

Chapter IX

THE WORKING CLASS IN THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST
MOVEMENT

(1)

In the election to the Central Legislative Assembly, which the then Governor-General, Lord Willingdon, ordered in 1934 with the firm idea in his mind that the Congress had been weakened by the 1932-33 repression, the Congress candidate from the Malabar-cum-South Kanara general constituency secured over 80 percent of the votes polled. It was thus made clear that the fire of repression had, far from weakening, strengthened the national movement. The Congress had become a real people's organisation with firm roots among the masses. This was made all the more clear in the subsequent general elections to the Provincial Legislatures (1937) when all the Congress candidates in the general constituencies secured overwhelming majorities and several candidates opposing the Congress forfeited their deposits.

While the Congress was thus coming out as the undisputed leader of the democratic people of Malabar, an internal crisis was slowly developing within the Congress organisation itself. The new revolutionary forces of left-nationalism and socialism that had taken shape in the course of the 1930-32 struggle had crystallised into a definite Socialist group within the Congress challenging the Gandhian leadership. No sooner was the Congress reorganised in June-July, 1934 than a bitter struggle started between this left and socialist group and the Gandhian leadership inside the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee.

It has already been mentioned that the K. P. C. C. of 1934-35 was one with a leftist majority. It was therefore natural that the Provincial Political Conference which that Committee organised in May 1935 should have on its agenda a series of resolutions giving expression to revolutionary sentiments. Resolutions demanding the abolition of Indian States,

drawing attention to the growing danger of war, supporting the immediate demands of workers and peasants, etc., were moved at the Conference. This led to heated controversy, since the Gandhian right-wing leaders of the Congress stoutly opposed all these resolutions. That controversy at the end of which the leftist resolutions were adopted by a majority vote was characteristic of the subsequent years; the entire Congress organisation in Malabar was the arena of a fierce struggle between the right and the left-wings in which the left-wing was stronger than the right.

The left-wing however did not confine itself to activities within the Congress. While working inside the Congress to bring about radical changes in the programme and methods of work of the organisation, it also carried on independent work of agitation, propaganda and organisation among workers, peasants, students, teachers, etc.

For the first time in the history of Malabar, Trade Unions started functioning in all the industrial towns: these were, all of them, led by one or other of the organisers of the newly-formed Socialist group in the Congress. Systematic co-ordination was organised between the Socialist-led Congress Committees (beginning with the Provincial Congress Committee itself) and the Trade Unions. The 1934-35 strike wave among the industrial workers was thus led and organised in such a way as not only to set up industrial trade unions but to link up their day-to-day activities with the agitation, propaganda and organisation for rallying the working class for the anti-imperialist united front.

So too was work among the peasants started. A basis for work among the peasantry was laid with a critique of the Malabar Tenancy Act passed in 1930 and demands for amendments to it. It has already been mentioned that the early Tenancy Movement was concerned more with the demands of the kanamdars who are a privileged minority among tenants than with the demands of all tenants. The Tenancy Act that was passed in 1930 therefore did not give any real relief to the majority of tenants; the fixity of tenure granted to Verumpattamdars was so conditional, and the rate of "fair rent" fixed for them was so high, that their position remained more or less the same as before. The demand was therefore formulated that all tenants including Verumpattamdars should get full and real fixity of tenure, that the rate of "fair rent" should be reduced and that other changes should be made in the pro-

visions of the Act. Malabar, Taluk and Local Peasant Conferences were held to formulate these and other demands and Peasant Organisations of District, Taluk and Local levels were formed. The Socialist-led Congress Committees and Congress Conferences also lent support to these demands. Thus was brought about that co-ordination of the independent class organisations of the peasantry with Congress Committees which laid the basis for a real anti-imperialist united front with the peasantry as its main driving force.

One other class organisation that was characteristically part of the anti-imperialist movement of the period was the Teachers' Union. This was the organisation of teachers in Aided Elementary Schools—a type of schools in which the teachers are literally at the mercy of the management. Living Wage, Security of Service and other demands of these teachers became the slogans that linked the industrial workers in the towns with the peasants in the villages. For, coming as they did out of the peasant class, these teachers had a real interest in the amendment of the Tenancy Act and other peasant demands; at the same time, being subjected to the same type of exploitation as the industrial worker (wage-labour), they were equally interested in the demands, struggles and organisations of the industrial working class. The Aided Elementary School Teachers' Union therefore took more or less the same organisational form and adopted the same forms of struggle (strike) as the working class while, being the most enlightened section of the rural poor, they provided the most active and most capable cadre for building up the peasants' organisations. In fact, it was the combination in one and the same person of the office bearer of the Village Congress Committee, the leader of the Teachers' Union and the organiser of the Kisan Sangham that made the anti-imperialist movement strike deep roots in the countryside.

It was these mass organisations, together with student and youth organisations, reading rooms, night schools, etc. that helped the leftists in the Congress in their struggle against the right. For, whatever manipulations the right-wing Congressmen might carry on at the top, they could not do anything below. The new constitution of the Congress, enforced in 1935, with its restrictions on the number of members of the K.P.C.C. and with various provisions like the Manual Labour Clause, enabled the rightists to capture the KPCC. Lower Committees like the District Congress Committee as

well as most of the Taluk and Village Committees, however, remained under the control of the leftists, so that these Congress Committees became another forum to ventilate the class demands of the toilers as well as another training ground to get active cadres from the working class and peasantry.

The right-wing leadership resisted this type of revolutionary activity. With the majority that they manipulated in the K.P.C.C. when the 1935 constitution of the Congress came into force, they dissolved several District, Taluk and Local Congress Committees and suspended some Congress organisers in 1936. They were deliberately provoking a split in the organisation, since it was only through a split that they could dominate the Congress. But the approaching general elections to the Provincial Legislatures under the new constitution, together with the fact that all the active and selfless cadres of the Congress belonged to the left, made the Congress President and the Working Committee revoke these disciplinary actions. And, by the time the elections were over, the position of the leftists had become so strong that the K.P.C.C. itself came under their leadership.

