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# UNIT 26 THE WORKING CLASS\*

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## 26.1 INTRODUCTION

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The rise of modern industry resulted in the formation of collectivities of workers in certain cities. In some big urban centres (such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Kanpur, Ahmedabad, and Jamshedpur), their presence was overwhelming. Any political party trying to build its base would attempt to mobilise them. Nationalism was the most important ideology and sentiment spreading throughout India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The workers were also not untouched by it. However, the relationship between the workers and the nationalists, particularly represented by the Congress, was not always close and uniform. It is the nature and dynamic of this association that we will discuss in this Unit.

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## 26.2 GROWTH AND CONDITIONS OF MODERN WORKING CLASS

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The growth of plantations, coal-mining, railways and mill industries in the nineteenth century resulted in the rise of the modern working class. It was a modern working class in the sense of relatively modern organisation of labour and a relatively free market for labour. There were certain important exceptions to this rule. The plantation workers, who also worked for the capitalist employers and produced goods which were sold in the international markets, were recruited and worked under unfree conditions. In fact, for the majority of the workers in colonial India, the recruitment and working conditions were not as free as were present in some other countries which were capitalistically more developed. This situation had its impact on the working class movement as it developed over the years.

Plantations and railways were the initial enterprises to herald the era of colonial capitalism in Indian subcontinent. A British company, the Assam Tea Company, was established in 1839 to set up tea gardens in Assam. Coffee plantations were started in South India by 1840. The Great Indian Peninsular Railways laid its first line between Bombay and Thane in 1853. Another line was opened by the

Eastern Indian Railway between Calcutta and Raniganj in 1854. By 1857, there was 288 miles of railway tracks in India. The real expansion occurred after the Revolt of 1857 when the British rulers realised its significance for military purposes. Coal production had begun as far back as 1775. The Bengal Coal Company was established in 1843. However, it was only the beginning of railways which saw a real growth in its production because coal was essential for running the railway locomotion. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, its production rose to around three million tons.

The first cotton mill was built in Bombay in 1854 by a Parsi businessman and it started production in 1856. Cotton mill industry developed rapidly in cities like Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Sholapur and Nagpur. It was mostly owned by the Indians. In contrast, the jute mills remained in foreign hands for a long time. A Scottish entrepreneur started the first jute mill in Kolkata in 1854. It also expanded rapidly over the next fifty years. The mill industry got enormously strengthened by the 1870s with a large number of workers employed in them. In 1890, over 3 lakh workers were employed in factories and mines.

By 1914, there were 264 cotton mills in India employing 260,000 workers, 60 jute mills with 200,000 workers, the railways provided work to 600,000 people, the plantations to 700,000 workers and mines to 150,000 workers. An increasingly growing number of workers were concentrated in small enclaves within city boundaries or around plantations. By 1921, over 28 lakhs persons were employed in organised industries. Besides, a large number of people were employed in the non-organised sector in urban areas, for example, domestic servants, and casual workers in the market. The modern working class, although derived from the agricultural labourers and marginal peasants in the countryside, was quite different its position. It was numerically small compared to the overwhelming number of labouring poor and small peasants in the rural areas. But it was concentrated in certain crucial areas from where the emergent modern politics could be influenced.

The working and living conditions of the workers were extremely bad. Long hours of work, low wages, unhygienic conditions at working places, employment of small children, discrimination against women workers, poor and unsanitary housing, high levels of indebtedness, and no guarantee against accident, sickness or old age created a situation in which the death rate was very high among workers leading to a high rate of turnover. In most places, the workers had to labour for 12 to 16 hours or even more under intolerable conditions. They had then to live in houses in the cities which had an average of 5 persons in one small room. Women workers faced even harsher situation labouring both in the mills, plantations or collieries and also working at home under unbearable conditions. The conditions of the plantation labourers were particularly bad because they were confined in a restricted area and were legally bound to work for the period of the contract. They almost faced the situation of prisoners of the planters who employed recruiting and disciplining agents called *sirdars* and security guards to supervise and coerce them to work.

The government passed Factory Acts in 1881 and 1891. However, these applied only to children and women and not to the adult male labourers who formed the bulk of the workforce, and, even in their cases, the protection was not comprehensive. The machinery to enforce the provisions of the Acts was even weaker. The provisions of these Acts were flouted without much fear of penalty.

