself off in opposition to national reformism.

With the disappearance of the Workers' and Peasants' Parties from the arena of the national emancipatory movement there begins the emergence of Communism. The link connecting the labour vanguard with national reformism began to break through. The proletarian vanguard began to put itself in opposition to the National Congress, to carry on a struggle for the leadership against them. This fact is of enormous significance. It marks a step in advance.

The growth of Communism represents the reflection of the growth of political independence of the Indian proletariat. As a matter of fact, the position is seen to be that the growth of Communism lags strongly behind the growth of class-consciousness and readiness for revolutionary struggle on the part of the Indian working class.

The working class struggle in 1930 shows a number of new features; firstly, that new wide forces of the working class began to be drawn into the struggle; and, secondly, in the number of political demonstrations and strikes which reached enormous dimensions.

Working class actions took place in a series of new districts; there were strikes in Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi, Madras, Delhi, Kolaba, Ahmedabad, Benares, Nagpur, Sholapur, Kharagpur, Lucknow and other places. The strikes were for the most part of short duration, came to an end and then again began anew, as, for instance, in the Kharagpur railway workshops. It is of interest to note that a very large number of strikes took place on the

railways, particular in the railway workshops.

Even more important, very many of these strike actions took on a political character, in a number of cases leading to armed conflicts with the police and troops. This had never occurred before on such a scale in India, testifying to the growth of political activity on the part of very wide strata of the workers.

A few examples may be given, characterising the growth of political activity and political independence of the working class. The strike on the Great Indian Peninsular Railway in the early part of 1930 was both in character and in class relationships a very important step in advance in the development of the Labour Movement. In the course of it, a struggle was conducted not only against open strike-breakers of the Joshi type, but also against the "left" Gandhists, like Ruikar and Ginwalla (the first of whom led the demonstration in Nagpur against the Whitley Commission, and the second voted for a general strike), who enjoyed enormous influence in the trade unions and from whom the Workers' and Peasants' Parties in their time were not capable and not desirous of separating themselves.

The proletarian vanguard consciously endeavoured to politicalise the strike. At the beginning of the strike the workers followed these "left" National reformists and avoided the revolutionary agitators. At the end of the strike, demonstrations of railway workers with 5,000 or more took place under the slogans and leadership of the proletarian revolutionaries. For the first time in the history of the Indian Labour movement, the proletarian revolutionaries came forward openly before the workers against the "left" National reformists, against the young Nehru and his like, and against their "economism" and treachery. As a result of the strike there was built up a mass basis for an active left wing among the railway workers. The proletarian revolutionaries not only exposed the "left" National reformists, but also developed their own programme and measures, raised the political consciousness of the railway workers, the effects of which will be seen in further actions on the part of the railway workers and the workers in general.

This strike was the first big railway strike which covered not only the workshops but the

whole line, testifying to the growth of class-consciousness and organisation of the workers. Previous strikes had only taken place in isolated centres and never included all the workers of the whole region. This is one of the distinguishing features of advance of this railway strike, even in comparison with the second Bombay textile strike.

As a second example, we may take the demonstration on April 16th in Bombay in connection with the shooting down of railway strikers, a demonstration called by the Secretary of the All-Indian Trade Union Congress. The *Workers' Weekly* of April 23rd in Bombay gives the following account:—

"The tramway workers and workers in the railway shops on the line Bombay-Baroda-Central India already came out on strike in the evening. On April 16th, 25,000 textile workers struck, who came out and demonstrated with red flags and slogans such as 'Down with Imperialism,' 'Long Live Revolution,' 'Long Live the General Strike,' 'Down with the Murderers of our Comrades,' etc."

An enormous mass meeting took place in the evening which adopted a resolution denouncing Imperialist repression and calling on the workers and peasants to carry out a general strike on a national scale, to organise a campaign for refusal of payment of taxes and rent, and warning the masses against the attempts of the bourgeoisie to sabotage and surrender the struggle for complete Indian independence. This demonstration took place in spite of the sabotage and betrayal on the part of the Congress leaders.

In Calcutta, the beginning of the mass movement was connected not with the "salt campaign," but with the demonstrations of the dockworkers, who demonstrated against attacks by the police and who even built barricades from their handcarts. After the shooting down of the dockworkers, leaflets and proclamations were issued by the proletarian vanguard to the workers and a meeting was held, attended by many thousands, at which resolutions were passed calling for a general strike, agrarian revolution and struggle against Imperialism.

