

The Indian National Congress Policy Towards the Working Class Struggle in India, 1918-1927

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The broad spectrum of the Congress policy towards working class move-ment comprised three strands of thought. Sharing the same ideological orientation, these strands differed from one another in terms of tactics for handling the labour. They believed in restraining the workers' move-ment from growing militant and to keep it under the Congress control.

The first of these strands was represented by Gandhi who, with his faith in class harmony, did not support any type of coercion either by the millowners or by the workers. Another set of leaders—those who formed the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)—believed in class harmony. But they did not agree with Gandhi's methods. Mostly reformists, like N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri, and Diwan Chamanlal, these leaders did not eschew cooperation with the British government as is clear from their association with various conferences and commissions. Supporting forcible and repressive methods of control over the working class activity, the second strand was represented by leaders like Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, and C. Rajagopalachari. Capitalists like Birla and Tata, naturally, had great faith in them and strengthened their hands to safeguard vested interests.¹ A section of Congressmen was affected by socialist ideas. They were mainly led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Bose. In spite of their 'socialist' sympathies, they never deviated from the Congress policies vis-a-vis the working class. Later on some radicals inside the Congress, who realized how antagonistic the party was towards the working class, broke off and joined the Communist Party of India.

Congress and Labour 1918 - But this period was dominated by Gandhian ideology. An isolated incident like the formation of the Madras Labour Union, under B.P. Wadia in 1918, was away from the mainstream, though this was the first effort to formally organize the workers under a modern trade union. However, being a liberal constitutionalist who sincerely believed in the British sense of "justice"² Wadia could not lead the workers

on an independent path of struggle. The same year the workers of Ahmedabad Textile Mills went on strike. The reason of the strike was that the 'plague bonus' was being withdrawn by the millowners after the end of the war and the epidemic. The latter were offering a 20 per cent wage increase, whereas the workers wanted the increase to be 50 per cent to neutralize the hardship of price rise. When the situation was about to get-out of control, Gandhi intervened. With his new ideology and calculations, he advised the workers to demand 35 per cent increase and stick to that. At the same time he told the workers 'not to indulge in mischief, quarrelling, robbing...but behave peacefully'.³ Gandhi felt obliged to resort to his method of 'fasting' in order to bring moral pressure on the millowners. He was ultimately 'successful' and an agreement was reached. The provisions of the agreement will explain the extent of Gandhi's 'success'. According to the agreement "on the first day of the settlement the workers would be given 35 per cent increase (to keep the prestige of Gandhi), on the second day they would get 20 per cent as was earlier offered by the millowners so that the millowners should not feel that they had lost their prestige. There after the half of the remaining 15 per cent would be given to the workers until the decision of the arbitrators. If the decision was 35 per cent, the millowners would pay the balance; if the decision was 20 per cent, the worker would refund the balance.

Gandhi, it is clear from the agreement, had checked the growth of a militant workers' movement and put it on the path of arbitration. This, as we shall notice in the subsequent discussion, became the main goal of the Congress. The Ahmedabad Textile Union, formed under Gandhi's guardianship, remained loyal to him and his ideology; except in 1934 when even these workers could not remain passive under the mass wage cut and retrenchment policy of the millowners. Gandhi again used the threat to 'fast' and persuaded the workers to accept the wage cut 'cheerfully'.

After the end of the First World War the decline in real wages led to mass unrest among the working class in 1920. This coincided with the Non-Cooperation Movement and the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress. There was no link between these two movements. The workers were not yet penetrated by the Congress party. Going by their own experience of capital, they had learnt to oppose it, in this period, by going on spontaneous strikes. But soon under Congress leadership this independent expression of labour unrest came to be controlled by the bourgeoisie. For several years the potential militancy of labour remained dormant.

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In the Kharagpur Bengal Nagpur Railways strike of 1927, which was brutally repressed by the British-owned Company, the Tatas helped the Railway authorities. The Tatas, it may be noted, were supported by the nationalist leadership when the TISCO workers went on strike during the period under study. On the other hand, when in 1920 the workers of A.B. Railways at Chandpur went on strike in sympathy with the tea plantation labourers of Assam who were fighting against the oppression of the British-owned planters, reformist leaders like C.R. Das rushed to take charge of this strike to prevent it developing into a more class conscious militant struggle. Gandhi, Andrews, and Hardayal simply condemned the strike in the name of public 'inconveniences'⁴ although the public of Bengal was fully supporting the strike. Naturally the strike collapsed for want of financial and other help. Support to this strike could have advanced the cause of the working class and sharpened their class consciousness. It could also have enlisted labour to the nationalist movement. But the Congress found such support inconsonant with its own class interests.

In Kanpur and Jamshedpur the Congress leadership were busy trying to implement Gandhi's ideology of 'class harmony'. Interestingly there is a striking similarity in these two places regarding the approach of the Congress. In Kanpur workers started their strike in 1919. Soon certain Congressmen got associated with the Union called Mazdoor Sabha and expressed their concern for the working class. Initially they played the role of mediators to help settle the strike. But soon after they tried to restructure the Mazdoor Sabha. Some of them like G.S. Vidyarthi, Murari Lai, and N.P. Nigam became important office bearers of the Sabha. All these leaders were closely associated with the Home Rule League, Khilafat, and Non-Cooperation Movement. They emphasized the principle of maintaining goodwill and harmony between the workers and employers and showed a Gandhian faith in the benevolence of the millowner. A belief in an abstract and undefined principle of 'justice' and 'reciprocity' seems to have prevailed in their ideas just as it did in Gandhi's conception of working class struggle.⁵ Leaders like G.S. Vidyarthi felt that the employers could be made aware of their duties toward the workers and with the methods of persuasion the hearts of the millowners could be changed. They went to the extent of calling the recurrent strike after the 1919 settlement as 'unjustified' because according to them the millowners were generally 'fair' in their dealings with the labour. This opinion of the local Congress leadership in Kanpur was formed at a time when the strikes were mostly in protest against the non-fulfilment of the settlement

and promises made earlier. Without bothering about the workers, problems these leaders went on emphasizing the principle of arbitration and conciliation and also got them incorporated in the Mazdoor Sabha constitution so that they could prevent 'violent' strikes and 'destructive tendencies' among the workers.⁶

Almost the same type of behaviour is noticed when Congressmen from Calcutta went to Jamshedpur in 1920 to take charge and guide the workers' strike at TISCO. We may say that the Congress attitude in the case of TISCO was more cautious because it was considered a 'national industry' which had the largest number of workers under one roof. Though Tata claims to be the most 'benevolent capitalist' in India, there was no system of increment in wages in TISCO. Jamshedpur, where TISCO was located, suffered the highest price hike after the War. The workers of TISCO were not organized under any union till 1920. But their unbearable situation made them go on strike on their own. Later they sent two of their educated workers to Calcutta to find a leader to guide their strike. These workers contacted Byomkesh Chakravorty and S.N. Haldar, two advocates who were also members of the Congress. Interestingly one millowner, Mr. Jain, who was a member of the Congress also joined the other leaders in their visit to Jamshedpur.

These leaders immediately formed a union of the workers and started negotiating with the management. These leaders undermined the seriousness of the situation and on their own tried to compromise for lesser percentage of wage increase. In spite of being inexperienced, the workers were very clear about their needs. They would not allow the leaders to compromise. Mr Jain found the workers so adamant that he told the Superintendent of Police that 'if the men now decline to behave let them go to hell'.⁷ He soon left Jamshedpur. The other two leaders also were not very successful in persuading the workers to agree to their compromise. They tried to weaken the struggle by demanding a settlement for those who wished to go to their villages. The tactics of the Congress leaders did not bring anything to the workers of TISCO, and in the end they had to join back the works. In the course of the struggle they lost five of their comrades in a shooting spree by the Company's honorary magistrate and twenty of them were injured. Soon after, Teja Singh, a local leader of the workers who claimed to be in touch with Gandhi, informed them that Gandhi had sent a message asking the workers to 'suffer in silence for the national industry'.⁸

Subsequent to this strike the local Congress leadership publicly eulogized the General Manager of the Company and said that he had

been misled by the advice of wrong people and so workers should forget and forgive these actions. This appears to have been a calculated move, because the Congress led JLA was more interested in getting recognition from the TISCO management in order to control the workers through their union. They knew that to get recognition they must cooperate with the management which was under the control of an Indian capitalist—a person who was in the good books of nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Motilal Nehru. These calculations were made clear when the workers were told that the Calcutta leaders were busy revising the rules of JLA, and the main principles would be: (1) to cooperate with the Company, increase its output and promote its interests; and (2) to safeguard the interests of the employees.

Incidentally after the tragic end of the 1920 strike Tata management passed a resolution thanking the government authorities for helping in the termination of the strike. These new developments were well analysed by the Deputy Commissioner of Jamshedpur. He wrote that the first principle with the Congress was that since the Company was Indian and financed by Indian capital it was incumbent on the workers, as Indians, to look after the interest of the Company. The second principle seems to have been that since a hungry man could not do a full day's work, the Association should see that he was well fed and so should assist the Company in turning out more work.

There was no amelioration in sight of the workers' unbearable plight. Their exploitation was increasing even after the strike wave of 1920. Consequently there was a shift towards greater militancy. 'The shortened amicable and successful strikes of 1919-20 had become less frequent, industrial unrest was reaching new heights and the working class struggles had become more bitter in their character and duration'. The Congress was persisting in its policy of checking strikes, irrespective of whether they occurred in foreign- or native-owned industries. The issues of Kanpur workers' protest in 1923 against ill treatment by the European officials in foreign-owned mills, like Elgin Mill and Victoria Mille could have been employed for its anti-imperialist dimension. Instead the Congress worked hard to check the workers' struggle from taking a militant turn.⁹

In Jamshedpur the JLA leadership decided that it would not initiate any strike, but if one occurred it would take charge of it. Since the JLA was not helping the workers of TISCO to realize their demands, the workers on their own once again went on strike in 1922. The JLA

tried to take charge of it, but in vain. Thereupon the workers invited Dewan Chamanlal, President of AITUC, to negotiate with the management. He proved no better than the Congress-led JLA. He made a verbal agreement with the Company, the contents of which no one knew, and told the workers to join back work. Naively the workers believed the nationalist leader and joined back. All they got was the dismissal of 1,000 workers; many of them were put on jobs lower paid than the ones they had held before the strike.

Similarly, in Bombay the Gandhian leader N.M. Joshi, who was the chairman of the workers' union, did nothing to organize a successful struggle against the capitalists who were forcing a strike on the workers. The millowners of Bombay announced a 20 per cent cut in DA in 1925. The workers were forced to go on strike. All that Joshi did was to ask for a settlement for the workers so that they could leave the town and go to their villages. He could not see that the millowners were using this strike to pressurize the Government to give levy exemptions. The strike could be brought to an end only when the Bombay Government suspended the levy of excise duty which helped the millowners to withdraw the wage cut. Joshi was only interested in avoiding tension between the labour and capital and not concerned with the suffering and needs of the workers.

In the late twenties there was once again a shift in the policy of the Congress. This was mainly due to the emerging force of communist ideology among the working class as well as the intelligentsia.

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