The Factory Act of 1911 restricted the working hours of adult males to 12 hours on any one working day. The amended Factory Act of 1922 further reduced the working time to 11 hours.

The situation on the wage front was no better in the initial years. The industrial wages were not much above the agricultural wages on the whole. The rates were different in different centres. While in Bombay the wages were the highest, in Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and other centres they were low. In the plantations the wages were even lower. However, even in Bombay, the wages remained at subsistence level till around 1918. Between 1918 and 1921, the wages in Bombay, as in other centres, registered considerable increase, even in real terms. This was the result of the agitations by the workers as well as the beginning of trade unions among them. The situation slowly improved in the long run both in regard to the security of jobs and rise in wages. However, the picture was not so good for the smaller and less organised and unorganised industries. There the wages remained much lower and there was no security of jobs either.

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### 26.3 NATIONALISTS AND THE WORKERS IN THE EARLY PHASE

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During the early period, some social reformers showed interests in the improvement of workers' conditions. Sasipada Banerjee, a Brahmo social reformer, formed an organisation, the Workingmen's Club, in 1870 to work for the amelioration of the conditions of workers in Bengal. He also brought out a monthly journal entitled *Bharat Sramjeebi* for spreading education among workers. In Mumbai, S.S. Bengalee and N.M. Lokhanday were involved in various activities among the workers. Lokhanday, an associate of the great social reformer, Jotiba Phule, published an Anglo-Marathi weekly, *Dinbandhu*, since 1880. He also formed the Bombay Millhands' Association in 1890. Some other important organizations active among the Bombay workers were the Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha formed in 1909, and the Social Service League established in 1911. However, these bodies were primarily interested in welfare activities and did not have much organizational base among the workers. Their work was mostly of a philanthropic nature, and not much political. Their main aim was to persuade the colonial government to make legislation to improve the harsh working conditions of labourers.

So far as the nationalists were concerned, they were so much enamoured by the ideology of industrialism that they regarded any legislative intervention for ameliorating the appalling conditions of workers as unnecessary and uncalled-for. None of the major works by early nationalists showed concern for the misery of the labouring classes, as they did for the peasantry. The Indian National Congress also did not mention the industrial workers in its early resolutions. When the first Factory Commission was appointed in 1875 to enquire into the conditions of the factory workers in Bombay, the nationalist opinion was not in favour of any legal intervention on this issue. Even when the Factory Act of 1881 was passed, which did not go far in addressing the terrible conditions of work, the nationalists were against it. The *Amrit Bazar Patrika* clearly expressed the nationalist sentiment on this issue by writing that 'A larger death rate amongst our operatives is far more preferable to the collapse of this rising industry' [cited in S.B. Upadhyay 2004: 146]. Dadabhai Naoroji declared in the second session

of the Indian National Congress that the Congress 'must confine itself to questions in which the entire nation has a direct participation, and it must leave the adjustment of social reforms and other class questions to class Congresses' [cited in Bipan Chandra et al : 211]. Thus, the nationalist leadership in pre-1905 phase displayed strong reservation towards any legislative measures by the colonial government, and by and large remained indifferent to the conditions of the workers.

One major reason for such reaction of the nationalists was because the British cotton textile industry was seen to be behind the move to regulate the hours of work in Indian industries which were perceived by it as competitor. The nationalist press, therefore, bitterly criticised any attempt to restrict the working hours in Indian industries. The fact that extremely long working hours were neither in the interest of Indian industries nor of the workers was overlooked by the nationalists. Even when the workers protested against such long working hours, the nationalist opinion dubbed it as the result of outside interference rather than any genuine grievance of the workers. One of the nationalist papers, *Kalpataru*, summarised the prevailing opinion of the nationalists when it wrote in September 1905: 'We have to build a nation and it matters not if all the mill hands are placed at the altar of martyrdom' [cited in S.B. Upadhyay 2004: 149].

