

# **BOMBAY TEXTILE GENERAL STRIKE**

*February 28th to  
March 11th, 1966*

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**By  
S. G. SARDESAI**

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The general strike of over two hundred thousand textile workers of Bombay embracing all the sixty mills in the city, started from the morning of February 28th. The call for the strike had been given after prolonged campaigning and preparations by the Mumbai Girmī Kamgar Union, affiliated to the All-India Trade Union Congress.

As a result of an agreement arrived at with the leaders of the Union after protracted negotiations, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri Vasant Rao Naik, issued a statement at midnight on March 10th, dealing with the demands of the strike and appealing to the workers to return to work. On the following day, the appeal was considered by the Strike Committee composed of the Executive Committee of the MGKU and 260 representatives elected by the workers' mill committees in the various mills. Recognising that the demands conceded by the Chief Minister's statement were substantial, the Strike Committee decided to withdraw the strike. The decision was placed before a mass rally of the strikers attended by nearly a hundred and fifty thousand workers on the evening of the 11th. It was elaborately explained to them by Comrade S. A. Dange and the other Union leaders. The striking workers confirmed the decision of the Strike Committee by a unanimous vote.

On the morning of March 12th the vast army of the textile workers of Bombay, renowned for grim and numberless class battles fought since the beginning of the century, marched back to work with the same exemplary unity and discipline which had characterised the walkout twelve days earlier. In fact, more. It was a more disciplined army, a more steeled

army, and one with far greater confidence in its own organised strength than what it had only a fortnight before.

## DEMANDS SECURED

Did the strike secure its immediate demands? Clearly not all—which, indeed, happens on extremely rare occasions. And yet, judged by any dispassionate standard, the success achieved was clear and remarkable. How?

Prior to the strike the Bombay Mill Owners' Association was emphatically opposed to conceding every demand put forth by the Union, and in particular, the two most important ones pertaining to the bonus for 1964 and the employer's threat to reduce the workers' dearness allowance. Their adamant attitude was evidenced not only in their appeal to the Supreme Court to get the Bonus Act itself invalidated, but in their dilly-dallying with the payment of the bonus for 1964 even though they were legally bound to do so by August 1965. And they had shown the audacity to approach the Industrial Court for a reduction of the DA by one-third precisely when the cost of living had shot up higher than at any time since the war. According to the employers, the "crisis" in the textile industry ruled out any possibility of their meeting the workers' demands.

Having made hay when the sun was shining the employers wanted (and want even now) to pass on the consequences of their own mismanagement, insatiable greed, and irresponsibility towards the elementary interests of the industry, to the shoulders of the workers on the advent of the rainy day.

The mill-owners' offensive against the Bombay textile workers' bonus and dearness allowance, moreover, was the spearhead of the concerted and unfolding drive of all the barons of Indian industry to attack dearness allowance and bonus in all industries, in the name of rising costs of production, unbearable corporation taxes, the credit squeeze, the drying up of the capital market and other pretexts.

Thus the textile workers, in this strike, were not pitted against their employers alone, nor were they fighting only for themselves. From both sides, it was an advance-guard action. The employers were fully conscious of this reality. As will be seen in the course of this narration, the workers in other industries in Bombay also realised the significance of this strike for their own future.

The first dress rehearsal of this general strike was the Bombay textile workers' one-day protest strike against the Bonus Ordinance in June last. The second was the textile workers' one-day protest strike on December 29th, on this occasion covering the whole of Maharashtra. This sparring before the real match clearly indicated the seriousness of the tussle to both the contending parties.

Further. All efforts made by the Union for months to get the State Government's intervention to secure a reasonable settlement had also failed. The Government did not take the two abovementioned protest strikes seriously. Prior to the strike the State Government itself pleaded the "incapacity" of the industry to pay due to "financial difficulties". The Maharashtra Labour Minister Shri Tidke stated on February 20th that since the issues raised by the Union were subjudice, "the strike was obviously illegal". During the strike, when the Chief Minister, together with the Home and Labour Ministers, met the strike leaders on three occasions, he consistently insisted, right up to the 9th of March, that the strike must first be unconditionally withdrawn before he could agree to look into workers' demands.

The attitude of the Central Government was no different. A written Memorandum had been submitted by Comrade Dange on behalf of the AITUC to the Prime Minister and the Central Labour Minister intimating to them the seriousness of the issues involved and warning them of the coming conflict. Nothing came of it. And during the strike itself, despite the issue being raised in Parliament, the Central Government refused to intercede.

In assessing the success and achievements of the strike as embodied in the statement issued by the Chief Minister on the

10th night, this formidable background cannot be overlooked. One has to know the heavy and determined odds against which the struggle of the strikers was pitched.

One vital outcome of the strike must also be stressed before referring to the actual demands conceded by the Chief Minister's statement.