A big and decisive factor in this last development—the restoration of the leftist majority in the K. P. C. C. —was the close co-operation between the Nationalist Muslims and the Socialist-led Congress of Malabar. It has already been mentioned that the Congress in the post-1921 period was virtually split into two—a Hindu group and a Muslim group. Muslim Congressmen had, for some time after the 1930-32 struggles, even kept themselves out of active political work. The emergence of the Socialist-led leftists as a definite group fighting the rightwing gave hope to these Nationalist Muslims who began to work in close co-operation with them. It was this alliance between the Socialist-led Congressmen and Nationalist Muslims that helped the reduction of the rightists into a minority in the K.P.C.C.; it was again this that took the Kisan and Teachers' Movement into the Muslim-majority areas of Malabar.

The emergence of a K.P.C.C. with a majority of Socialist-led lefts and Nationalist Muslims carried the mass movement several steps forward. The gigantic political campaigning of the period of general elections, followed by the enthusiasm roused by the formation of the Congress Ministry, did of course lead to a tremendous mass upsurge; the Trade Unions, Kisan Sabhas, Students' Unions, Teachers' Unions etc., grew up as

never before in the latter half of 1937, the Trade Union Demands Declaration Day (Sept. 19, 1937) being the day of the biggest rally of the working class in Calicut and Cannanore. It was however after January 1938 (the date when the K.P.C.C. came under leftist leadership) that the Congress in Malabar became a real organ of people's struggles. For, one of the first things that the new, Socialist-led, K. P. C. C. did was to organise Provincial, District, Taluk and Village Volunteer Camps through which, in the course of a year, nearly 3000 volunteers were given physical and political training. These 3000 volunteers, with Taluk and District captains, formed the backbone of the 500 or so Village and Taluk Congress Committees for the regular functioning of which systematic organisational steps were taken by the K. P. C. C.

It was this unprecedented organisational work that roused the peasantry of N. Malabar, gave them confidence in their own organised strength and led them towards the first mass peasant struggle in the history of Malabar—the 1938-39 campaign against feudal levies. That campaign was so strong that the landlords and bureaucrats raised the cry of "anarchy". And "anarchy" it was to those who wanted to maintain feudal domination intact; for, not only did the peasants withhold the payment of rent for the season, winter 1938-39, till a solution was found to the question of feudal levies; they also resorted to that traditional weapon of the peasantry—social boycott—against the landlords and their stooges. This act of the peasantry so enraged the landlords, bureaucrats and right wing Congressmen that they demanded prompt punitive action against the peasants. The K. P. C. C. and lower Congress Committees however declared themselves on the side of the fighting peasants and urged upon the Congress Ministry to bring about an amicable settlement. The result was that, on the one hand, the Congress Ministry appointed a Committee to go into the question of amending the existing Tenancy Act while the leaders of the Kisan movement advised the peasants to pay rent to the landlords. The latter however were forced to drop the demand for feudal levies.

The Congress organisation in Malabar in 1938-39 was thus a model of an anti-imperialist united front in action. On the one hand, it helped the working class and its allies in revolutionary struggle—the peasants and the petty bourgeoisie—to organise themselves and their struggles; on the other hand, it rallied all these revolutionary classes and their orga-

nisations behind the common slogans of the anti-imperialist movement. It however roused the anger of the right-wing Congressmen who lost no opportunity to run down this Congress organisation. They went so far as to non-cooperate with the Congress organisation in the 1940 election to the District Board resulting in the defeat of several Congress candidates. Since however the new District Board had a majority of Congressmen with a few Socialists also in it, the Advisers' Regime that came to power at the end of 1939 took the first opportunity to dissolve it.

It is significant that, while the Advisers' Regime dissolved the District Board in which Socialist-led leftists shared power, the Congress Working Committee in its turn dissolved the K.P.C.C. itself. A Socialist-led Congress organisation even in a corner of the country was a hindrance to the carrying out of the anti-struggle (individual Satyagraha) line which the Congress leadership was then pursuing. With this dissolution of the Socialist-led K.P.C.C. and with the intense war-time repression against the leftists, the internal struggle between the rightists and leftists in the Congress took a new turn.

(2)

The emergence of the working class and socialist movement began earlier in the States part of Kerala than in Malabar. Apart from the Alleppey Labour Union whose formation and adoption of a resolution advocating responsible government have already been referred to, there was the Karshaka Thozhilali (Peasant and Worker) Movement in Cranganore in 1933. This was a movement demanding the scaling down of agrarian debts and took the form of mass satyagraha. A Communist League was also formed in Trivandrum in 1931-32. Hence, when the trade union and socialist movements came to be organised in 1934-35 on an all-Kerala scale, they were not confined to Malabar, but unlike the earlier Congress movement, were really all-Kerala movements. Trade unions and socialist groups were also formed in Trichur, Cochin and other industrial centres of Cochin and Travancore while the Alleppey Trade Union came to be linked with the all-Kerala movement.

One of the major activities of these Socialist groups was

to work inside the democratic movement for responsible government and, to this end, agitate for the reversal of the Congress policy of "non-interference in the internal affairs of Indian States". Cochin and Travancore Political Conferences were held in 1937 which urged on the Congress Working Committee to allow the Congress organisation in the States to carry on political activity and not confine itself to "constructive work." When, however, the Haripura Congress adopted its well-known resolution on the formation of independent States peoples' organisations in the States, an organisation called the Cochin Congress was formed in Cochin, while the leaders and organisers of the Joint Political Congress in Travancore formed, together with other national democratic politicians, the Travancore State Congress. Both had, as their central slogan, responsible government under the Maharaja.

The course of development of these two organisations was different because the policies pursued by the two Governments differed. The Government of Travancore headed by Dewan Ramaswamy Iyer made it clear that it would not allow any agitation for responsible government as that slogan was a challenge to the authority of the Maharaja. The State Congress therefore came to clash with the Government within a few weeks of its formation and had to start a Civil Disobedience Movement within 6 months. The Government of Cochin took a different attitude and declared that it had no objection to responsible government and that, on the other hand, responsible government was its own goal. Since, however, that goal could not be reached in one leap, said the Government, it was introducing an instalment of constitutional reforms, widening the franchise and transferring one department—the department of Rural Development—into the hands of an elected and responsible minister. This gave a handle to the rightist leaders of the Cochin Congress to sabotage the development of the organisation on militant lines. They decided to accept the new instalment of reforms, made their representative accept the ministership and then began to cooperate with the Government.

