

Congress and Labour Movement
in India.

By

P. P. Lakshman

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FOREWORD

We often hear the charge levelled against the Congress that it being a capitalist or at least a capitalist dominated organization it has so far given scanty attention, nay totally neglected the interests of the labour. Those who make this charge consciously and seriously make it, they know, out of mischief and malice and those who believe it do so out of ignorance. This brochure prepared by Shri P. P. Lakshman of the Labour Section of our Economic and Political Research Department, is an effective answer to this charge and proves to the hilt that the Congress has been, practically from its very birth, very solicitous for the interests of the workers and has always tried its utmost to safeguard them from the foreign government as well as the Indian capitalists. Of course, the Congress being a national organization, its first and foremost objective was national freedom. It knew that all other freedoms could flow from this freedom only and therefore it concentrated all the energies of the nation on achieving this goal by providing a common anti-imperialist platform for the various interests in the country. It could not in the very nature of things, like a class or communal organization, confine its activities to the furtherance and safe-guarding of the interests of a particular class or community to the exclusion of others. It had necessarily to follow the policy of proper adjustment of conflicting interests of different communities and classes and thus try to keep them all on the right path of nationalism. If the Congress had not followed this golden path India would not have achieved its freedom in such a short time with so little sacrifice.

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But this does not mean that the Congress sacrificed at any time the interests of the masses. As Mahatma Gandhi put it very succinctly at the time of the second Round-Table Conference, whenever there was a real conflict between any other interest and the mass interest Congress has always upheld the interests of the masses. This can be easily proved by the history of the last thirty years of the Congress. Not only has the Congress by its constructive programme always served to the needs of the masses but as its fight for freedom developed it gradually gave more and more economic and social content to its freedom till at last at the time of its final struggle for driving the foreigner out of the country it declared that "the primary object of the Indian Government must be to promote the well-being and progress of the workers in the fields and factories and elsewhere to whom essentially all power and authority must belong." Thus Congress has unequivocally declared that the Swaraj for which it was fighting was the Swaraj of the people. The Congress does not stand for a dictatorial regime even in the transitional period before real power is transferred to the people. For it firmly believes freedom can never come through dictatorship. That is the real difference between those who are nurtured and nourished exclusively on foreign ideology and methods of its achievement and the Congress which wants to work and build its political and economic edifice on the firm foundation in the native soil. It stands through and through for democracy. Therefore it declared in its Meerut resolution that "Swaraj cannot be real for the masses unless it makes possible the achievement of a society in which democracy extends from the political to the social and economic spheres and in which there would be no opportunity for the privileged classes to exploit the bulk of the people, nor for gross inequalities such as exist at present." Thus the difference is not of ends, but only of means.

According to Gandhiji this process of levelling could

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be undertaken by labour itself if they educated themselves and acted in a nonviolent manner. Labour is the producer of wealth and therefore it must be its master also. Only it must become conscious of its power and role. That is the congress work in labour for the future. This brochure narrates how it has done so in the past and how it intends to do in the future. Therefore I recommend it to all the well-wishers of the workers.

New Delhi
22nd. October 1947

SHANKARRAO DEO

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The history of the Labour movement in India begins practically after the end of the first World War. The All India Trade Union Congress was formed in 1920 with Lala Lajpat Rai, the President of the Indian National Congress, as its first President. The organisation was sponsored and supported by Congress, and it was common practice then that Congress Presidents and Secretaries functioned as its President or Secretary at one time or other. This gave it prestige as well. But before it could grow naturally and become sufficiently strong, differing theories and ideologies disturbed the unity of its ranks. The result was that by 1931, in place of one organisation there were three viz., All India Trade Union Congress, Indian Trades Union Federation and All India Red Trade Union Congress, neither of which by any manner or means could make a claim or speak on behalf of Indian labour. Some joint efforts were however made in the same year by some labour leaders with a view to close up the ranks and put their house in order. One such effort was a representative conference of Trade Unionists in Bombay in 1931 when a Trade Union Unity Committee was formed. The finding of the Committee was that the gulf which divided the communists from other sections in labour was unbridgeable and that a platform of unity for non-communists be formed. Based on this platform of unity an organisation called the National Federation of Labour was formed. This organisation and the Indian Trade Union Federation were amalgamated into National Trades Union Federation in 1933. In 1938 All India Trade Union Congress and National Trades Union Federation decided to combine into one central organisation

and the decision was formally ratified at the Eighteenth Session of AITUC. But at the very same session a further split was caused when a section headed by Shri M. N. Roy formed a new central organisation known as the Indian Federation of Labour.

When top leadership of labour was thus being fought for by different groups and sections, Congressmen down the ladder kept themselves busy doing field work among labour. That was Gandhiji's method which led the historic labour movement at Ahmedabad in 1918 to a successful end and brought into being there the biggest labour organisation in the country. "If I had my way," wrote Gandhiji, "I would regulate all the labour organisations of India after the Ahmedabad model. It has not sought to intrude itself upon the All India Trade Union Congress and has been uninfluenced by that Congress. A time, I hope, will come, when it will be possible for the Trade Union Congress to accept the Ahmedabad method and have the Ahmedabad organisation as part of the All India Union. But I am in no hurry. It will come in its own time." When Congress passed under Gandhiji's leadership in 1920, most of its time and efforts were directed to constructive channels, and in the labour field especially such activities like organisational work, educational services, housing facilities, health services, campaign against drinking, gambling and other evil habits among workers, were undertaken. This has been the Congress line of activity ever since, not only at Ahmedabad but wherever Congressmen undertook to do service to labour. In 1938 the Labour Committee of the Gandhi Seva Sangh set up an organisation called Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh mainly with the purpose of putting trained workers in labour field in order to help labourers organise, establish welfare activities among them and better equip them to fight for their rights. After eight years of service to labour, this organisation received recognition from Congress in August, 1946.

Both Congress and Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh adopted a policy of cooperation with All India Trade Union Congress till 1947. The growing communist influence in the Trade Union Congress and the gradual displacement of democratic methods by dictatorship made it increasingly difficult for non-communists to have any voice in the organisation. At present, the communist members of both the General Council and the Working Committee of this organisation constitute 55 per cent of the total. The 1946 Provincial Assembly Elections showed that 66% of the votes polled in labour constituencies in all the Provinces were polled in favour of Congress. Communists who secured only 23% of the total labour votes are controlling an organisation which claims to speak on behalf of Indian labour. This was resented by prominent trade unionists in India. At a representative conference of trade unionists in Delhi in May 1947, it was decided to set up a new national organisation of labour called the Indian National Trade Union Congress. Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh recognised by Congress has extended its support to this organisation. The aims and policy of this new organisation are in consonance with those of Congress regarding labour. The Congress Working Committee has therefore recommended to all Congressmen to get those unions which they are organising affiliated to the newly formed Indian National Trade Union Congress.

An attempt has been made in this brochure to trace the history of the labour movement in India, to examine in general the efforts made by Congress towards bringing into being a sound, healthy trade unionism, and to study in particular the Congress stand in regard to certain problems facing labour in this country. It has not been the intention of the author to record all that has been done and is being done to labour by Congress, Congressmen and Congress Governments. The attempt made here is to indicate the Congress attitude and service to labour, and to show that the imple-

mentation of the Congress policy should ultimately result in a transfer of power to the workers in fields and factories.

10th October, 1947

P. P. LAKSHMAN