For the first time on the 10th afternoon the State Labour Minister, on his own, presented a written draft statement to accredited representatives of the MGKU (Com. Dange, President, Com. Patkar, General Secretary, and Coms. Datta Deshmukh, Yeshwant Chavan, K. L. Desai and Gulabrao Ganacharya) and Com. K. N. Dhulap, leader of the Samiti Group and the opposition in the Vidhan Sabha, dealing with the strike demands, and inviting their comments and amendments. These were given and were followed by consultations in the State Cabinet.

Some of the amendments made by the Union and strike representatives were accepted, others were not. The important amendment which was not accepted pertained to the recognition of the MGKU. The reason given was that under the BIR Act the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh of the INTUC was the recognised Union.

At the same time, the draft made a clear reference to the strike call having been given by the MGKU and the appeal for its withdrawal was also directed to the MGKU together with the striking workers.

The final acceptance of the draft statement took place at midnight in a joint meeting of the MGKU representatives and the Chief Minister, the Labour and Home Ministers and the representatives of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee. This acceptance, again, was subject to its ratification by the Strike Committee, and Government representatives accepted this position.

The manner in which the strike was settled and the Chief Minister's statement issued are of key importance since they give the statement the character of an agreement between the Government and the MGKU representatives. Further,



this constitutes a de facto recognition of the MGKU. In fact, this was the crucial reason why the die-hard reactionaries of the Congress and the leadership of the RMMS virulently opposed the State Government carrying on any negotiations with the MGKU or arriving at any agreed settlement with it.

What demands did the statement concede?

1. The State Government undertook to make the employers pay the bonus for 1964 expeditiously. The significance of this undertaking is underscored by the fact that the Bombay Mill Owner's Association also came out with an official statement on the 10th morning stating that, without prejudice to its appeal in the Supreme Court against the Bonus Act, it was prepared to make the bonus payment for 1964. Obviously, the Chief Minister agreed to secure the bonus for the workers only after the latter had given the employers a taste of militant working-class solidarity.
2. The State Government agreed to oppose the employers' demand submitted to the Industrial Court for reduction in dearness allowance.
3. It has been the practice of the "Socialistic" Congress Government in the past to take over mills which are closed down or go bankrupt because of all sorts of frauds, embezzlements and mismanagement committed by their Managing Agents. The Government then puts the affairs of such mills in order, including making their workers work on lower wages in the name of "unemployment relief", and brings them back to a solvent condition. Having done so, the mills are handed back to the owners so that they may once again indulge in the earlier orgies that had led to their ruin. The Maharashtra Government has now accepted to move the Central Government to permit it not to hand over such mills back to their owners.
4. Government has undertaken to see that no worker is subjected to victimisation because of the strike.

5. The questions of women and "badli" (substitute) workers will be settled through further negotiations.

No one can deny that these concessions are clear and substantial. No wonder the strikers accepted them as a basis for terminating the strike, despite all the hullabaloo raised by their pseudo-friends and enemies who had denounced the strike when it was on, and also denounced its withdrawal when it was ended.

Of course, the workers are intensely conscious that there is no guarantee that the employers or Government will stick to their commitments except the unity and capacity of the workers to strike back if and when those who have made the commitments back out. This was conveyed to the workers in their last rally in no uncertain terms. As has been said, "Trust in God but keep your powder dry". The employers and the capitalist Government themselves drive home this lesson into the consciousness of the working class every moment of their life. There is no question of the workers having any illusions in the matter.

#### KEY EVENTS AND DATES

In order to appreciate the economic and political significance of the Bombay strike, apart from the immediate demands secured, it would be helpful to note some key events and their chronological order.

To begin with it should be noted that the Communist Party, because of its unquestioned historical role in building the working-class movement in Bombay, and more specifically, of the textile workers, holds a leading position in the MGKU. But this does not at all mean that it is a "communist" union. It is a very broadbased trade union in which members of the Lal Nishan Group, the Peasants' and Workers' Party, and independents also hold leading positions.

In fact, till fairly recently, Com. S. M. Joshi, President of the Samyukta Socialist Party, was the president of the Union.

It is extremely significant that on the eve of the general strike Shri S. M. Joshi and George Fernandes, who are also

leaders of the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, formed a rival textile workers' union in Bombay whose first act was to come out against the proposed general strike by the MGKU. They attacked the strike as "unnecessary, frivolous, and bogus". They attacked the MGKU leadership, and in particular, Com. Dange, for being "in league" with the Congress leadership. Strangely enough, together with such "left" criticism, they also opposed the strike on the ground that it was "illegal".

The pro-employer RMMS of the INTUC was, of course, virulently opposed to the strike and called it "communist gangsterism" meant to achieve "ulterior objectives". It marshalled its entire cadre, not excluding dubious goonda elements, to break the strike as the 28th of February drew near.

Now for the main events.