Such nationalist reaction was prompted by the nationalist fear that the fledgling Indian industries would be destroyed due to any interference by the colonial government which worked in the interests of the British cotton manufacturers. On the other hand, when the workers' protests were against the colonial state, the nationalists, particularly of the extremist stream, promptly supported them. They made a very clear distinction between the grievances of the workers employed in the industries owned by Europeans and Indians. For example, the nationalists quickly extended support to the strike by the signallers of the GIP Railway in 1899 and appealed to the public to raise funds for the strikers. Similarly, they expressed sympathy for the mint workers who were worked for long hours and whose conditions were very bad. They also supported the strikes of the postal employees and some nationalists demanded that unions should be formed among these workers.

Thus, the pattern of early nationalist response to the workers' grievances and protests was very clear. If the protests were against the Indian industrialists, the nationalists did not support them, and wanted the matters to be resolved internally without government intervention. However, if the protests were against the colonial government, many nationalists supported the workers. The nationalists wanted to enlist the support of the workers for the nationalist cause but not at the cost of the supposed interests of Indian capitalists. The early nationalists quite clearly sought indigenous bourgeois development for the country and opposed any move which they perceived to be against this.

But, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalists of extremist variety began to see the workers as an ally in the quest for national freedom. Thus, during the Swadeshi Movement, the nationalists reached out to the workers, particularly in Bengal, and were involved in various protests and strikes by the workers, especially in foreign-owned companies. Government of India Press, railways and jute industry were the main concerns in which the nationalists supported and organised workers' protests. The workers as a collectivity were

sought to be involved in political matters and nationalist mobilisations. Right on the first day of protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905, the workers struck work and joined the demonstrations.

Nationalists such as G.S. Agarkar, B.C. Pal, C.R. Das and G. Subramania Iyer spoke for pro-labour reforms. In 1903, Iyer emphasised the need for the workers to form their own organisations to fight for their demands. Other Swadeshi leaders in Bengal, such as Aswini Coomar Banerji, S. Haldar, Premtosh Bose and Apurba Kumar Ghosh, were involved in several protests and strikes of the workers, particularly in foreign-owned companies. In Punjab, Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were actively involved in the strikes by workers in government concerns in 1907. They were deported by the colonial government for this. In Tamil Nadu, the nationalist leaders, such as Subramaniya Siva and Chidambaram Pillai, organised strikes in foreign-owned cotton mills. The workers were sought to be involved in nationalist agitations as well. The *hartals* to protest the partition of Bengal witnessed many strikes and participation of workers in demonstrations. During the Swadeshi movement, some preliminary efforts were made to form trade unions. Some temporary organisations of workers were formed. But, due to lack of consistency, long-term organisations could not develop and, after the decline of the Swadeshi Movement, the labour unions floated during the height of the movement disappeared.

The greatest demonstration of the workers' nationalist fervour was seen in 1908 when there were massive strikes and protests against Tilak's imprisonment. The workers from the mills and other industries violently protested against the government for unfairly imprisoning Tilak when he wrote articles in defence of the revolutionaries such as Khudiram Bose and others. As Tilak was sentenced for six years, the millworkers decided to strike work and hold demonstrations for six days, one day for each year. The strike was almost total bringing out thousands of workers on the streets, despite the fact that there were no noticeable leaders managing the strikes and demonstrations. These events in Bombay in 1908 were a high watermark of the relationship between the nationalists and the workers.

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## **26.4 NATIONALISTS AND WORKING CLASS IN THE ERA OF MASS NATIONALISM**

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The graph of working class movements all over India cannot be neatly drawn in terms of periods. Nevertheless, for the sake of presentation, we have here adopted a period-wise structure for working class activities and their relationship to nationalist movement.

### **26.4.1 Working Class Movements from 1918 to 1926**

The First World War caused steep rise in the prices of necessary commodities while the wages did not rise much. The real earnings of the workers, therefore, registered a sharp decline causing tremendous hardship to them. The news from the War front and the relatively better situation of workers in Western countries, combined with the Russian Revolution, instilled a new consciousness among the workers. The era of mass nationalism, enunciated by Gandhi in India, was the most important factor in the post-War scenario. Various middle-class leaders, including the nationalist ones, were now taking increased interests in workers'

problems. Earlier protest activities by the workers had also made them aware of their strengths and weaknesses and made them conscious of the need for larger organisation. Thus, economic distress, beginning of the era of mass nationalist politics, Russian Revolution, and formation of International Labour Organisation (ILO) created the situation for greater politicisation of labour and formation of labour organisations. All these factors heralded the era of general industrial strikes and of trade unionism. The strikes which were resorted to since 1918 were much larger, more intense, and better organised. The years from 1918 to 1922 were very important for labour movement. There were a large number of strikes and protests all over the country, the workers became involved with the nationalist upsurge during this period, and various unions all over the country were formed leading to an all-India federation, AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress).