Though, because of the open hostility of the Government of Travancore to any movement with responsible government as its aim, the leadership of the Travancore State Congress could not pursue such an avowedly compromising policy, they too did their utmost to avoid direct mass action to enforce the democratic demand. It was the Socialist-led Youth

League which took the initiative in starting direct action; the State Congress Working Committee had to follow suit.

Thus was started that glorious mass action which is known as the 1938 State Congress Struggle, a struggle that was far more extensive than the 1921 Malabar movement; for, while the latter was confined to certain Taluks of Malabar, the 1938 Travancore movement embraced the whole State of Travancore. The main difference between the 1921 Malabar movement and the 1938 Travancore movement however consisted in the qualitatively higher character of the latter. For, one of the characteristic features of the Travancore struggle was the part played by the working class of Alleppey under the leadership of the Socialist Party.

The 20,000 and more coir workers not only of the town of Alleppey but of the 2 Taluks of Ambalapuzha and Shertalai declared a General Strike not only to enforce their own partial economic demands but also to express solidarity with the State Congress demand for responsible government. The strike was so magnificently conducted that, for days together, Alleppey town and the surrounding industrial belt were in the hands of the workers. The one-lakh strong rally at Alleppey on October 23, 1938, the militant resistance offered by the workers to the police, the firing that followed it and the arrest of over 500 leading cadres of the Union—these were the first baptism of fire for the working class, the precursor of the still bigger and still more glorious action of 8 years later—the famous Punnapra-Vayalar of 1946. And it was the conscious and effective leadership given to this strike action by the Socialist leadership, and particularly Com. P. Krishna Pillai who personally organised the strike, that won the confidence of the Alleppey working class for the Socialist Party.

Together with the working class of Alleppey and the surrounding industrial belt also came into action the mass of students all over Travancore, even in the most remote corners of the State. The magnificent strikes and demonstrations of students in colleges, high schools and even elementary schools were a sight unprecedented in the history of Kerala. Here was a repetition of what has taken place in many colonial and semi-colonial countries—demonstrating the ability of the petty bourgeoisie, particularly students, to play, on occasions, the role of the vanguard of the democratic movement. There is no doubt that, next only to the General Strike of the Allep-

pey working class, the State-wide student actions shook the State machinery to its foundations.

Though not on such a wide, all-State basis and hence insufficiently noticed by the State Congress leadership, peasants also came into action with their own forms of struggle. For, just as in the 1921 Malabar rebellion, so in certain localities of Travancore, peasants prepared themselves to resist the military forces if they came and, to this end, started cutting lines of communication. It is worth mentioning that the first persons to be executed on charges of waging war against the State in Kerala after the 1921 rebellion were the leaders of this movement which was however confined to a few villages.

The most significant feature of the 1938 Travancore struggle was the fact that the all-Kerala Socialist leadership gave direct organisational assistance to it. Not only did Com. Krishna Pillai personally organise the Alleppey strike but he himself and other all-Kerala leaders of the Socialist Party were the brains behind the underground activities of the State Congress. Socialist cadres from all over Kerala were sent to Travancore to assist in the organisation and regular functioning of the illegal apparatus of the State Congress. Above all, the two jathas which marched from Malabar to Travancore, particularly the first under the leadership of Com. A. K. Gopalan, electrified the whole country. Thus was born in action that unity of the democratic movement of Kerala—that too under the leadership of the working class and socialist movements—which was later to form the basis of the struggle for a democratic United Kerala.

All these features of the struggle in Travancore created as much panic in the bourgeois leadership of the all-India national movement as in the Government headed by Sir C. P. As in the case of other militant mass actions, Gandhiji found in the State Congress a "deplorable" element of "violence"; he objected to the fact that the State Congress leadership denounced not the Government in general but the head of that Government, Sir C.P., personally. He said it was wrong on the part of the State Congress leadership to have submitted a memorandum to the Central Government exposing the misdeeds of Sir C. P. and "advised" the State Congress leadership to withdraw it. Since the penalty for non-compliance of the State Congress to this "advice" would be withdrawal of the moral support of the all-India leadership to the State Congress struggle, the Working Committee of the State

Congress was forced to withdraw the memorandum. And this was the end of the great 1938 upsurge, since the people took this action as nothing but surrender to the Government.

There was however intense dissatisfaction among the rank and file at this surrender. This discontent expressed itself in the formation of a definite left-wing inside the State Congress—what was then called the Radical Group. Furthermore, the Youth League which had initiated the 1938 struggle reconsidered the entire political situation and decided to start a new struggle, the open reading of the withdrawn memorandum being the initial form of struggle. This received tremendous support from the people and even from a section of the State Congress leadership which, though forced to comply with Gandhiji's "advice", was at heart opposed to the withdrawal of the memorandum. However it could not acquire the mass national character of the earlier struggle since it was conducted by only a section of the national movement.

This second struggle may be said to mark the beginning of the same struggle between Left and Right in the Travancore State Congress as the formation of the Socialist Party in 1934 did in Malabar. For, the Socialist groups that had been functioning in Travancore till then were confined to certain towns and had become a major political force only in the industrial belt surrounding Alleppey. The 1939 struggle of the Youth League and the formation of the Radical Group however led to the transformation of left and socialist groups into a national political force, some of the best-known State Congress leaders (like Coms. K. C. George, M. N. Govindan Nair, P. T. Punnoose, Srikantan Nair, etc.) being the leaders of the left and socialist movements.