**FEBRUARY 27TH EVENING:** Vast workers' rally at Nare Park giving its final and unanimous verdict to strike work from the 28th morning shift.

**FEBRUARY 28TH MORNING:** Strong police mobilisation all over the mill area, on the roads, and particularly in front of mill gates. A large number of RMMS volunteers (to be frank, also rowdies) in front of every mill gate "to give confidence to loyal workers wanting to go to work". Red-flag volunteers also at mill gates. But the strike is so voluntary, enthusiastic and united that over eighty per cent of the workers do not even go to the mill gates from their residential chawls. Most of the others, return. Numberless processions of strikers are spontaneously formed all over the mill area, marching about with red flags quite jubilantly and shouting slogans. The tension is not even a tithe of what was feared the previous evening.

**MARCH 1ST, 2ND, 3RD AND 4TH:** Strike becomes more consolidated, strikers more calm and confident. RMMS cadre and strike-breakers thoroughly demoralised. No violence anywhere excepting rare and minor incidents. Even the Police Commissioner and the Government accept the fact of the peacefulness and discipline of the strikers and MGKU cadre. Mass rallies every evening continue throughout the strike. Employers

threaten to close down cheap grain shops run by the mills, but retreat. Thousands of altogether new and young strike militants emerge to organise processions, maintain discipline, fight provocation, keep vigilance in the chawls, keep regular contact with and take instructions from the MGKU central and area offices. This is the new generation of red guards and activists.

· MARCH 3RD: Mammoth procession of at least over one lakh workers, over three miles long, marches in strict discipline from Parel to the State Secretariat shouting slogans issued by the strike leadership. The State Secretariat is eight miles away from certain mill areas. None has any fear that anyone can do strike breaking in the mill area when the strikers are away for almost the whole day at the other end of the city.

· An interview between the strike leaders and the Chief Minister. No results.

· Meeting of the representatives of all (barring INTUC and HMS) trade unions in the city in the evening to plan Bombay Bandh to express fraternal solidarity with the strikers. Hind Mazdoor Panchayat representatives stage a walk out on the fantastic plea that their newly-formed textile workers' union (which had openly and vociferously opposed the strike) had not been invited. All others agree to organise Bombay Bandh but decide to make further efforts to seek unity with the HMP for fixing the date.

· MARCH 5TH AND 6TH: Holi holidays. Festive and also calm and determined atmosphere in the mill area. Seeing the demoralisation of the RMMS cadre the Bombay City Congress Committee and Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee leadership comes stridently on the scene. This includes three Maharashtra State Cabinet Ministers, Shantilal Shah, P. K. Sawant and even the "Labour" Minister Tidke. They declare the strike to be a "political challenge" of the Communist Party and also their determination to "crush communist gangsterism". In a meeting they attack the Maharashtra Government for its "kid-glove" policy towards the strike, demand "more protection for loyal workers" and also attack the Chief Minister and Shri

Yeshwantrao Chavan for having negotiations with the Communist Strike Leaders.

!A second interview with the Chief Minister. No results.

MARCH 7TH: On the previous two days and on March 7th the INTUC and the Congress leadership prepare for "mass counter-picketing" at the mill gates on the 8th. This preparation, as evidenced on the 8th morning, was nothing short of organised and aggressive provocation meant to bring about clashes with the workers for giving the police the opportunity for unleashing mass violence and terror against the strikers and thus crushing the strike.

The MGKU activists and leadership size up the meaning of this "preparation" and also organise themselves to meet it. The strike leadership had planned to offer mass satyagraha before the State Legislature on the 8th. The Strike Committee considered the satyagraha proposal but decided to drop it and concentrate all its forces in the mill area on the 8th, which proved to be a very correct decision.

MARCH 8TH: Maximum and most provocative strike breaking by the entire united strength of the Congress leadership and INTUC. Big mobilisation before mill gates. A group of INTUC 'volunteers' takes red flags and parades the mill area, indulges in stone throwing, and also attempts to force petty shop-keepers to close their shops. Congress and INTUC leaders move most provocatively in the mill area. This is the day of the maximum tension and explosiveness throughout the strike. Some confusion in the ranks of the strike activists also whether closure of shops was our slogan (since the INTUC 'volunteers' carried red flags). But the Strike Committee leadership rapidly covers the entire mill area isolating the provocateurs and maintaining the discipline of our activists and the mass. By the evening strike breaking fails as also the dangerous provocations.

MARCH 9TH: The Hind Mazdoor Panchayat leadership, most of all George Fernandes, refuses to join hands with other trade unions and unilaterally issues a call for Bombay Bandh on March 11th, while again denouncing the textile strike as a hoax

and deception! This not only discredits Fernandes thoroughly among the textile workers but also other industrial workers. Reliable reports are received that his policies and tactics call forth strong resentment even among the BEST bus workers, taxi drivers and municipal workers whose unions he has been leading in the past.

The same evening representatives of sixty-one trade unions in Bombay, including middle-class employees, engineering and dock workers and many others issue a call for Bombay Bandh on Monday the 14th. The HMP call for the 11th is rejected as disruptive since that was pay day for a number of industries and inconvenient for other reasons as well.

Third interview with the Chief Minister. No results.

MARCH 10TH: Mill workers' pay day. The Union leaders had advised the workers to take their wages in the mass rally the preceding evening. With admirable and astonishing unity and discipline, endless rows of strikers receive their pay from pay-clerks sitting at the mill gates. Almost to a man, the same workers proceed a few steps further and pay their union subscription to the Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union volunteers who are waiting for them at nearby tables with red flags and placards. Over 70,000 rupees collected in a few hours. Further collections not possible as receipt books were exhausted and the Union volunteer organisation could not cope with all the mass that wanted to pay. Strikers' loyalty exceeds what was expected by their most optimistic leaders!

This finally decides the issue for the employers and the Government. They are thoroughly convinced that such unity and discipline, now materially supported by the pay packets just received, was absolute proof that the strikers would definitely hold out for a long period to come. The only way 'open' to the employers and Government to end the strike earlier was unprovoked, pure and simple, mass bloodshed from which they recoil. They were not prepared for a 'Calcutta' in Bombay.

The millowners hold a conclave and the Chief Minister prepares his 'statement and appeal'. Negotiations for amending

the draft go on till midnight. The contents of the statement, as it finally emerged, are described earlier.

MARCH 11TH: The entire bourgeois press in the morning—English and Marathi—comes out with banner headlines that the strike is ended and the workers' leaders have agreed that the strikers should immediately return to work. Com. Patkar's statement that no worker is to return to work, until he receives such a directive from the strike committee, is published only by the Maratha. The strike continues as fully as before.

Only after the Strike Committee decides to end the strike on the basis of the Chief Minister's statement and after the decision is endorsed by the mass rally in the evening, only after this the strikers march back triumphantly on the 12th morning.

Such are the essentials of the story of the 12 days' textile general strike of Bombay.

## THE NEW WORKER

Apart from the immediate demands secured the deeper significance and abiding gain of the general strike has been the broader and deeper consciousness, steeling and sense of class solidarity and strength that a new generation of textile workers have acquired through it. Nothing can educate and forge the militant unity of the masses as the experience of actual struggle. The recent textile general strike will surely go down in the history of the textile workers of Bombay as a landmark in their schooling.

The heroic generation of the late twenties that laid the foundation of militant class struggle in Bombay, the generation that made Bombay famous as the "Petrograd of India", is now a vanished generation, not only politically, but also physically.

Between the second world war and the present strike there has been only one indefinite general strike of the textile workers of Bombay. That, too, was sixteen years ago. It was still a strike of the pre-independence generation of workers.

Since independence, the textile workers of Bombay have no doubt fought many protest strikes, and shed their blood in profusion.

BUT THE PRESENT ONE HAS BEEN THE FIRST INDEFINITE GENERAL STRIKE OF THE POST-WAR YOUNG GENERATION OF TEXTILE WORKERS. TO FAIL TO REALISE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PHENOMENON IS TO MISS THE VERY ESSENCE OF THE IMPACT OF THIS STRIKE ON THE NEW BOMBAY WORKING CLASS.

What is this new generation of workers? What is its outlook, its physiognomy? What are its mental digits and habits of behaviour?

It is undoubtedly a militant, fighting generation. It is capable of heroic actions unmindful of the price it may have to pay in life and limb.

But without denigrating it in the least, its other features have also to be realistically understood and taken into account.

It has had very little experience of sustained and protracted class struggles. It has yet to attain the mature class understanding of economics and politics which only such struggles can give.

Inevitably, it takes the achievements of the earlier generation for granted. It has no consciousness of the struggles and sacrifice that have gone into those achievements of the trade-union movement the fruits of which it enjoys today. It does not know what suffering, starvation and bloodshed had to be gone through by its parents to secure the simple right of holding the red flag aloft and carrying it proudly through the streets of Bombay, the simple right of publicly declaring "Yes, I am a red-flagger, I am a Communist". What a price had to be paid to establish the right to dearness allowance, its linking with the cost of living, bonus, the minimum living wage, trade-union recognition, and such vital issues is not a part of its own experience.

In this context, the new labour legislation, the conciliation and arbitration machinery, have also created many illusions in its mind. They have considerably diverted its attention from the



indispensable necessity of class organisation and class struggle to the trade-union mechanism of the bourgeois state. The value of the trade-union secretary is often judged more from his capacities as a trade union lawyer than as a mass organiser and leader of militant struggles. This has a corrosive influence on its class consciousness.

The new generation is not only literate. It has a wider knowledge of life, a passion for art and entertainment, and is a voracious reader of daily newspapers, periodicals, fiction and literature. Most of what it gets in these spheres is naturally bourgeois. A good part of it is degenerate and escapist. What is idealistic is generally romantic, glorifying spectacular acts of individual heroism, not the unassuming, tenacious and sustained heroism of the working class and its children. Even in heroism, the new worker seeks glamour and sensation.

Over and above all this, the new generation is subject to the crude and vulgar corrupting influences of the get-rich-quick capitalist development in the country. It is exposed to the pervasive atmosphere of bribery, illicit distillation, crime and worse. In the old days, it was rare to come across a red-flagger, or any public worker, for that matter, who was not keen on maintaining certain standards of personal conduct. Today it is not rare to find young workers who face police bullets with death-defying abandon but do not worry much about their personal reputation.

It would be utterly unfair, because it is wrong, to take a condescending attitude towards the new young worker. He has immense qualities and healthy ambitions. And basically, it is not he who is responsible for his faults.

At the same time, the fact remains that *it is this new worker* that has to be moulded and forged to become the model leader of the working-class and democratic movement in the country. And what is decisively pertinent is that *struggle and proper guidance do shape him pretty fast*. This is not utopian theory. This is the actual experience of the Bombay textile general strike and a number of similar struggles.

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With the decision of the strike taken early in February the Party and trade-union machinery was set in motion. Quite a few hundred activists and whole-timers moved into the agitational campaign.

But the mass of the textile workers had not, as yet, taken a partisan position. The demands were correct, the leaders were right, but may be some negotiated settlement would come about and the strike may not be necessary—this was their mood.

With the approach of the 28th things began to warm up. There was a growing and sharper realisation that this time the employers and the Government were more adamant than in previous years, and that the securing of the bonus and beating back the attack on dearness allowance was going to be a hard-fought battle.

It was in this atmosphere, even before the 28th, that a rapidly expanding mass became more keen, and thousands of young workers, attracted by the prospect of battle, became enthusiastically active and partisan. Mill gate meetings, chawl meetings, and such forms of agitation as leafleteering, postering, placarding, the organisation of local processions and demonstrations with red flags and slogans, swelled very fast. The MGKU started a special bulletin for strike propaganda called *Lal Bawata* (Red Flag). It sold like hot cakes all over the mill area.

And yet, the excitement of the new worker exhibited all its characteristic features. In the post-war years, the INTUC has brought organised and flagrantly pro-employer strike-breaking into the trade-union movement. Simultaneously, a certain "militant" element has also introduced into it irresponsible and adventurist methods, cheap and sensational stunt-mongering, and pseudo-leftist disruptionism, all combined and unprincipled pacts and agreements with the employers and high-ups in the Government. At times this degenerates into vulgarity.

The new worker is not insulated from the influence of such "trade unionism". He often mistakes it for genuine militancy.

One could notice this influence in the swelling mass of local demonstrations and processions that preceded the strike. Real Red Flag slogans used to get mixed up with indecent ones aimed at the INTUC and HMP leaders who had come out against the proposed strike. Light-hearted jeering at pedestrians, some molestation here and there of street vendors, loud whistling, and such things were not ruled out. Young men would often dance the *Rhomba Somba* (the indigenous variety of the twist) in the processions.

At the same time the Union leadership came out powerfully and systematically against all such manifestations in the rising tempo of the movement. The nobility and idealism of the earlier heroes and martyrs of the Red Flag were popularised on a mass scale through the narration of numberless old episodes. The distinction between militancy and adventurism, between militancy and disciplined restraint for nipping provocation in the bud, was popularly put across in huge rallies. The glorious role of women in the working-class movement and hence the impermissibility of obscene slogans no matter against whom they are directed, were rammed in day after day. Speeches in the pre-strike meetings were not just demagogic performances denouncing the employers and calling on the workers to fight. They were a real educative campaign for making the prospective strikers realise the meaning of the proud traditions of the Red Flag movement, its values and high standards, its honour and discipline. Com. Nana Patil's homely and allegorical language hit the mark very effectively on all such questions.

And how rapidly the working class learns these lessons and rises to its height in actual struggle!

● The mammoth three-mile-long procession of the strikers on March 3rd was a sea change in contrast with pre-strike processions not merely in respect of its far bigger magnitude but in each and all aspects.

Literally thousands upon thousands of young workers formed an unbroken chain on both sides of the procession throughout

the march. Every rank was precisely four abreast, no loose fifth person being allowed to muscle in. Not a single slogan was shouted which had not been issued in the rally held the previous evening. No whistling and no improper dancing or gestures were witnessed at any time by anybody. Pedestrians and hawkers were not only never molested but small breaches were made in the procession at junctions and crowded spots to allow the pedestrians and traffic to cross the street. The police were literally unemployed, and had nothing to do except march along with the procession because they had been ordered to do so.