The Madras Labour Union, formed in April 1918, is generally considered to be the first trade union in India. B.P.Wadia, a nationalist leader and an associate of Annie Besant, was instrumental in its organisation. It was mainly an organisation based on the workers of Carnatic and Buckingham Mills in Madras. But workers from other trades such as tramways, rickshaw-pullers, etc. also joined the union in the initial stage. For the first time in India, there was a regular membership and the members were to contribute one *anna* as monthly subscription.

Around the same time, labour agitation had started in Ahmedabad which was to lead towards a completely different model of labour organisation. The workers in Ahmedabad were agitating for a bonus to compensate for the rise in prices. Ansuayaben Sarabhai, who was involved with the agitation, got in touch with Gandhiji and requested him to come to Ahmedabad. Gandhiji stood by the workers' side and demanded that the workers should be given 35 per cent bonus. On the refusal of the millowners, he called for a strike and insisted that the principle of arbitration should be accepted. He also went on a fast to persuade the millowners. Finally, the millowners accepted arbitration and as a compromise, the arbitrator recommended 27.5 per cent increase in wages. On the basis of this struggle and on the Gandhian principles of conciliation and arbitration, the Textile Labour Association, also known as Majur Mahajan, was established in Ahmedabad in 1920.

The atmosphere of mass politics created by the Khilafat Movement, anti-Rowlatt agitations, and the Non-cooperation Movement had influenced the workers who demonstrated their collective strength in many industries across the country. The millworkers in Bombay effected general industrial strikes in 1919 and 1920 involving over a lakh of workers. On several occasions, the workers in various parts of the country struck to protest government repression of nationalist movement. In April 1919, after government repression in Punjab and Gandhi's arrest, workers in Gujarat, Bengal and Maharashtra struck work, and held violent demonstrations. In 1919, the rumour of Gandhi's arrest brought a large number of Bombay workers on the streets which also witnessed some violence. In 1920, the Bombay millworkers twice struck work and held demonstrations after the death of Tilak to pay obeisance to him. In November 1921, there occurred a large-scale strike in Bombay mills in support of Congress' call to boycott the visit of Prince of Wales. More than a lakh of workers participated in militant demonstrations all over the city.

In its Amritsar Session, held in 1919 in the wake of rising unrest among workers, the Congress passed a resolution directing its provincial committees and other associated bodies to work for promoting labour unions throughout the country. These labour unions would try to secure fair wages and good living conditions for the workers. Again in 1920, in its Nagpur Session, the Congress passed a resolution: 'This Congress expresses its fullest sympathy with the workers in India in their struggle for securing their legitimate rights through the organization of trade unions, and places on record its condemnation of the brutal policy of treating the lives of Indian workers as of no account under the false pretext of preserving law and order. The Congress is of the opinion that Indian labour should be organized with a view to improve and promote their well-being and secure to them just rights and also to prevent exploitation i) of Indian Labour, ii) of Indian resources by foreign agencies' [cited in S. Sen 1977: 221-2]. As is evident, the resolution basically underlined the exploitation of the workers by foreign companies and the repression by the colonial state. No clear stand was taken about the exploitation and maltreatment of labour by Indian industrialists.