These leaflets and meetings condemned the treacherous tactics of the Congress leaders

and gave an impetus to the broad, popular anti-Imperialist movement in Calcutta. The bounds of the "salt campaign" were broken before the latter had formally begun. It was the workers and student youth who broke these bounds.

The demonstration on May 1st, organised on the appeal of the Calcutta Committee of the Communist Party, included a strike which embraced not only factories and workshops, but actually led to a cessation of the whole industrial and commercial life in the town. Leaflets were issued in all languages. The May 1st demonstration and strike in Bombay, although smaller in extent, bore the same political character. All these actions were organised under the leadership of proletarian revolutionaries and were conducted under proletarian slogans. There was a sharpening of the struggle against the National reformists.

Besides these working class demonstrations, politically entirely independently organised, there took place a whole series of political demonstrations of workers and peasants throughout the entire country. The demonstrations of the toiling masses from the very beginning went contrary to the plans of the National Congress and in their content and character broke with the influence of the bourgeoisie, although, owing to the weakness of the revolutionary leadership, they were in a number of cases "exploited" by the reformists.

In this regard, the demonstrations in Sholapur were very characteristic. The textile workers of Sholapur paid no heed to the call of the National Congress to cease the hartal on the second day, and in spite of Congress condemnation took possession of the streets, burned down the Law Court buildings and, in fact, temporarily drove out the British from the town. In Karachi, after the firing on the demonstration during the hartal (which the Congress volunteers unsuccessfully attempted to disperse as soon as its revolutionary character was evidenced) the dockers and municipal workers answered by a political protest strike which lasted several days. In Madras there was the same picture of firing on the workers, the same disorganising activity of the Congress leaders, in spite of which the workers carried on their demon-

stration involving conflict with the police and troops.

In the gold mines of Mysore, 15,000 miners refused to submit to the order of the police and administration requiring the taking of finger-prints and went on strike. The strike was accompanied by armed attacks from the police and troops. As a result, the police had to abandon their demands. In a number of the hartals of the National Congress in Bombay the participation of a large portion of the workers took place on the call of the red trade unions. In Bombay, the National Congress issued an appeal to come out on May 6th, but the workers did not respond, although they came out on May 7th after an appeal of the Girni Kamgar Union. The weakness of the revolutionary leadership was particularly expressed in the fact that it was unable to organise and mark off the independent rôle of the workers in this demonstration and to oppose them in fact to the Congressmen, although in its appeals and agitation the revolutionary wing criticised and exposed the bourgeoisie and Congress leadership.

An open struggle with the National Congress for influence over the mass of the workers has begun. Lack of experience, the enormous weakness of organisation of the Communist Party, inability to utilise all legal possibilities and inability to carry through this struggle in practice has in a number of cases been an obstacle to the solution of this task. New strata of the working masses are being drawn into the revolutionary struggle, strata which have not yet lost their illusions and faith in the National-reformist leadership of the National Congress. Already, however, wide masses of workers are freeing themselves from this influence, as can be seen clearly from the facts already mentioned. We are suffering now for the belated appearance of a mass Communist Party.

The weakness of the Communist Movement reveals itself now with especial sharpness, in spite of the present growth of Communism, when the development of the revolutionary upsurge of the Indian proletariat sets before it new and extraordinarily complicated tasks both in regard to the transition to new forms of the movement and in regard to the struggle for the leadership over the mass of

the workers who have now entered the political arena. This is the cause of the terror of the British and of the cunning hypocritical policy of the Indian bourgeoisie. The "salt campaign" and the independence resolution are consequences of the National reformist attempts to seize the initiative for themselves, to deceive the masses and to disorganise the revolutionary struggle. The "left" National reformists, the younger Nehru, etc., have for the first time come into the open with a programme of demands for the workers and peasants.

The younger Nehru has begun to speak of the liquidation of big estates by purchase, of liquidation of indebtedness by partial compensation, of nationalisation of British factories, etc. The Bombay Committee of the National Congress has adopted a resolution declaring that the Socialist form of society is the only one suitable for India.

Recently, the Bombay Committee of the National Congress has taken in hand the practical task of organising the Bombay workers, has been propagating entry into the National Congress and has declared that the Congress represents the interests of the workers and fights against the capitalists. The struggle for the mass of the workers has entered a new and sharper phase, a circumstance to which the Communists must pay special attention.