Left and Socialist forces were also developing in Cochin. For, though the 1938 instalment of constitutional reforms and its acceptance by the Cochin Congress successfully diverted the national movement towards constitutional channels, discontent also began to express itself in Cochin. The Socialists and other discontented democrats began to grope for an alternative to the Cochin Congress and organised the Cochin State Praja Mandalam. They also took up the question of agrarian reforms, formulated the demands of tenants in connection with the Tenancy Act in force and organised a State-wide jatha to popularise these demands. Out of this campaign arose the first independent class organisation of the peasantry in Cochin—the Cochin State Karshaka Sabha. The demands

formulated and the type of organisation formed were more or less on the lines of what was done in Malabar. It was the organisers of the Praja Mandalam and Karshaka Sabha that organised the 1941 defiance of the ban on a conference at a time when the leaders of the Cochin Congress were co-operating with the Government in its "war effort."

The national upsurge of the nineteen thirties and the role played in it by the working class and socialist movements were thus on a really all-Kerala scale. For, though the form in which and the intensity with which they manifested themselves were different as between Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, they did not remain localised as the political national movement of the twenties did. A really all-Kerala national democratic movement with a really all-Kerala leadership was thus slowly emerging. And it was the organised working class guided by socialist ideology that was standing at the head of this movement.

(3)

The main source of strength of the national upsurge of the nineteen thirties was, as will be clear from the above, the fact that the new forces of the working class and the socialist movements were deeply rooted in the general democratic movement. It was because the first generation of socialists arose from the ranks of the national democrats, because socialism was to them a natural and logical development of revolutionary democracy, that they could successfully link up the class struggle of the industrial proletariat and its allies with the national struggle of the entire people.

This however was at the same time the great shortcoming of our working class and Socialist movements as well as the revolutionary democratic movement under their leadership. For, this meant that the various socialist groups in Kerala that were united under the banner of Congress Socialism and the class movements that were growing under this Socialist leadership had not yet completely freed themselves from the ideological influence of the national bourgeoisie that was heading the National Movement. The Socialist cadres that were reared in Kerala had not carried on that struggle against the bourgeoisie and its ideology, Gandhism, which would

alone have given them the proletarian class outlook towards the various problems they had to tackle.

We have seen that socialism came to Kerala as a movement within the Congress, as a party of Socialists working inside the Congress. This meant that the approach of our Socialists was essentially that of Congressmen, extreme vacillation manifesting itself in them on all those occasions when a firm fight had to be put up against the bourgeois leadership of the Congress. This does not of course mean that they did not put up a fight against the leadership of the Congress, as Congressmen, inside the Congress; this, of course, they did and that was why they could build up the Congress itself on progressive democratic lines. This struggle inside the Congress however was so circumscribed by the anxiety to preserve the internal unity of the Congress as an organisation, that they failed to carry on a determined ideological struggle against Gandhism.

The clearest example of this anxiety to preserve the internal unity of the national organisation was seen in 1939-40 when the Socialist leadership advised the Travancore Youth League to withdraw the second Civil Disobedience Movement which, as stated earlier, was started as a protest against the directive of Gandhiji that the anti-Dewan memorandum should be withdrawn. The Socialist leadership was more anxious to maintain the unity of the national movement against the common enemy than to organise the discontent growing in the ranks of State Congressmen and form a definite left wing.

This attitude of loyalty to the bourgeois leadership of the national movement affected socialist work in the mass organisations as well. The trade unions, kisan sanghams and other mass organisations that they built up were independent only in an economic sense, in the sense that, so long as it was a question of fighting economic battles, they acted independently of the Congress. In fighting political battles, they did not come out as independent mass organisations. It is to be noted that the only example of a political general strike of the working class in Kerala in the years before the Second World War was the 1938 Alleppey strike organised in support of the State Congress struggle. As for the peasantry, not only did the Kisan Sangham fail to fight any political battles, but the very understanding of the Socialist leadership on the agrarian question was that the abolition of landlordism was a programme to be implemented only after independence was established, the immediate perspective being one of only fighting partial strug-

gles to secure partial demands. In other words, working class and peasant organisations were looked upon not as mass political organisations operating independently of, and if necessary in opposition to, the bourgeois leadership of the national movement, but as the vehicles through which the workers and peasants are mobilised behind that leadership.

The ideological root of this trailing behind the bourgeoisie was the failure to see the crucial role played by the peasantry in the national revolution; the failure to see that agrarian revolution is the axle around which the wheel of national revolution turns; that it is the working class alone headed by the Communist Party that can successfully lead the agrarian revolution and hence the national revolution. Failure to see these basic elements of the strategy of Marxism-Leninism as applied to colonial revolutions made our Socialists look upon the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie as the leader and decisive force in the revolution, all talk of the leading role of the working class being merely formal.

It should nevertheless be mentioned that, in spite of the grave shortcoming which this wrong approach to the strategy of revolution constituted in the further development of the working class and socialist movement, it did not for the movement do much harm. For, what was needed at that time was that independent class organisations should be built up, that the working class and peasantry should be brought into the anti-imperialist movement and that the left and socialist wing should be organised as a force against the right wing in the Congress. These tasks of the moment were, in the main, fulfilled, though it is indisputable that the correct approach to the strategy of revolution would have helped the better fulfilment of these tasks themselves.

The biggest asset of the pre-Second-World-War socialist movement in Kerala was that, unlike the top right-wing leadership of the Congress Socialist Party, it was sincerely pro-Soviet and pro-Communist. As a matter of fact, it was the grand achievements of the First Five-Year Plan in the midst of the most severe economic crisis in the capitalist world that attracted the working class and petty bourgeoisie of Kerala to the side of socialism. It was therefore unthinkable for the young socialist groups of Kerala to go anti-Soviet as the Masanis and Mehtas went. The result was that, as the internal struggle inside the Congress Socialist Party developed more and more intensively, the entire socialist ranks in Kerala sup-

ported the pro-Soviet and pro-Communist left-wing as against the anti-Soviet and anti-Communist right-wing. Furthermore, a definite Communist nucleus was formed in Kerala in 1937 composed of some of the topmost provincial leaders of the Congress Socialist Party. The work of this group in the years 1938-39, together with the clash of Communist and Socialist policies following the outbreak of the Second World War, resulted in the wholesale transformation in 1940 of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala into the Communist Party.