The launch of the Non-cooperation Movement helped in various ways to energise the labour movements all over country. It inspired the workers and their leaders to struggle for their just rights, and several nationalist activists directly participated and led the labour agitations in various parts of the country. There were hundreds of strikes all over India in many enterprises during 1918-21, including some general industrial strikes. In Bombay Presidency, there were numerous strikes pointing to a general unrest among workers to improve their conditions. In Bengal, the Khilafat agitators and some Gandhians supported and participated in many strikes and agitations by jute workers in and around Calcutta. The Khilafat activists and the Non-cooperators held a lot of meetings in Calcutta and preached Hindu-Muslim amity, setting up of arbitration courts, abandoning liquor and toddy, and boycott of law courts and foreign goods. Even unorganised workers such as carters, tramway workers and taxi-drivers were involved in their own struggles. The wave of struggle extended to coal workers and also to the tea garden workers in Darjeeling and Dooars. There were 137 strikes in Bengal between July 1920 and March 1921. In Raniganj coalfields, Swami Viswananda and Darsanananda, deputed by the Congress, organised and mobilised the workers against European Managing Agencies which were in control. They formed two labour associations in this area, and they preached equality of all humans and the need to improve the conditions of the workers. They also led an important strike in East India Railways which continued for about three months. Even in the tea gardens, Non-cooperation Movement inspired the belief that the British rule was to end soon resulting in the demise of the hated garden managers. Several sporadic agitations took place, with some help from the Congressmen. C.R. Das was an active Congress leader in Bengal who worked for linking the Congress with the emergent labour movement and wanted that the Congress should actively involve itself with promoting labour struggles against capitalists. Some Congress leaders, however, had misgivings about this strategy and wanted only a restricted involvement of the Congress in labour issues so as not to alienate the Indian industrialists. In Jamshedpur, the Jamshedpur Labour Association, was formed during the 1920 strike by the Congress leaders. In 1925, the renowned Congress leader, C.F. Andrews, became its president. Gandhi also visited the place and exhorted both the employers and the workers to work according to the principle of harmonious relation between labour and capital.

The heightened political activities during this period resulted in formation of several unions in many centres. By 1920, according to an estimate there were 125 unions consisting of 250,000 members. This was a fairly impressive growth by any standards. All these developments led to the establishment of the AITUC in 1920, with Lala Lajpat Rai, the Congress President of that year, as its first president and Dewan Chaman Lall as its first general secretary. Tilak, before his death in August 1920, was the moving spirit behind the formation of the AITUC. Many people connected with labour were realising that there was a need for a central organisation of labour to coordinate the works of the trade unions all over India. The formation of the ILO acted as a catalyst for it. The ILO was established in 1919 according to the terms set by the Versailles Treaty which ended the World War I. It was felt that there should be a national organisation of the trade unions whose nominees could be chosen to represent the Indian labour in the ILO.

The emphasis of the AITUC was to associate the workers with the nationalist movement. A large number of Congress activists were among the 800 delegates who attended the AITUC conference from all over the country. 60 unions had affiliated with it and 42 more had sent their willingness to affiliate. By all counts, the formation of the AITUC was a success. Overall, the AITUC claimed to represent over 500,000 workers from all over the country.

Lajpat Rai, in his first presidential address to the AITUC, emphasised the urgent need for organisation among workers, and declared that 'We must organize our workers, make them class conscious.' He warned the capitalists that if the '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' [cited in S. Sen 1977: 171]. He linked capitalism with imperialism and militarism and emphasised that the organised labour was very significant in the fight against them. Dewan Chaman Lall moved a resolution in favour of *Swaraj* and emphasised that it would be a *Swaraj* for the workers as well. All important leaders of the Indian National Congress, except Gandhiji, were enthused by the formation of the AITUC and send congratulatory messages for its conferences in 1920 and 1921.

The Congress' interest in labour declined after the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation Movement. The labour movements also registered a decline in this period due to various reasons. The years between 1922 and 1926 were a time of industrial recession and the workers were at a receiving end. The industrialist sought to cut wages which the workers now found difficult to resist. Although a few important strikes, particularly in Bombay, took place, the overall scenario pointed towards a retreat of working class activism as the job market was shrinking. The number of strikes declined from 376 in 1921 to about 130 annually between 1924 and 1927. Between 1923 and 1930, the Congress passed just one resolution on labour issues in 1926 in which it wanted the Gandhian constructive programme to be extended to the workers in urban areas.