The procession ended in an unprecedentedly big mass rally at the Oval Maidan opposite the Secretariat. In the afternoon it dispersed, the participants trekking their way home to Parel, Sewri, Worli, and other areas miles away. Not a single untoward incident was reported from anywhere.

● The ordeal of March 8th, when the INTUC and Congress leaders made their biggest and most aggressive efforts at strike-breaking, and resorted to such dangerous provocations as INTUC volunteers going about with red flags and intimidating shop-keepers to close down their shops, was even more difficult to deal with.

The main danger on this day lay in this that there was every possibility of honest and militant Red Flag activists, the new and inexperienced but enthusiastic workers, being drawn into the whirlpool. It is not easy to deal with the strike-breaker. It is even more difficult to deal with him coolly and firmly when he becomes rowdy, uses foul and abusive language, and takes cover under the red flag to indulge in intimidation and violence against non-working-class citizens in the name of bringing about a hartal in support of the strike.

If even a microscopic proportion of the strikers had fallen prey to this dangerously provocative game on the 8th it would have become an invitation to lumpen and goonda elements in the mill area to indulge in looting and vandalism. Further, it would have been the surest invitation to the police to drown the strike in a sea of blood.

But by now the entire strike organisation, from the leadership to the ranks, had become so developed and reacted to developments so fast that literally within half an hour after the start of the provocative tactics the leadership and middle ranks rushed to all the danger spots and brought the situation under control. The rowdy campaigners of the hartal were isolated and had to retreat into their hideouts. By noon a press statement in the *Maratha* carried the exhortations of the strike leaders to the nooks and corners of the entire mill area.

In the vast rally in the evening the role of provocateurs masking themselves as militants and sympathisers of the strike was boldly exposed and denounced. The exposure was thunderously applauded by the audience. No activists got the feeling that his militancy was being curbed or denied. Militancy means fighting unity, struggle means disciplined action, provocation is the enemy game, to fall a prey to it in the form of anarchic actions is to damage one's own cause—the lesson was clear to the workers through actual experience.

● Another vital lesson assimilated by the workers in this strike was in connection with the forms, methods and tactics of a really fighting strike struggle and pseudo-leftist disruptionism.

The vehicle of the latter technique in this strike was the HMP leadership and in particular George Fernandes. During the last seven or eight years, George Fernandes, in the eyes of big sections of the working class, had emerged as a brilliant star, a daring trade-union leader, a name of conjure with, mainly among the backward workers lacking experience in prolonged struggles. In this strike, his very name became anathema.

He launched his attempted intervention in the strike by forming a rival trade union because, we were asked to believe, "Dange, Patkar and the MGKU leadership had sold itself to the capitalists and Congress leaders", "the MGKU strike demands were wishy-washy nonsense", "the strike was a hoax practised by its leaders on the workers only to cheat and betray them", and many such things. The flaming new "revolutionary" union

was to become the champion of genuinely radical demands and a relentless fight with the employers and the Government.

For the workers, however, the test of the pudding was in the eating. They realised the genuineness, objectivity and feasibility of the demands formulated by the MGKU leadership. They saw the seriousness and sincerity of the leadership in organising the struggle. They were convinced of its determination and capacity to make all the sacrifices and face all the consequences demanded by the struggle. Above all, they saw the transparent insincerity and disruptionism of the HMP leadership which, while claiming to be their true champion, attacked their action and hence objectively played the game of the INTUC and the employers.

*The working class can forgive anything. It cannot forgive those who divide its ranks at the moment of action, in the field of battle, no matter whether under rightist or leftist pretexts.*

The Fernandes tactic became even more glaringly reprehensible as the situation developed towards Bombay Bandh. While dozens upon dozens of trade unions in the city, embracing every section of the white-collar and industrial working class, rallied in support of a united action to express their fraternal solidarity for the textile workers, the HMP leadership first stood out on a flimsy and dishonest pretext. Next, Fernandes came out with his own date for Bombay Bandh in open defiance of all appeals for united action made not only by communists but by all other shades and trends of leftist, progressive opinion in the trade-union movement in the city. That was the limit.

If the Government had not come to terms with the MGKU leadership on the 10th night, Bombay and India would have witnessed the magnificent Bombay Bandh of March 14th. They would have also experienced the damaging consequences of the adventurist and disruptionist Bombay Bandh of March 11th.

It is to be hoped that even now the HMP leadership will draw positive and healthy conclusions from its role in the recent strike. The trade-union and democratic movement has every-

thing to gain if it does so. The HMP and the SSP themselves stand to gain, and will rise in stature and prestige, if they do so.

● Apart from the question of how to fight, yet another lesson learnt in this strike was when and how long to fight and when and how to settle a strike.