The proletarian vanguard has made use of the fact that the younger Nehru and the All-India Working Committee of the National Congress, when invited by the workers to support the strike on the Great Indian Peninsular Railway and to transform it into a general strike, made a negative reply and proposed arbitration and reference to the British Government. The leaflets and agitation of the proletarian leadership were of important significance for the exposure of the treacherous rôle of the National reformists. There is no doubt that the latter will attempt to "radicalise" their promises still more in order to strengthen their positions inside the working class and peasantry.

It is possible that on this basis new petty-bourgeois political groupings will arise. One thing, however, is already clear, viz., that the struggle for the working masses is becoming

intensified and is taking on new forms. In this respect, it is significant that revolutionary organisations have arisen among the youth, of which the Bombay Youth League is the most important.

Recently (July and August) a number of political demonstrations of workers have taken place in Bombay, under the leadership of the Girni Kamgar Union and of the League of Working Youth. Two meetings and demonstrations, at each of which five to six thousand persons were present, took place in connection with the imprisonment of one of the chief leaders of the Bombay proletariat, and a third demonstration of over five thousand took place in protest against the scandal of the arrested workers' leaders. These demonstrations were carried out under revolutionary slogans. The revolutionary youth is beginning to take up its rightful place.

One of the characteristic features is that the advanced section of the workers is beginning to occupy itself actively with organisation and leadership of the proletarian movement. Workers are beginning to take part in the leadership of the Girni Kamgar Union, in the editing of workers' papers, etc., and in spite of their deficiencies in knowledge of grammar and so on, they are making great progress in this work.

Here we have one of the best possible guarantees for a successful struggle against the petty-bourgeois influence in the proletarian vanguard and for the creation of a proletarian revolutionary mass movement. The following quotation from the Bombay *Workers' Weekly* of May 20th on "The significance of the Meerut Trial," gives some indication of the political awakening of the Indian proletariat:—

"It is especially the wide masses of the Indian proletariat who are going through a rapid process of revolutionary education, and what is particularly important, revolutionary education based on experiences of everyday life and struggle. In India, unlike in many European countries, such as Russia, etc., efforts to bring Socialist ideas into the masses and work and carry on propaganda among them were insignificant. In India, the working class was compelled to get its revolutionary education only from

the bitter experience of its struggle.”

The process of the political development of the Indian proletariat is going forward with giant strides. The marked intensification of the economic crisis, the closing down of a number of factories and the threat of further stoppages, the extraordinary unemployment, all demand higher forms of economic struggle, incomparably higher organisation and heightened class-consciousness. The struggle for the leadership of the wide masses newly drawn into the struggle, who will only in the process of the struggle free themselves from the influence of the bourgeoisie, demands skilful and determined tactics. The revolutionary vanguard is welding its ranks ever firmer together in the prosecution of heavy struggles, is bringing forward the best elements of the working class and preparing itself for victorious struggle for hegemony in the Indian revolution.

More than ever before, the Indian proletariat must exert all its forces to extend its vanguard and to strengthen it, in order to create a Communist Party, in order to extend the Communist fractions in the trade unions, and to establish new proletarian mass organisations. (Trade Unions, Factory Committees, Committees of Action, Unemployed Committees, etc.).

At the present time, the material position of the workers is becoming worse. Wages are being reduced, the intensity of labour is being increased, various minor gains are being taken away. The economic activity of the workers

is increasing, further growth of the strike struggle of the working class is inevitable.

The working class is always ready to support the creation of mass trade unions. The will to organise itself is strong; the chief obstacle is the weakness of revolutionary leadership. In a number of places, the monopoly of leadership in the hands of the National reformists is not even challenged, although this leadership does not enjoy any great influence among the masses of the workers.

The problem of the organisation of the working class and of its proletarian vanguard has been thrust into the foreground and demands a solution. The upsurge of the workers' movement in the conditions of a general upsurge of the National revolutionary struggle, of sharpening crisis and of an ever-clearer exposure before the masses of the treacherous rôle of the National bourgeoisie and of reformism, puts before the revolutionary proletarian vanguard in India the immediate task of developing revolutionary mass action under its own slogans, of developing the strike struggle and of political strikes and the creation of mass trade unions, factory committees and organs of mass struggle. It sets them the task of drawing into the struggle ever new regions and wider strata of the working class and of the toilers generally and, on the basis of a determined and merciless struggle against National reformism, of passing from isolated mass actions of the working class to the general railway strike and the political general strike in India.