With this ends one phase of the history of the working class and socialist movement, the phase in which these movements remained more or less inside the bourgeois national movement. It was only after the formation, in 1940, of the Kerala and lower committees of the Communist Party, only after an illegal apparatus was set up to carry on the work of the Party, that the socialists of Kerala ceased to look upon the Congress as the central organisation through which they had to carry on their political activities. Since this organisational demarcation from the Congress arose out of a political situation in which a clash of policies had started between the Communists and the Congress on the issue of India's attitude to war, this may be considered the beginning of a phase in which the working class and its political party started an open ideological and practical struggle against the bourgeoisie and its leadership.

(4)

The months immediately following the outbreak of the Second World War saw an intensification of the struggle between the Left and the Right inside the Congress. The Left came out with a declaration that the war was an imperialist war and that therefore India should have nothing to do with it. The Right on the other hand said that the war was an imperialist war *since* Britain had not accepted the independence of India, thus implying that it would cease to be an imperialist war *provided* India's status as an independent nation was accepted by Britain. From these conflicting characterisations of the war arose conflicting tactics—the Leftist tactics of *unconditional resistance to an inherently unjust war* and the Rightist tactics of *supporting that unjust war on conditions, or rather*

the tactics respectively of intensification of the mass struggle against imperialism and of bargaining with imperialism.

This struggle between the Left and the Right was, in Kerala, not merely a continuation of what had been taking place in the pre-war years, a struggle between two groups inside the Congress. It was a struggle between the bourgeois leadership of the national movement on the one hand and the Communist Party that was just coming out as an independent political party on the other. It meant further the adoption of certain forms of organisation and methods of struggle that were never before known to the people of Kerala.

It was in January-February 1940 that at a series of meetings of the Congress Socialists it was decided that the Congress Socialist Party should be transformed into the Communist Party and that efforts should be made to implement the revolutionary plan of action chalked out by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India in its well-known document, *The Proletarian Path*. This decision was naturally followed by the decision to set up the illegal apparatus of the Party not only because the Communist Party was a party under ban but also because Government had already started repression. Dozens of cases had already been registered against leftists for having carried on anti-war and seditious propaganda and many were already in jail. It was therefore thought necessary to preserve the minimum cadre and make the necessary arrangements for the continuous functioning of the Party organisation. That this organisation functioned for over 2 years—from the beginning of 1940 to July 1942 when the ban on the Party was removed—was a new experience for the people, and Communists themselves, of Kerala.

In the beginning of this activity however the Communists were in a peculiar position: they were, on the one hand, an independent political party functioning illegally and fighting the official policy of the Congress while, on the other hand, they were the leaders of the provincial, district and lower units of the Congress organisation. They had, on the one hand, to popularise the independent revolutionary political line of the Communist Party and, on the other, to keep, as Congressmen, within the limits set by the rules of Satyagraha laid down by Gandhiji. This conflict between their position as Communists on the one hand and as Congressmen on the other led to the call issued by them as Congressmen to celebrate an anti-repression day (September 15, 1940) and to the organisation of

militant resistance to the police on that day, organised by them as Communists. It was out of this militant action that the well-known Morazha and Mattannur cases arose leading to the sentence of death on Com. K. P. R. Gopalan. It was in the course of this action that two young Comrades, Aboo and Chathukutty, laid down their lives. That day was therefore the first occasion on which militant resistance to the police was consciously organised by a political party as against the hitherto spontaneous resistance of the people.

This action therefore enraged the Government as well as the bourgeois leadership of the national movement. While the former unleashed a reign of terror in all areas where Communists were strong, the latter dissolved the K.P.C.C. and other Congress Committees that had a majority of Communist-led leftists. The Communists had therefore necessarily to strengthen their illegal organisation and to come out before the people as an independent political party. That they did this successfully for nearly two years—October 1940 to July 1942—evoked the admiration of all genuine anti-imperialists in the province who began to look upon the Communist Party as the leader of the anti-imperialist movement. It was in fact during this period of illegality that the Communist Party, as a political party (and not merely as a group of good and hardworking Congressmen), became the leader of the anti-imperialist movement.

Meanwhile, however, the character of the war had changed: on June 22, 1941, the war ceased to be an attempt of antagonistic imperialist groups to re-partition the world among themselves, but a war to decide the future of the Soviet Union and through it of world socialism. Since however this change in the character of the war was of such a type as could be seen only by the class conscious representatives of the proletariat, it led to a very complicated situation. The genuinely-left petty bourgeoisie was of course sympathetic towards the Soviet Union but could not, on that account alone, see any transformation in the character of the war so long as Britain continued to rule our country. The advanced elements among the working class, on the other hand, felt that nothing should be left undone to defend the Land of Socialism. It was naturally the latter stand that the Indian Communists, after an initial leaning towards the former, took in 1942 when they declared that, with the entry of the Soviet Union as one of the contestants, the war had become a People's War.

This made a basic change in the alignment of forces inside the national democratic movement in Kerala. For, the undisputed position of leadership over all genuine anti-imperialists which the Communists had enjoyed till 1942 was shaken. The right-wing bourgeois leadership of the national movement, which had always appeared to the rank and file anti-imperialists as compromising, now assumed the role of uncompromising fighters against imperialism, engaged in a last-ditch battle with the enemy; while the Communists who had always been regarded to be the best fighters appeared as compromisers. The hitherto solid unity of the left elements was thus broken, a section of the leftists allying themselves with the right-wing Congressmen. Anti-Communism became the hallmark not only of the right-wing but sections of the left also. A new generation of anti-imperialists grew who genuinely believed that the Communist Party was a paid agent of British Imperialism.

This development had disastrous consequences for the working class and other mass organisations. The hitherto solid unity of trade unions, student organisations, etc. was broken. For the first time in the history of our working-class movement, a bourgeois-led trade union movement, the National Labour Union, came into being. So also did the Students' Congress begin to grow as rival to the Students' Federation. On a far smaller scale than these two, and only in certain localities, the Peasants' Congress also started growing. Rival organisations of every section of the people—this became the slogan of the anti-Communist section of the national movement.