Gandhi had different ideas about capital-labour relationship. He considered the capitalists as trustees and the workers as partners, both working for common public good. He believed in amicable and mutual settlement of all contentious issues and strongly discouraged class conflict. The role of trade unions, according to him, was not just to agitate for wages and other workers' issues by holding

strikes. They should rather work for the social and cultural improvements of workers and their families. His idea of constructive work among the labourers included establishment of day school for children, enforcement of prohibition, educating the workers for proper and ethical behaviour, and so on. He warned that 'It will be the most serious mistake to make use of labour strikes for political purposes' [cited in V. Bahl 1988: 6]. He firmly believed that 'Labour must not become a pawn in the hands of politicians on the political chessboard'. He chastised the Bengal Congress leaders in 1921 for supporting labour militancy by stating that 'We seek not to destroy capital of capitalists but to regulate the relations between capital and labour' [cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 2004: 378]. All disputes should be settled through mutual understanding and arbitration. There should be no role of strikes in labour-employer relationship. Such views were not in conformity with the practice of trade unions. Thus, the TLA, under instructions from Gandhi, did not affiliate with the AITUC when the latter was formed. Gandhi did not even send a message to the first conference of the AITUC. He did not approve the idea of a central organisation of the working class which encompassed various unions.

### **26.4.2 Working Class and Nationalist Movement between 1927 and 1937**

Although some of the Congress leaders had been involved with the labour movements in several places and had been active in certain unions, their main interest of the Congress had been towards overall national movement. Although the labour had been deeply influenced by the nationalist movement in general, the inconsistent involvement of the Congress in their economic struggles had created the space for others with different ideologies. In the late 1920s, the leadership of organised labour was moving towards the communists who were energetically organising and mobilising the workers to raise their voice for their just demands. After 1926, the communists had started making an impact in the labour movement in some centres, particularly Bombay. Workers' and Peasants' Parties were organised in several parts of the country under the leadership of S.A. Dange, P.C. Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmed and Sohan Singh Josh. In the re-energised nationalist atmosphere, the communists quickly spread their influence among workers and became the leading force in labour unions in Bombay and Calcutta. Their leadership of the legendary 1928 cotton textile strike in Bombay and 1929 jute textile strike in Calcutta made them into the most important player in labour movement. The 1928 strike propelled the communist-led Girni Kamgar Union to become one of the most important unions. Its membership increased from 324 to 54,000. In many other industries located in various parts of the country, the communist influence quickly spread among workers. With their worker-oriented ideology and hard work, the communists made a strong impact among labour unions. By the end of 1928, the communists and other leftist forces had acquired an upper hand in the AITUC.

The national scene had again become charged up in 1928 due to agitation against the all-White Simon Commission. Angry demonstrations were held all over the country to protest the exclusion of Indians from deciding their own constitution. In line with the Indian National Congress, the AITUC resolved in 1927 to boycott the Simon Commission and the workers enthusiastically participated in demonstrations against the Commission. The unprecedented depression in the world economy in 1929 resulted in recession in Indian industries as well. Lowering

of wages and large-scale retrenchment was resorted to by the industrialists to economise. Schemes of rationalisation were set in motion which increased the intensity of work without raising the wages. Strikes took place at various places against these measures. The workers at several places also held strikes and militant demonstrations during the Civil Disobedience Movement. There were many strikes on economic as well as political issues all over the country between 1927 and 1931.

This period witnessed the legendary strikes by the Bombay textile workers in 1928 which lasted for about six months. The general industrial strike in textile industry of Bombay was repeated in 1929 which, however, failed. There was also a protracted strike of workers in Tata Iron and Steel Works in Jamshedpur. In 1929, there was a general strike among the jute workers of Calcutta. The militancy exhibited by workers was partly due to the rise of the communists in the workers' organisations. In 1931, the workers of Sholapur staged militant strike. The workers in Bombay and Calcutta also struck work. In 1932, significant strikes occurred in the railway workshops in Bengal, Madras and Bombay presidencies. In 1934, a big strike occurred in textile mills in Bombay. Many of these strikes now happened under communist leadership with the Congress not playing an important role in these, although the presence of nationalist sentiments cannot be discounted.

During this period, the tussle within the AITUC between the liberal-reformist leadership and the leftist-communists got bitter in the wake of long-drawn strikes at certain centres and power struggle within the organisation. There was also deep disagreement between the two sides about international affiliation of the AITUC. While the communists wanted to affiliate it to the Red International Labour Union, the other group wanted to associate with the International Federation of Trade Unions. At the 8<sup>th</sup> session of the AITUC in 1929, the organisational split came. While the AITUC remained with the communist leadership with help from the left nationalists such as Nehru and Bose, the other group formed the Indian Trade Union Federation.