The securing of the immediate demands of the strike is, of course, the primary task of every strike. But it is not often that all the demands of the strike are fully secured at a stroke. The strike leadership has to judge what demands to emphasise and how to retain their essence while being flexible in the matter of details. This, again, is not a rigid and unchanging category. It changes in accordance with all the fluid factors that determine daily changes in the strike situation. The co-relation of forces between the employers and the Government, on one side, and the workers on the other, is constantly in flux. A serious and experienced strike leadership has to have its eye on this barometer.

And this is not all. The preservation and consolidation of the mighty organisation which necessarily emerges in every strike must always be a matter of vital and basic concern for a responsible strike leadership. In the final analysis the broadening and consolidation of the unity of the working class, its organisation, is the most valuable achievement of every working-class struggle. Against the bourgeoisie and reaction that is the one and the only reliable weapon of the toilers.

From this consideration, a negotiated settlement based, of course, on the strength of the workers and justifiable on merits, opens out most valuable opportunities for strengthening the trade-union and political organisation of the working class for the future and for more powerful and decisive battles to come. The working class always sees the value of such opportunities. It has no fascination for the glamorous martyrdom of a "short and swift" struggle that only recoils on its own head. It does not gamble for "all or nothing".

When the Strike Committee discussed the Chief Minister's statement on the 11th, it considered all those factors before accepting the statement. It was fully conscious that the settlement was not an unqualified victory. It was equally convinced that in the totality the settlement was correct and a great advance for the textile workers in the city. It was precisely in this manner that the settlement was put across in the final mass rally on the 11th. It was with this understanding that the workers put their seal of approval on it.

● A reference has been made earlier to the all-India significance of the strike from the point of view of the workers as well as the employers and the Government.

During the strike, not only the non-textile Bombay working class but workers and trade unions belonging to various industries all over the country rallied in its support. Messages from distant industrial centres used to pour in every day which heartened the strikers, enhanced their sense of national working-class solidarity, and also made them realise the broader responsibility which rested on their shoulders in the conduct of their strike.

At the same time, the success of the strike has already given an impetus to bonus and DA struggles not only in other textile centres in Maharashtra but in other states as well.

It has definitely exerted an influence on the Government and the employers on a national plane. The Ahmedabad millowners came out with an offer to settle the bonus issue, the merits of which can be judged independently. What is more important is that Shri Jagjivan Ram, the Central Labour Minister, came out clearly stating that all employers must observe their obligations under the Bonus Act irrespective of their appeal to the Supreme Court. Bonus payment was also made by the coal mines. These developments cannot be divorced from the results of the Bombay general strike.

As never before, this strike has extended the influence of the Red Flag among the Telugu and Hindi speaking textile workers



of Bombay. It has helped to consolidate the MGKU among these sections of workers, whose number in Bombay is very large. This development also will have repercussions in working-class centres outside the city.

● The support given by the WFTU to the Bombay textile strike had a very deep impact on the minds of the workers. In rally after rally, its significance from the point of view of the international solidarity of the working-class movement was constantly explained. Every generation of workers has to learn anew, through its own experience, the meaning and value of international working-class unity. The WFTU has become a more living organisation for the workers as a result of this strike than what it was before.

● A valuable political lesson was also assimilated on a mass scale in the strike. The workers were fully aware that the employers, the INTUC, the Government and the Congress as an organisation were all pitted against them in the strike. But they saw, and realised it increasingly as it was brought to their notice by the strike leaders, that not everyone who counted in the Government and the Congress was itching to give them a blood bath. Of course, such people had their own reasons for adopting this attitude, they wanted their rule to continue not just on the strength of bullets but the ballot. Even so, this was a valuable distinction from the point of view of the interest of the strikers. For it meant that when driven to a situation when they had either to negotiate with the strike leadership for ending the strike or suppress it by sheer violence, they stood for *the former alternative*.

To put it more concretely, while the mill owners, and the Shantilal Shah and Abidali Jafferbhai section of the Government and the Congress leadership only wanted fire and thunder let loose against the strikers, Shri Yeshwantrao Chavan, Vasanttrao Naik and Balasaheb Desai (Home Minister) did not want, to quote their own words, that "the workers should suffer from a sense of defeat".

It is an undeniable and valuable achievement of the Bombay strike that it did bring about a division in the two sections of the Congress leadership. This was a factor in bringing about its satisfactory and negotiated settlement.

The strikers also knew that not only tens of thousands of workers who ordinarily pay their membership dues to the RMMS were cent per cent in the strike but that a large number of RMMS cadres were also sympathetic and extremely unhappy about the strike-breaking activities into which their leadership had forced them.

The workers were fully satisfied that the strike leadership kept this reality in view and conducted negotiations giving due recognition to it. In tangible terms, this approach, apart from helping to bring about an organised settlement of the strike also enabled the strikers to secure a de facto recognition of the MGKU which would not have happened if the strike leadership had approached the entire Congress and governmental leadership as a homogenous and undifferentiated entity.