The same thing happened to the socialist movement. There had, till 1942, been no anti-Soviet, anti-Communist bias inside the socialist movement in Kerala, thanks to the genuinely socialist convictions of the first generation of socialists in Kerala. This was why not a single member of the Socialist Party of Kerala dissented when it decided, in 1940, to transform itself into the Communist Party. But the apparent conflict in 1942 between loyalty to the international proletariat and loyalty to our anti-imperialist movement created a new generation of socialists in Kerala who were as anti-Soviet and anti-Communist as the Masanis and Mehtas.

This was a very significant development because it showed that the apparent unity of the Congress contained within itself the seeds of future crisis. The desire to develop the national movement in the direction of socialism was as genuine for this

generation of socialists as hatred for the Communists who were standing in the way of what appeared to them to be the final struggle against imperialism. Hence, as it began to become clearer and clearer, as days passed, that the right-wing leaders were trying to come to an agreement with imperialism, the new, 1942, generation of socialists began to get disillusioned regarding their right-wing allies. This, as we shall see, was what led to the subsequent radicalisation of the socialist ranks, to the formation of the Kerala Socialist Party and Revolutionary Socialist Party and to the possibility of a united front between them and the Communists.

Another factor complicating the political situation was the growth of the Muslim League as a major political force. Not since the days of 1920-21 was there such an awakening among the Muslims as in the war years; but, while in 1921 the Muslim masses were rallied behind the Congress, they were now rallied against the Congress. Since the rallying of any section of the masses against the Congress was, in the eyes of Congressmen and anti-Communist leftists, a rallying of reactionary forces, they looked upon the masses behind the Muslim League as as much a reactionary force as the League leadership. The opposition of the Communists to this attitude towards the Muslim League, their advocacy of the slogan of Congress-League unity, was another reason for the anti-Communist prejudice inside the anti-imperialist movement.

So complicated a political situation as this required a high degree of political maturity on the part of the Communist Party. For, it was a question of linking up the national anti-imperialist tasks of the Indian proletariat with its international tasks. It was again a question of fighting the pro-fascist sentiments growing among the anti-imperialist masses in such a way that, while it effectively exposed the conscious fascist agents, it won over the majority of anti-imperialists. It was moreover a question of so working among the Muslim and non-Muslim masses as to help both to see the anti-democratic character of the stand taken by the leadership of both the Congress as well as the Muslim League. It was, above all, a question of preserving and extending the unity of the trade unions, kisan sabhas, student organisations, etc., in such a way that the day-to-day demands of the mass of the people were secured without resorting to such forms of struggle as would help the conscious fascist agents.

There is no doubt that the Communist Party failed to show such a high degree of political maturity. Various mistakes were no doubt committed in assessing the anti-imperialist content of the 1942 upsurge, in evaluating the significance of the birth of socialist and left elements in the wake of that struggle, in the understanding of the role of the Muslim League and its slogan of Pakistan and in the tactics of struggle on the working class and other mass fronts. The essence of these mistakes consisted, no doubt, in the under-estimation of the national factor in working out the tactics of revolution, in the failure to realise that the Communists in a colonial country can fulfil their class tasks only if they take proper account of the fact that national aspirations are the decisive political factor in a colonial country.

The main point however is not that these mistakes were committed and that the Party in consequence got temporarily isolated from the non-party mass of anti-imperialists. The main and decisive point is that, in the first major political conflict with the bourgeois leadership of the national movement, the Communist Party took its international and class tasks as the axis of its political activity. It required a tremendous amount of political conviction and courage to swim against the current of national sentiment and openly take the international task as the main task. This was particularly so for the Communists of Kerala who, as we have seen, grew inside the national movement and hence carried with them innumerable remnants of bourgeois nationalism. And yet they carried out this part of their task as a united party; all the fervent hopes cherished by the opponents of the Party, that it would either be forced to give up its slogan of People's War or would get disrupted, were dashed to pieces.

This however was not all. It was precisely during the 1942-45 period, when it had to contend against blind prejudice on the part of the majority of genuine anti-imperialists that the Party grew into a mass political party. The weekly organ that the Party started in 1942 very soon got the status of the best-circulated political weekly in the Malayalam language. The successive calls for Party funds received a magnificent response, the amount collected in the 1942-45 period being over Rupees three lakhs. By every criterion of the organisational strength of any political party—such as funds collected from the people, the number as well as the quality of work of whole-

time and part-time cadres, the circulation of the Party organ, the average sale of political pamphlets and other publications etc.—the Party created epoch-making records.

The main reason for this advance in the political influence and organisational strength of the Party was that, though its slogans on the national-political plane ran counter to the sentiments of a majority of anti-imperialists, its practical day-to-day activity was eminently fitted to the needs of the people. For, the Party took up all those issues that affected the daily lives of the common people such as food, cloth, sugar, kerosene, etc. Not only did the Party agitate for people's solutions of these problems of the people's lives, it also organised the people in Food Committees, Grow More Food Committees, etc. Through these activities as well as through the functioning of trade unions and kisan sanghams, the Party sought to solve many immediate problems of the people. It was because of these activities that, at the very time when mass organisations were being disrupted with the formation of 'national' trade unions and students' congresses as well as Muslim labour unions and Muslim students' federations, the number of mass organisations under Communist leadership and their mass membership grew as never before. The Party's efforts in the direction of developing a people's culture, a culture in the service of the people, also led to a tremendous enrichment of the literary, artistic, and scientific heritage of our people, thus drawing a vast number of men and women of culture towards the Party.

A significant step taken by the Communist Party in the 1942-45 period was the formulation of the slogan of United Kerala. This was of course formally accepted ever since the Indian National Congress accepted the principle of linguistic provinces in its own constitution and made the Malayalam-speaking areas into a separate Kerala Province. But the fact that the major part of Kerala lies in the two Indian States of Cochin and Travancore, into whose "internal affairs" the Congress was prohibited from "interfering", made the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee a virtually Malabar Congress Committee. That was why, even when the Travancore State Congress and the Cochin Praja Mandalam brought these two states into the realm of active struggle for democracy, the national movement under bourgeois leadership remained split in three parts. It was the emergence of the socialist movement and its transformation into the Communist Party that

created an all-Kerala political party, an all-Kerala political leadership.