Within the AITUC, the conflict of politics still persisted between the left-nationalists with allegiance to the Congress and the communists. The fateful decision of the communists to keep away from the Congress in 1928 proved costly for them. The government, sensing their isolation, clamped hard and arrested the major communist leaders to be tried under Meerut Conspiracy Case. After the failed strike of Bombay textile workers in 1929, the membership of the Girni Kamgar Union declined precipitously to 800. The second split occurred in 1931, when the communists moved out to form the Red Trade Union Congress. In 1935, with the change in the policy of the Communist International which now wanted the communists all over the world to follow the 'United Front' strategy and work jointly with bourgeois liberals and socialists against the rising tide of fascism, the communist-controlled Red Trade Union Congress joined the AITUC, which was at that point controlled by the supporters of M.N. Roy.

Some Congress leaders, such as Subhas Bose, wanted that the Congress should take more interest in labour issues and support the workers in their just struggles against both the foreign and Indian capitalists. Nehru declared in 1929 that 'if we spread socialist ideas we are bound to come into conflict with the capitalists. But this should not deter us from working for the welfare of the peasants and

workers' [cited in V. Bahl 1988: 9]. However, although local Congress leaders and activists were supportive of and involved in labour agitations, the central leadership did not do much to actively associate the Congress with the workers' struggles. Even Nehru, as the president of the AITUC in 1929, reminded the delegates that the Congress was 'not a labour organisation', but 'a large body comprising all manner of people' [cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 2004: 378]. The imperative to lead the national movement comprising all kinds of people in basically non-violent way did not permit the Congress to closely identify with any single class or group. The growing influence of the communists also alarmed the Congress leadership and determined its guarded approach to labour.

However, in 1931, the Congress, in its Karachi Session, passed a resolution which promised that the Congress government, after independence, would provide the workers a proper wage, healthy working conditions, protection for old age and sickness. It would restrict the number of hours, provide maternity leave for women, grant the right to form labour unions, and seek to improve overall condition of labour. In the wake of its decision to participate in elections, the Congress Working Committee constituted a Labour Committee in 1936 to help the workers in their problems and struggles. The Congress manifesto also supported union-formation among the workers.

On the whole, due to its national commitment, its paradigm of a bourgeois economic development, its policy of class conciliation rather than class conflict, and the Gandhian ideology of non-violence which was often superseded in working class struggles, the Congress had not been much involved organisationally in the labour movement until quite late. However, the nationalist movement worked as a great inspiration in energising the workers to struggle tenaciously for their rights.

### **26.4.3 Working Class and Nationalism from 1937 to 1947**

The formation of Congress ministries in various provinces in 1937 resulted in increased working-class activities. In 1935, the communists, again on instructions and changed line from the Comintern, decided to join hands with the Congress. The AITUC supported the Congress candidates during 1937 elections. Increased civil liberties and pro-labour attitude of some important Congress leaders provided a favourable ground for labour movement during the period of the Congress ministries.

The number of trade unions registered a significant increase from 271 in 1936-37 to 562 in 1938-39, and their membership rose from 261,047 to 399,159 in those years. The moderate National Federation of Trade Unions came together with the AITUC on the same platform in 1938. There were a few notable strikes in this period. The general strike of the jute workers in Bengal in 1937 lasted for 74 day involving 225,000 workers. It was supported by the Congress which passed a resolution condemning the repression by the state. In Bombay, a big strike in textile industry occurred in 1938 against the Industrial Disputes Bill introduced by the Congress ministry in the province. Besides these, there were several important strikes in Kanpur, Madras and many other centres. In Jamshedpur, the Congressmen had been active in labour organisations right since 1920 strike. However, as this industry was under the premier Indian industrialists, the Tatas, they remained a little careful in order not to hurt the Indian industry.

They mostly tried mediation which would be acceptable to both sides. But, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Congressman Abdul Bari turned out to be a firebrand labour leader. He became very popular among the workers owing to his militant position and anti-capitalist speeches.