A consequential though not direct result of the strike is going to be that it will lessen the difficulties in the organisation of united mass struggles, including on broad democratic issues, in the period to come. It will strengthen all the left and democratic forces that stand for unity, despite certain differences, in the coming parliamentary elections.

## THE TASK AHEAD

The struggle is not over. The employers' opposition is not ended. They have been compelled to beat a temporary retreat. They will seek all stratagems, legal and illegal, direct and indirect, to wriggle out of their commitment, to impose new burdens on the workers, to save themselves from the crisis of their own creation. Government will cool off and forget its promises now that the "strike emergency" is over. With the added confidence arising out of the strike, workers will react

more sharply than before to any such attacks and will want to hit back.

Monopolists and reactionaries all over the country are determined to intensify their offensive against popular living standards, against all the past achievements of the working-class and other popular elements, against the most elementary democratic rights of the people, above all, the right to struggle. They are determined to use this offensive as their main instrument for securing complete domination over the State and Central Governments. A still further broadening in intensification of popular struggles is the decisive and indispensable popular weapon for defeating this attack.

The first task, under the circumstances, is to strengthen and activate the entire MGKU machinery. That does not only mean mass membership enrolment. It means regular functioning of the expanded leadership of the Union, its central organs, as also of the mill and chawl committees which became intensely active during the strike. They must remain live, the eyes and ears of the central trade-union leadership, as also its tongue and arms in the mass of workers.

Regular TU and political schools have to be organised, central as well as regional, to train and educate the thousands of young workers who have proved their mettle, zeal and loyalty in the strike. They are the real gold that the strike has thrown up. It must not be frittered away.

The new worker must clearly understand the relation between his economic struggle and the general democratic struggle in the country. He is on the threshold of the Communist Party. He has to be inspired to join it and become a stable, steady, political worker, a revolutionary in the full sense of the term.

The worker is thirsting for trade-union and political literature, for political journals and periodicals. More pamphlets and journals are urgently needed, and their sale has to go up many times over.

These tasks are not only urgent, they are perfectly practical. The test of the leadership is to plan them out concretely and insist on their execution. Those who organised, led and piloted such a difficult and successful strike are certainly capable of facing the new tasks. They have to get down to them.

The Bombay textile strike has opened a new chapter in the history of the entire working-class movement of the city. Its subsequent pages have to be written in terms of practical work, patient and persevering activity.

BOMBAY

March 25, 1966.

## Appendix

### TEXT OF THE AGREEMENT CUM-APPEAL

Following is the full text of the agreement cum appeal which Maharashtra Chief Minister Vasant Rao Naik made to the Mumbai Gum Kamgar Union on the basis of which the twelve day strike was called off by the control strike committee on March 12.

'As a result of the call given by the Mumbai Gum Kamgar Union the workers in the cotton textile industry in Bombay went on an indefinite strike from February 28 and the strike is now nearly ten days old. The strike was resorted to mainly on the issues of bonus for the year 1964 and reduction of DA.

'Government of Maharashtra has always been sympathetic to labour and has been helping labour to enable it to secure a fair deal. Even at the time the Bonus Bill was on the way, this Government had approached the problem very sympathetically so that workers' interests would be safeguarded.

'The dispute regarding bonus for the year 1964 was settled satisfactorily as a result of my intervention. For the year 1964 also similar efforts will be made and my Government and myself will do our best to settle the issue in regard to the minimum and the total amount expeditiously.

'Although, the main demand has been bonus for the year 1964, the withdrawal of the notice given by the millowners to reduce the quantum of dearness allowance has also been one of the demands made.

The workers are aware of the provisions of the Bombay Industrial Relations Act, according to which no unilateral reduction can be made by the employers, without undergoing the procedure laid down. Besides the entire question of wages and allowance is before the Central Wage Board. Therefore, in larger interest I would appeal to the employers to drop the proposal for the reduction in the dearness allowance.

'I would request employers, workers and their representatives to discuss this problem with constructive approach and cooperate in the scheme proposed by the State Government to make available important commodities at Price Shops, which will give some relief to both parties.

Government is also aware of certain other issues taken up by the workers at the time the call of strike was given such as the question of closed shop and the problems of badly workers and women workers. Given the general goodwill on both sides I am sure that satisfactory solutions can be found without the necessity of recourse to strike.

"Government has already taken over and restarted closed undertakings and is considering similar action in other cases wherever possible, with a view to averting the hardships caused to labour by unemployment. The difficulty arising out of returning the units to the original owners has been taken up with the Government of India and that Government is considering the matter.

"I feel that any further continuance of the strike will do incalculable harm to the interests of labour. Government would never like to see that the workers should get demoralised and frustrated or have a sense of defeat at any time.

"I assure the workers that I and my Government will continue to help labour in securing a fair deal. I will see that there is no victimisation. I would, therefore, earnestly appeal to the workers and the Mumbai Gini Kamgar Union to reconsider the entire situation and resume work immediately."