The Party however did not remain satisfied with this practical unification of the democratic movement throughout Kerala, but, through a series of articles and pamphlets, raised the programmatic slogan of uniting all the homogeneous Malayalam-speaking-majority areas of the Madras Presidency and the States of Cochin and Travancore into one province without any of the maharajas. This, as we shall see subsequently, was a slogan which caught the imagination of the people and created a very powerful mass movement for democracy.

Let us however state in anticipation that it was the Communist Party alone that gave an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal content to this slogan. For, it was the Communist Party alone that declared (1) that the struggle for United Kerala is an indivisible part of the struggle of the people of India for the ending of imperialist rule; (2) that the struggle for United Kerala is also a struggle for ending princely rule and other remnants of feudalism, a struggle for the introduction of full and genuine democracy for the people; (3) that the boundaries of United Kerala are to be so drawn up that all those contiguous areas of Madras, Travancore and Cochin wherein the Malayalam-speaking people are in a majority shall be included, the rest going to neighbouring national area provinces; (4) that, the struggle for United Kerala being the struggle for democracy, the common people of Kerala, in alliance with their brethren in the neighbouring nationalities, are the decisive forces in that struggle. It was these basic premises of a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the national question in Kerala that enabled the Party to carry on an ideological struggle against the various disruptive slogans advanced by the feudal, bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties with regard to United Kerala.

(5)

Just as, in 1934, the people dashed the hopes of Lord Willingdon of seeing the Congress defeated at the polls, so too did the people in 1946 dash the hopes of Congress leaders of seeing the Communist Party suffer an ignominious defeat. In spite of the slogan which Nehru himself raised: "The Com-

munists were on the other side in 1942", in spite of the vigorous offensive, political as well as physical, launched by the Congress, the Socialist Party and others against the Party in the name of 1942, the I.N.A., Netaji, etc., a sizable section of the electorate voted Communist in all those areas where the Communists had become a force. It is true that they secured very few seats in the Legislatures; the few they got were only in special Labour Constituencies and not in General Constituencies. But the number of voters who braved the political and physical offensive of other parties and expressed confidence in the Communist Party was an indication that the Communists had grown stronger and not weaker because of the bold independent stand they took in 1942-45.

So far as Malabar was concerned, the Communists fought the Congress in 5 General Constituencies which together constituted 2/3 of Malabar. The votes polled by them for these 5 seats together represented 25 per cent, the percentage in one of these (Chirakkal) going as high as 44 per cent. Considering the heavy odds they had to contend with in fighting the Congress with its appeal to the traditions of 1942, this 25 per cent poll was indeed a creditable record.

The main thing however was not the size of the pro-Communist electorate but its political quality. For, the 25 per cent of voters who recorded their votes in favour of the Communists were not merely voters exercising their franchise but the vanguard of a new round of mass political actions—strikes, kisan struggles, student struggles, etc. Though the Congress secured an overwhelming majority in the Provincial Legislature, it had to face not only a gigantic people's movement for the satisfaction of immediate demands but also a determined struggle to smash imperialism. And it was the Congress and not the Communists who were going to join "the other side" in these struggles. The 25 per cent votes polled by the Communists in Malabar, together with similar votes polled by them in other parts of India, were an index of the Communist leadership in this post-war revolutionary upsurge.

Within a few months of the General Elections of 1946, the workers of the South Indian Railway Labour Union launched their glorious General Strike. Along with other parts of the Madras Presidency, Malabar participated in this. Not only did the railway workers of Malabar stand solidly behind the strike leadership; other sections of the workers and the general public also came out in solidarity actions in support of the

strike. This was followed by the strike actions of the Municipal Workers, Beedi and Cigar Workers, etc.

Peasants too came into action; their campaign for the right to cultivate fallow lands and to retain their own food requirements before complying with the demands of the Government's Procurement Officials, was the first large-scale militant mass action of the peasantry in Malabar. Police and M.S.P. terror of unprecedented magnitude was unleashed by the Congress Ministry to crush this wave of struggle. The Congress Government resorted also to that method of repression against the Communists, the leaders of these struggles, which had been universally condemned when resorted to by the British—detention without trial.

This round of struggles had far more of a mass character in Travancore than in Malabar. For, while the struggle in Malabar had the appearance of the Communists trying to create trouble for the Congress Government which had the support of the majority of the people; while, therefore, there was a section of the people who were as firmly ranged against, as another behind, these struggles, the struggles in Travancore were clearly directed against the universally hated Government of Dewan Ramaswamy Iyer. The labour strikes, food rallies, student actions and other mass actions in Travancore were launched in the midst of a political situation in which two slogans echoed throughout the State: "Down with the American Model" (the reference here is to the new constitution modelled on the American, presidential, type of executive as opposed to the British, parliamentary, executive) and "End the Dewan Rule". The Communists being the most determined fighters against the American Model and Dewan Rule, there was perfect cooperation between them and the mass of Congressmen including a section of the Congress leadership itself.

There was however one section of the Congress leadership in Travancore which grew as panicky at this new round of struggles as the Government. They could not, of course, openly support the Government since the latter was as unbending as ever in its opposition to Responsible Government. They were however prepared to accept the new constitutional proposals of the Government provided some slight changes were made in them. Nay more, they were totally opposed to the launching of any mass action against these proposals. The Government naturally tried to utilise this section to neu-

tralise the entire Congress leadership and in order to isolate and crush the vanguard, the working class led by the Communist Party and then to crush all opposition.

That the Government succeeded in this for the time being is shown by the fact that, when the Government raised the slogan of "Communist violence and anarchy", the right-wing leadership of the Congress tacitly agreed with them. The concentration of the Government's armed forces in the Ambalapuzha and Shertalai Taluks, the organisation under their auspices of landlords' goondas in the villages of the area, the series of arrests and other repressive actions resorted to by them—all this did not rouse the indignation of the State Congress leadership. But, when the working class under Communist leadership took defensive measures to meet this offensive, they denounced it as "violence" and virtually supported the Government's declaration of Martial Law. It was not the brutal firing and other atrocities that enraged them, but the heroic resistance put up against them by the organised volunteers of the people led by the working class of Alleppey. The hostility of the Congress leadership to the heroic defence put up by the working class led by the Communist Party at Punnappra and Vayalar was the one factor which helped the Government in beating back the people's movement for democracy.

The long-range consequence of this betrayal by the Congress leadership however was not what either the Government or the Congress leadership had hoped for. Though confused for the time being, the people in general began gradually to see that what was crushed in Ambalapuzha and Shertalai Taluks was not merely the working class and its political party but the vanguard of the democratic movement. For, they saw that it was after Punnappra and Vayalar that the Government started its attack on the State Congress itself. As against the Congress which wanted Travancore to accede to Indian Union and to introduce Responsible Government, Sir C. P. raised the slogan of "Independent Travancore" with no Responsible Government. The people therefore began to organise themselves for a struggle against the Government. Student struggles started in various parts of Travancore. The militant rank and file of the Congress started organising Committees of Action to effectively lead the struggle for Responsible Government. The leadership of the State Congress itself was forced not only to start preparations for a new struggle but also to contact the underground Communist leadership to

give a militant character to that struggle. It was this new round of struggles that forced the Government to announce the end of Dewan Rule and the establishment of Responsible Government.

As in 1938, the Government of Cochin followed a different policy. It announced that it was expanding the scope of the constitutional reforms introduced in 1938 and throwing open all departments minus Finance and Home to the administration of elected ministers responsible to the Legislature. While thus trying to win over the compromising leadership of the Praja Mandalam, which of course accepted the "Reforms", the Government attacked all the genuinely democratic elements in the Praja Mandalam as well as all the leftists including the Communist Party. A reign of terror was unleashed in Anthikkad, the area in which the Toddy Tappers' Union under Communist leadership had become the spearhead of the people's movement. Other sections of the democratic movement like the students were also attacked. This attack was finally directed against the Praja Mandalam itself, its ministers being forced out of the ministry by the stooges of the Palace. This however could not last long because, in the conditions of the general democratic upsurge of the post-war years, the demand for democratic rule could not be resisted; Responsible Government had ultimately to be conceded in Cochin as well.

It was in these years of the post-war upsurge that the Communist Party began to come out of the comparative isolation in which it found itself in the 1942-45 period. For, it was the Communist Party which took the most consistently democratic stand on all issues and fought most courageously and with the utmost determination for the demands of the people. Even the most prejudiced anti-Communists began to see that, whenever there was an issue that agitated the people, the Communists were there to champion the interests of the people: S.I.R., Punnapra-Vayalar, North Malabar, Anthikkad, etc. in Kerala, as well as Tebhaga in Bengal, Telengana, Andhra etc. in other parts of India, together with the glorious R.I.N. revolt in Bombay, helped in once again drawing the best anti-imperialist democrats towards the Communists. Particularly significant was the shift taking place inside the Socialist Party, the majority of the 1942 generation of Socialists getting more and more dissatisfied with their leadership and being inclined towards a revolutionary orientation of their policy.

It was in this period of post-war revolutionary upsurge

that the shortcoming of the Communist Party that has been noted earlier, its failure to have a correct approach to the strategy of revolution, became a real hindrance to the development of the revolutionary movement. The character of the mass actions of 1946-47 could not be correctly gauged by the Communist Party, sunk as it was in an outlook which tended to underestimate the role of the working class and peasantry. For example, in the development of the struggle in Travancore, the Party failed to work out a plan of linking up the resistance of the working class of Alleppey with the struggle of the peasantry for land on an all-State scale. So did the Party in Malabar fail to support the peasant struggles of N. Malabar with strike actions of the working class of Malabar. The result was that, though the working class of Ambalapuzha and Sertalai Taluks, the peasants of N. Malabar, the workers and middle class of Cochin, fought heroically, though, in each of these struggles, the Communists stood at the head of the fighters, these separate struggles could not be co-ordinated into a common struggle for People's Democracy.

The ideological root of the Communist Party's shortcoming in the post-war years was their failure to see that the gigantic struggles that had started breaking out towards the end of 1945 were struggles for the realisation of People's Democracy, i.e., for the consistent carrying out of the bourgeois democratic revolution under the leadership not of the bourgeoisie but of the proletariat. The Party failed to see in 1946-47 that a fundamental transformation in agrarian relations had already been put on the agenda; that the vehicles of carrying out these transformations were the revolutionary peasant committees in the villages linked on the one hand with the revolutionary committees of action in factories and, on the other, with similar committees of the petty bourgeoisie and other democratic elements; that, in bringing about these fundamental transformations in agrarian relations, the working class and peasantry would have to beat down the opposition of the reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie; and that this struggle against reactionary elements could be successful only if the utmost reliance was placed on the resourcefulness and initiative of the masses of workers and peasants, on their ability to discover ever newer and newer forms of resistance to the enemy. Failure to see these elements of a qualitatively new political situation made the Communists trail behind the bourgeoisie at a time when the people as a whole had already

started looking up to the Communist Party as an alternative leadership challenging the bourgeoisie.

It should nevertheless be mentioned that, though with an inadequate realisation of the character of the period and of the tasks for the period, the Communist Party was the only force that stood with the people in these struggles. It was the leadership given by the Party that made Punnapra-Vayalar, N. Malabar, Anthikkad, etc., the glorious indications of a new phase in the struggle for independence and democracy—a phase in which the working class and not the bourgeoisie was looked upon as the leader of the people. It was this leadership, given by the working class in the years 1946-47, together with the developments of the last four years, that brought about such a transformation in the political situation that, in the recent elections, the Congress suffered ignominious defeat all over Kerala.