In 1938, the strike wave reached a very high level, particularly on the issue of the recognition of unions by the management, which frightened the industrialists. On the labour issue, the Congress was divided between the right wing (which did not want mass agitations and did not wish to involve workers in organised form in the Congress) and the left wing which favoured the involvement of the Congress in mass politics and taking up the demands of the workers. However, in 1937, even Nehru advised the workers in Kanpur that they should not do anything which might cause obstruction in the smooth working of the mills, as this would ultimately mean a loss for the workers as well. To restrict the labour militancy, the Congress ministry in Bombay passed the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act in 1939. For the recognition of a union, it made the clause of arbitration necessary. Strikes could be legal only if a proper notice had been given and the arbitration process was over.

In the beginning of the War, the Congress ministries resigned to protest the unilateral decision by the colonial government to involve India in War. The communists were also opposed to what they termed as imperialist war. The workers of Bombay staged anti-War strikes and demonstrations. Over 90,000 workers participated in the strike. During the ensuing Quit India Movement, the nationalist activists tried to involve the organised workers all over the country and succeeded to a large extent. In Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur, and some other places, there were militant strikes by the workers. In Tata Iron and Steel Plant workers struck for two weeks demanding the formation of national government. In Ahmedabad, the textile workers' strike continued for over three months. In other places also, such as in Kanpur, Bombay, Delhi, Nagpur, Madras and Bangalore, there were strikes and demonstrations by workers in support of the nationalists. However, during the War period, the Congress could not undertake any organised activity among the workers, although individual Congress persons were involved in union activities and the Gandhians in constructive work.

In 1945, large number of workers in various places held strikes and demonstrations in support of the INA prisoners. In 1946, the workers in Bombay turned violent in support of the revolt by RIN ratings. Led by left unions, between two and three lakh workers struck work and held militant demonstrations. They fought with the police and the military leading to the death of 250 agitators, including the millworkers.

In the post-War period, when the contours of a national government were becoming apparent, the political rivalry within the trade unions became even more acute. After its victory in several provinces in 1946 elections, the Congress Working Committee decided in 1946 that the Congressmen should further involve themselves in labour matters but they should 'discriminate between occasions on which labour action deserves their support and those which called for restraints and discussions' [cited in N. Basu 2008: 26]. To propagate its viewpoint among the workers and to organise them on that basis, the Congress had earlier formed Congress Majdoor Sevak Sangh and Hindustan Majdoor Sevak Sangh. Later, it was able to mobilize a large number of trade unions and in May 1947, the Indian

National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was formed. It had 200 unions with a membership of about six lakhs. In 1948, the unions under the influence of the Congress Socialists came out of the AITUC and formed the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat (HMP). In 1949, another organisation called United Trade Union Congress was formed under the famous trade union leader, Mrinal Kanti Bose. In 1949, the HMP and the IFL united to found the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). Thus, in 1949, there were four central trade union federations – the AITUC, the INTUC, the HMS and the UTUC.

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## 26.5 SUMMARY

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The organised working class was a very small proportion of the Indian population during colonial times. Yet, its concentration in certain important cities gave it cohesion and political visibility. The nationalists in the early period were not much interested in the issues of the workers. Since they favoured an indigenous capitalist path of development, they even opposed legislation to regulate the working conditions in mills and factories. However, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalists belonging to the extremist wing realised the political importance of the workers and sought to mobilise them for the nationalist cause. In the period of mass nationalism, enunciated by Gandhi, the workers' participation in the nationalist activities became more frequent. However, the generalised, multi-class orientation of the Congress, and the arrival of the Communists on the political scene with their radical agenda for the working class led to rather inconsistent engagement between the Congress and the working class. Although the workers were inspired by the nationalist sentiments, the Congress could not consistently mobilise them in its movements because it did not take up the core issues of the workers and did not support their militant movements due to the fear of antagonising the Indian industrialists. Therefore, the relationship between the Congress and the working class remained rather weak, despite the fact that many individual Congress persons were involved in workers' struggles.

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## 26.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Why did the early nationalists oppose the legislation for improving the conditions of the workers?
- 2) What were Gandhi's views on the relationship between labour and capital?
- 3) Discuss the relationship between the Congress and the workers during the early 1920s.
- 4) Describe the response of the workers to the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements.