

The 10th Month



Bombay's Historic Textile Strike

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PREFACE

Whatever the final outcome of the ongoing textile strike in Bombay, one thing is certain. It will represent a watershed in the history of Indian labour. The ten-month long struggle of the textile workers has, once again, re-established their credentials as a workforce that has stayed at the forefront of industrial unionism in the country and has in fact even dictated its course. It was their pioneering efforts in the early years of this century that determined the scope and nature of all legislation pertaining to industrial relations. After a virtually dormant decade, two-and-a-half lakh workers are now threatening to break down the carefully-designed, repressive structures that had straitjacketed them for over thirty years, particularly the INTUC-affiliated Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), which has been the sole bargaining agent for the cotton textile industry under the provisions of the Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act since 1946.

The strike is thus significant in many more ways than the one most newspapers have chosen to identify : the demand for wage increases. Certainly, higher wages are an important demand which must be conceded so that textile workers can take home a salary which compares favourably with their counterparts in the engineering and chemical industries. However, it is a measure of the workers' awareness today that they have been able to transcend this primarily economic demand, transforming the strike into a political struggle.

The issues the strike raises are therefore not only numerous but also extremely complex. This anthology has tackled only a few of them since the strike is destined to go down as a chapter in the annals of the labour movement in the country a throughgoing analysis of it will be possible only with the hindsight of history. Thus, the nature and scope of most of the articles here are necessarily transient.

The first article by Javed Anand, labour correspondent for The Daily, is a chronologue of events that details the course of the strike right from its beginnings in the bonus demands made by the workers of seven mills in October 1981.

Gurbir Singh, of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, has been closely associated with the activists of the mill-strike committees that sprang up around Elphinstone Road, Parel and Delisle Road, which together form the core of the mill belt in Bombay. He has observed the growing repression which the state has unleashed on worker-activists. Conversely, he has also witnessed the formation, consolidation and the later disintegration of the more militant strike committees. His report focuses on these two factors.

Since the demands for the repeal of the BIR Act and the de-recognition of the RMMS are central to the strike, an article compiled from reports by Kumar Ketkar, of The Economic Times, and Anjum Rajabali, of the CED, analyses the background against which the BIR Act was enacted and outlines its extremely restrictive and undemocratic nature.

In an exhaustive report, the Union Research Group, examines the basis for wage settlements in the textile industry challenging the rationale behind earlier settlements and comparing them to settlements made in other industries.

The question of wages has been intricately-linked with the state of modernisation in the Indian cotton mills. In a report, previously published in The Times of India, Praful Bidwai has concluded that a large segment of the Indian cotton textile industry suffers from obsolescence

While millowners claim that they cannot afford to pay higher wages because of poor productivity, an article by a chartered accountant, draws attention to a number of loopholes in the existing corporate legislation which make possible large-scale siphoning of funds.

Jean D'Cunha, of the CED, has analysed the growth of the textile industry and the powerloom sector in the light of the government policies on textiles. The last section of this anthology is constituted by a series of short backgrounders.

The 10th Month

A chronology of events



For mill workers the month of October signifies bonus time. Every year in September-October, as a matter of routine, the red flag unions would lead an agitation to pressurise the RMMS (Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh) - the sole bargaining agent for the entire cotton textile industry in Bombay - and the BMOA (Bombay Mill-owners Association) to settle a half-way decent bonus agreement.

There was nothing unusual, therefore, when the mill workers struck work for a day on September 27, 1981, to agitate on the bonus issue, as well as the earlier demand for a revision of wages and work conditions formulated and presented to the mills' management by the red flag unions. Talk of an indefinite strike to press for these general demands was also in the air, but no one had any idea if, when and under whose leadership the workers would come out on the streets.

On October 20, the BMOA announced the bonus agreement arrived at between the RMMS and itself. According to the agreement, the 47 privately-owned mills in the city were to pay a total amount of Rs.20.62 crores to their 1.75 lakh workers, while the 13 state-owned mills declared a bonus sum of Rs.2.40 crores to their 30,000 workers. Nine of the private mills were to pay 17.33% four mills 15%; three mills 14.5%; one mill 14% while the remaining agreed to pay between the statutory minimum of 8.33% and 12.5%.

Instead of rejoicing at the declaration, workers from around 15 mills staged a sit-down strike the following day, to express their discontent at the bonus quantum announced. Encouraged by the belligerent mood of the workers, the CPI-affiliated Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union threatened an indefinite strike by the textile workers.

While workers from several of the units accepted the bonus amount after a day's protest, nearly 25,000 workers from eight of the mills - Hindustan (A,B,C and D), Standard, Prakash Cotton, Srinivas and Madhusadan refused to resume work.

No one could have imagined on October 21, that this spontaneous act of defiance on the part of workers from eight city mills would soon infect the city's 2.5 lakh mill workers

and conflagrate into the most determined battle ever in the industrial history of the country between labour and a mighty combine of industrialists backed to the hilt by the machinery of the state.

On October 23, the third day of the strike, several hundred workmen of Standard Mills, ignoring all the opposition unions in the mills which have unsuccessfully tried for over three decades to dislodge the RMMS (considered a pocket union by the mill workers), marched several kilometres in a demonstration to the residence of a total outsider to the textile world - militant union leader, Datta Samant - to demand that he take over the leadership of the strike.

"Actually, workers from different mills had been coming to me from time to time," Samant said in an interview on October 27, "but I kept declining as I was already overburdened with responsibilities. The Standard Mill workers however stuck to their request and refused to leave my place till I gave my consent. I finally agreed when they told me that the workers themselves would take the responsibility of any struggle and only wanted me to be their spokesman." Workers spoken to at the time stated that they wanted a union leader who would be prepared to fight as hard as they themselves were determined to and who would not compromise their struggle for some meagre consideration.



What was intended to be only a gate meeting of Standard Mill workers on the morning of October 26, turned out to be a massive rally, with thousands of workers from the other strike-affected mills jamming up every lane and by-lane outside the mill gate. Amidst thunderous applause and deafening cheers, Samant made explicit the larger demands of mill workers implicit in a strike apparently meant for demanding a higher quantum of bonus. Samant struck an immediate rapport with the workers when he lashed out at the RMMS for having done nothing to protect and advance the interests of mill workers.

"Mill workers are paid very poorly compared to workers in engineering and other industries," said Samant and declared that the striking mill workers would not merely stop at their higher bonus demand, but would also continue their fight for better wages and benefits and for the permanency of thousands of badli (substitute) workers who had no job guarantee even after putting in as much as 15-20 years of service in the mills.



Before the excited gathering could disperse, it was announced that similar gate meetings would be held every day in front of the other affected mills. Gate meetings, however, became virtually impossible since every gate meeting from that day on drew/such an overwhelming response from the workers that the meetings invariably had to be held in large grounds. An announcement for a meeting made at a mill gate one day was enough to ensure a crowd of 50,000 and above the next day.

If it was the persistence of the Standard Mill workers that brought Samant to the mill gates, his battle cry for a basic revision of the capital-labour equation in the mills electrified the entire lot of mill workers. Barely four days after the Standard Mills's workers had made him their leader, workers from one mill after another moved towards Samant in a floodtide. By the evening of October 27, Samant was in no doubt that the entire lot of mill workers would rally behind him in a matter of days and he was ready for battle. (See interview box).

Excessive heat and humidity in textile mills is energy depleting and oppressive. Cotton dust gets into the lungs causing TB and byssiniosis (a peculiar lung disease which progressively impairs ability to work). The deafening noise of the shuttle in the weaving department and the non-stop high frequency buzz of the newer machines cause noise induced hearing loss (NIHL) in a large number of workers.

Accident rates in the textile industry in India are the highest in the organised sector and are on the increase. In fact, according to a recent government study, the very high and rising rate of absenteeism is largely due to accidents and health problems.

But wages of labour in the mills are low. While the textile industry in Bombay was the wage leader till the late 50's, wages and other benefits have since been slipping in comparison to engineering and other industries. A certain wage differential between the textile mills operating on ancient machines, in comparison to the modern enterprises, is perhaps understandable. What is not so understandable



is the fact that wages in the textile mills have been near stagnant for long years, thanks to the total disinclination of the collaborationist RMMS to fight for the workers' interests.

For long years, the mill workers have been disgusted with the RMMS, the recognised sole bargaining agent for the entire mills under the provisions of the Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act, 1946. In the past, several unsuccessful attempts have been made by the workers under the leadership of red flag unions to get rid of the RMMS.

In one of their more recent efforts to cut themselves loose from the deadly stranglehold of the RMMS, large numbers of young Maharashtrian workers from various mills gravitated towards the Shiv Sena (a chauvinistic regional party whose prime slogan is 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians'), hoping to find in its apparent militancy, a solution to their decades-old problem. But within a short time span of two years, the textile workers came to the conclusion that when it came to the question of championing workers causes, the militancy of the Shiv Sena proved totally vacuous.

In retrospect it could be said that the textile workers had to relive for themselves the experience of engineering and other workers with the Shiv Sena, a decade earlier. In the late 60's and the early 70's, large numbers of young Maharashtrian

workers in the engineering industry shifted allegiance to Shiv Sena unions. But in the span of a few years, these workers affiliated themselves en masse to another union leader, who emerged on the labour scene close on the heels of the Shiv Sena and held out a militant promise. This was Datta Samant. As in the engineering industry, the Shiv Sena union in the mills - the Girni Kamgar Sena - disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

Mill workers had a more immediate reason for joining up with Samant. As in the cotton textile mills, the BIR Act provides for a single bargaining agent in the processing mills which has for many years been the HMS - affiliated Mill Mazdoor Sabha. In May-June, 1981, an overwhelming majority of workers from a processing unit, the Empire Dyeing Mills, shifted their loyalty to Samant and struck work with the demand for higher wages. Despite the fact that Samant had no locus standi in the mill, legally speaking, the management of Empire Dyeing Mills buckled in after a 77 day strike and conceded a wage hike of around Rs.170 p.m. to the workmen. Empire Dyeing Mills is situated right in the heart of the textile district in Bombay. The agreement at Empire Dyeing fired the imagination of the workers in the textile mills. If Samant could do it there, why not in the mills too?

If the sudden surge of sentiment for Samant amongst the mill workers during October, '81, threw the left unions in the mills into confusion and paralysis for a while, it galvanised Shiv Sena chief, Bal Thakeray, and his lieutenants into a last ditch battle. At a hurriedly summoned rally of mill workers (following Samant's gate meeting at Standard Mills), and in an unusual display of concern for the mill workers, Thakeray announced a charter of demands asking for a wage increase of Rs.200 p.m., called for a one day strike on November 1, and threatened an indefinite strike of workers from November 16, if the demands were not conceded by then.

The November 1 strike was a total success and for a few days more, the average citizen thought Thakeray was in the running against Samant for the soul of the mill worker. By November 10 however, in spite of Thakeray's brave claims, it was clear that he was no longer in the picture.

At a massive rally of workers on October 30, Samant announced the formation of his Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU), spelt out a rough charter of demands (wage increase from Rs.250-400 p.m. for different categories of workers, permanency to the nearly one lakh badli workers employed in the mills, an increase of leave facility and other fringe benefits and additional wages to workers employed by mills having carried out automation and modernisation) and threatened an indefinite strike from mid-November unless the millowners talked and settled.

The then chief minister of Maharashtra, A.R. Antulay, announced a three-member high-powered committee to be headed by him which would go into the demands of the striking workers and make its recommendations within two months. Antulay appealed to the strike leaders and the striking workers both to call off the continuing strike in eight mills and to desist from the decision of an indefinite strike in view of his announcement.

An overwhelming sight was presented by close to one-and-a-half lakh workers, who packed up every inch of space at Jamboori Maidan, Worli, on October 12. Tense with eager anticipation, straining in action readiness, it was clear they expected Samant to ignore Antulay's proposal and to call for an indefinite strike immediately.

Samant however did not oblige. While announcing that the strike in the eight mills would in no case be called off, Samant nevertheless agreed to wait and see what the committee had to offer. "We are in any case not bound by the decision of the committee. Besides, the battle, once it starts is bound to be a long drawn one, make no mistake. So why not use the two month's time to prepare on our side, and see what they have to offer?"

Many labour observers attending the meeting were terribly disappointed at Samant's decision to postpone the strike. Workers too were not very happy with what Samant had to say. The decision, observers argued, was a definite volte-face on his part. This, it was strongly felt, had the effect of throwing cold water on the

workers who seemed all prepared to enter into battle right away.

Wasn't Samant being naive to put his faith in a government-appointed committee and also creating an illusion amongst the workers? Or was he buckling down to pressure from above rather than heeding to the pressure from below? Did he feel unequal to the task he took up enthusiastically in the beginning? Had he now realised that he was going to be faced by the most powerful combine of capitalists in the country, which had the political backing of the Congress(I)? Had he come to some private understanding with the government in the state and at the centre? How come he had not even asked for the representation of his own union in the committee, but instead demanded that only experts be appointed on the committee? Did he expect this morale of the workers to last for the two months that the committee said it would take to decide? Would the strike in the eight mills continue for these two months? Or would it end before then and thus diffuse the whole situation? If the RMMS was not toppled over at the peak of the Samant wave, when would the next opportunity arise?

I asked Samant all these questions two days later. All the doubts were ill-founded, said Samant, since the union was totally committed to strike action if necessary,



"We are fighting for our future"

IN AN AREA just about enough to accommodate four flats, and as many families, nearly 250 workers employed in different mills, over-crowd themselves in about half a dozen large huts in Bawani Chawl, Kalachowki. Many of them, 55 year old "Pradhan" Lokan Yadav, for example, have been staying here since 1946.

In one of the big huts, measuring roughly 450 square feet, as many as 48 of them take turns, shift-wise, to cook their meals and rest their bones before the next day's ordeal. U.P. workers, as a rule, find their places in the dirtiest and the most strenuous work-places within the mills—blowroom, cardroom, beaming, bleaching and dyeing departments. Maharashtrian workers, especially the younger lot, show a much greater preference for the folding department, weaving etc.

The occupants of the hut pay Re.1 to Rs.3 per month as contribution towards room rent, shared salt expenses etc. Food is cooked in groups of three to five. Food expenses for the month work out to around Rs.150 today, while in 1976, Rs.60 used to suffice, say the workers. Bidis (most of them smoke) and two or three cups of tea during working hours adds up to another Rs.50-60.

In almost all cases, wives stay behind in the countryside. Taking heed of the sex-drive, even occasionally, must be yet another item on the budget, but you can't ask such questions easily in a group. Many of the workers being badli workers, have to rest content with a monthly earning of Rs.300-350. Just about enough to meet their barest survival needs, and hopefully Rs.50 left over to send home for the family.

"Pradhan" Lokan Yadav is lucky to be a permanent worker. After 26 years of service, as a clerk he earns Rs.1200 p.m. (In contrast, a fresh unskilled helper/sweeper joining service today in any number of engineering units in Bombay would start with a salary of over Rs.1,000 and more likely than not, would fight and get 20% annual bonus).

As part of their preparation for the indefinite strike, the 250 U.P. workers of Bawani Chawl are ready to head home-

wards at a day's notice. They assume, as a matter of fact, that the strike is going to be long drawn-out and are at the same time convinced that it is going to be for their good.

"Samant Ke hawa bahut jorun me hai," says Lokan Yadav, "aur marathi logon me to bahut jyada tayyari hai. Faida hogajarur is bari." (The Samant wave is everywhere and there is a great degree of preparedness amongst the Maharashtrian workers. This time we will definitely benefit from the strike).

There is a unanimous feeling amongst all the mill workers I have met in the last 10-15 days, that the atmosphere that exists this time has not been around for many, many years. Lokan, for example, says that during the 1974 strike, many U.P. workers went into the mills at the instance and protection of RMMS tough-hands, and earned the biggest incomes of their lives by simply sitting inside and doing nothing.

"They were fed so many puris, laddoos, tea and sev at management's expense," says he, "that many of them could not even reach the toilets to 'unload' themselves. But no one is going to go inside this time."

Workers from seven mills have been on strike since October 23. "Go and find out for yourself, the pathetic state of affairs of these workers," an angry union leader staunchly opposed to "Samant's method" told me.

"We are fighting for money, but much more important than that, we are fighting to get the RMMS and the BIR Act out," said a group of Crown Mills workers, "if it comes to that, let the money go too, but RMMS and BIR must go at any cost. We are fighting for our future, and if we lose 6 months wages for it, it is quite alright."

Some of them have gone further to point out that the RMMS has not only failed to get "justice" for them in terms of higher wages and benefits, but that it has also been a source of endless harassment on a day-to-day basis at the level of the shop-floor.

A charge-sheeted worker does not even have the comfort of the presence of an RMMS representative when he has to face the management representatives to defend himself against the charges.

"We will prefer a Rs.50 agreement signed by Samant to a Rs.200 agreement signed by the RMMS," say a group of workers from India United Mills (No.2) "because once RMMS is out of the picture we will be able to fight for more later."

But mill workers have agitated and struck work even earlier. So, why must one assume that they will not give in mid-way, as in the case of the 42-day strike of 1974. There is a big difference between 1974 and today, argues a time-keeper from one of the mills. "Even in 1974, the workers were looking towards the opposition unions and their organisations to deliver the goods. This time, it is absolutely amazing, the extent to which each worker is thinking for himself and is willing to shoulder the burden on his own.

"That is why inspite of the fact that Samant has no organisational structure in the mills, spontaneous groups and committees of workers, specially the young ones, have sprung up everywhere. They are relying on Samant only to the extent of their conviction that he will stand behind them till the end and won't budge an inch. To the extent that they are so far convinced of Samant on this point, their morale is at a peak."

But the government, it is reported, is proposing to come down heavily on the striking workers. If it takes place? "Sarkar ko bhi dekh lega," comes the answer everytime, "yaa to woh mare ga, yaa to hum mare ga. Humko to pahla se bhi maar ke rakha hai." (We'll take care of the government also. Either they will be finished or we will be finished. As it is, we are in a miserable state).

Having acted as the terrain for the birth of the union movement in this country, having stood in the forefront of the workers struggle in India for the eight-hour day, for the introduction of D.A. and bonus, having even been the pace-setter for wages for many years, textile workers, in helplessness and in frustration, have



witnessed themselves being overtaken by workers from the "off-spring industries" of their "mother-industry".

For the third time in 35 years, the workers are in a determined mood to wash away their 35-year-old "sin" of having shown the kind of enthusiasm for the Congress that they did in 1945-46 which became enshrined into the institution of the RMMS through the instrument of the BIR Act.

The workers for their part seem absolutely convinced of the favourable outcome of the coming struggle. But only the coming months can tell whether mill workers will succeed in breaking loose from the continued strangle-hold of their past over their future, or whether the future will become an open frontier with exciting possibilities.

as it most likely would be. He said, "but remember, it is not a joke to take over two lakh workers out on the street without adequate preparation. Why dissipate the energies of the workers without even waiting for the recommendations of the committee? Once we know how much they are prepared to concede, we can fight for the remaining. Why should we have our people on the committee and thus bind ourselves to its decision?"

As for fears about the workers striking readiness getting dissipated Samant remarked, "The government, the millowners and the RMMS should become 'conscious' of the mood of the workers. They are living in an illusory world if they think that they can diffuse the situation by postponement. The workers are absolutely convinced of the reasonableness of their demand as put forward by our union and nothing will prevent them from fighting for it".

But why didn't Samant emphasise in the October 12 meeting that whatever the agreement, it must be signed only with his union as the workers demanded? "The government is not likely to let go of the RMMS so easily. Let us get the demands conceded first. We'll take care of the RMMS later".

A few days after October 12 Antulay announced that the three-member committee would consist of Congress(I) MLA, and trade unionist Bhaurao Patil and the Congress(I) whiz-kid from Nagpur, Dr. Shrikant Jichkar (presently the minister of state for home, Maharashtra). Jichkar was known to have some sympathies for Samant, while Patil let it be known to newsmen that the committee would make an award "quite favourable" to the workers. Antulay himself had little affection for the RMMS leaders who were said to be in the anti-Antulay camp within the Congress(I). According to some reliable sources, the millowners had already come to the realisation that they had no alternative but to pay something and had therefore already decided that they would concede upto Rs.100 p.m. increase in wages. The recommendation of the government committee was expected to be of a similar amount.

Following the announcement of the committee members, Antulay asked Samant in the

course of a meeting to withdraw the continuing strike in eight mills on the bonus demand, promising that the committee would also examine the higher bonus demand of the workers. Samant replied that he was willing to oblige on condition that the strikers were paid wages at least for part of the strike period. That of course was something the millowners would not concede under any circumstances.

Samant's refusal to withdraw the strike became a convenient pretext for the millowners and the RMMS to withdraw any co-operation to the committee. Neither the central government, the millowners, or the RMMS were in any way pleased with the prospect of Samant making a dent in the textile industry. As several prominent Congress(I) leaders as well as government officials pointed out at a subsequent date, if Samant succeeded in the mills, there was every chance he would take the whole city by storm. Employees of the city's BEST bus services had already shifted to Samant in large numbers at the same time the mills workers did. Dock workers, *mathadi* workers (who handle loading and unloading jobs in the city's markets) and just about every other worker would flock to Samant the moment he was victorious in the textile mills, it was feared.

At the same time, labour officials told me towards the end of November that it was best that Samant call off the strike in eight mills and let the committee proceed with its work. The settlement would be favourable to workers, it was claimed by them too.

It would seem that from the moment it became clear to the authorities that the Samant sentiment had taken hold of a large number of mill workers, the government and the millowners were working on two alternative strategies, both designed with the single purpose of not allowing Samant to consolidate his hold in the textile industry.

If Samant acted "reasonably" and called off the eight mills strike, a wage increase of around Rs.100 p.m. could be announced by the government and accepted by the millowners. Of course the agreement would only be signed with the RMMS as always. With the conceding of a wage increase

such as the mill workers have never known, the situation would hopefully be diffused, at least for a section of the mill workers. If Samant was still determined to call for a strike, response from the workers would be only half-hearted and would fizzle out soon.

If Samant refused to play the game and did not call off the strike, the blame for the non-functioning of the committee could be passed on to Samant. As a spokesman of the millowners' association, as well as concerned government officials, later admitted before newsmen, they did not expect the strike to last more than 6-8 weeks at the maximum. Such a strike would in any case be of benefit to the millowners, as it would help clear their accumulated stocks, it was calculated. A Samant-led strike action by workers could help serve the management's purpose, it was felt.

Given the extremely belligerent mood of the workers and the continuous pressure exerted by them on Samant, he was forced to renew the strike threat as soon as it became clear that the committee was delaying its deliberations. "Even I feel weak in front of these mill workers, I can't believe the degree of their determination", Samant told me in the first week of December.

Addressing a massive rally of workers at Nardulla Tank, Prabhadevi, on December 8, Samant asked the workers to make "immediate preparations for a determined and indefinite strike in textile mills very soon". The high-power committee set up by the state government was only engaging in dilatory tactics and the mill workers are not prepared to wait indefinitely, he added.

Samant also announced at the meeting that he had received the threat of a "permanent arrest" this time by a "very senior minister" the previous day, if he did not desist from calling the strike, but told the workers to continue their struggle irrespective of what happened to him personally. (At a later public meeting, T.S. Borade, general secretary of Samant's various unions, disclosed that it was the then state labour minister, N.M. Tidke, who had warned Samant of "dire personal consequences" if the strike was called).

Meanwhile, workers reported daily skirmishes between the Samant followers in the mills and the RMMS "toughies". Union leaders kept emphasising to the workers not to get provoked by such acts, thereby giving the government a handle to come down heavily on the workers. On December 10 (pay day), however, Samant supporters refused to let the RMMS representatives sit near the cashiers' counters to collect membership fees from the workers (as was their normal practice all these years). In a few of the mills the workers even staged a sit-in strike for a few hours and resumed work only after the management asked the RMMS representatives to move their membership fee collection tables away from the cashiers' counters.

The year 1981 closed with the announcement from Samant for a one day "notice strike" on January 6 to be followed by a "long drawn strike soon after". "I have waited for two months in spite of continuous pressure from the workers but now there seems no alternative to a strike," he said. (Samant went over to the Raj Bhavan to meet the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, while she was on a visit to Bombay on December 5. The PM declined to meet him. Her secretary told Samant that she was too busy and asked him to leave behind his memorandum addressed to her).

Vidyadhar Budbadkar, Secretary of the Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU), announced at the December 31 rally of workers that with the workers of Kohinoor Mills also having just joined the MGKU, all the 60 mills in the city were now with Samant and the indefinite strike would therefore be total.

The one day strike of January 6 was not only total but also "unprecedented and an absolutely thumping success," according to the President of the Sarva Shramik Sangh, Yashwant Chavan. The "unprecedented" part of the strike lay in the fact that for the first time ever, a large majority of the RMMS members in most of the mills ignored their union's call to report for work.

The other unique feature of the strike was the fact that, even according to prominent activists of unions other than Samant's, young mill workers in

thousands roamed the streets the whole night in great excitement, as if a festival was in the making. The morale and high spirit of the workers was in clear evidence in the entire mill area on January 6.

While the strike was reported as having passed off peacefully by the police in the evening, Podar Mills, De lisle Road, proved to be the "hot spot" of the day. On receiving the news that over 100 RMMS supporters led by a prominent RMMS activist, Walawalkar, had entered the mills, workers from several mills started gathering outside the gates to demand that the "black-legs" get out.

By 10 a.m. the atmosphere outside the mill was so charged that the frightened RMMS workers asked for police protection to be able to leave the mill. But given the excitement of the several thousand strong crowd of workers outside, the police flatly refused to take the responsibility of safely escorting the workers out of the mill, notwithstanding the fact that eight police vans, two bus-loads of SRP men and several police officers were present on the spot.

The situation was saved for the RMMS men, when realising the situation, office bearers of Samant's union took their own union van inside the mill gates to take them away. At 10.55 a.m., amidst deafening cries of "Dr.Samant Zindabad," they were escorted out of the mill crouched low in the union van escorted by a police van in front and police jeeps behind.

"I was frightened, to tell you frankly," the security officer of the mill told me on January 18, the first day of the indefinite strike, "I really thought the strikers would enter the mill any minute and bring the whole place down". Tiny handfuls of RMMS workers entered India United Mills (No.5) and another mill in the neighbourhood, but took fright the moment strikers started collecting at the mill gates to demand that they leave."They are so frightened that they have locked themselves up in the lavatories," watchmen manning the mill gates reported gleefully. The sympathy of the watch and ward staff in mill after mill was clearly with the strikers and Samant. "RMMS wala chor hai,

Doctor aayega to humko bhi kuch milega (RMMS fellows are crooks, if Doctor's union wins, we'll also benefit)", they said.

The call for an indefinite strike from January 18 was given by Samant at a massive workers' rally at Nardulla Tank on January, 17.

"Continue your struggle peacefully, but with grim determination until all demands are met, and if I am arrested, do not heed any call to return to work that may be falsely issued in my name," Samant advised the workers. At the same time a warning was issued to the police that if they tried to escort "RMMS goondas" into the mills and resorted to lathi-charge or other repressive measures on the workers, "the union will take no responsibility for any retaliatory violence by the workers."

A spokesman of the Sarva Shramik Sangh(SSS) also addressed the workers rally from the the Samant platform. Amongst the red flag unions, the Sangh was the first to make up its mind on its attitude to the textile strike being led by Samant, a unionist suspected by the red flag unions on a variety of counts. Based on its assessment that the vast majority of the mill workers were fully behind Samant, and its assessment that whatever else be Samant's shortcomings, he could not at least be blamed for having wittingly compromised workers' interests in the midst of a struggle, the Sangh leaders decided to submerge their separate identity as the Kapad Kamgar Sanghatana in the mills. The leaders and activists of the Shramik Sangh stayed with the Samant union right from the beginning. As we shall see later, this decision of the SSS increased the credibility of the union immensely amongst the strikers and the union was to make significant contributions to the character of the strike.

In keeping with their principles, the other red flag unions would not act as strike breakers and in any case were contemplating strike action on their own. Many mill level activists of the red flag unions in fact went over to the Samant side, while the remaining were left rather confused even while they participated with enthusiasm in the strike.

A few days before the indefinite strike call was announced by Samant, the Trade Unions Joint Action Committee (TUJAC - a joint platform of opposition trade unions which came into existence after the national conference of trade unions on June 6, 1981), while expressing its full support to the imminent strike, called upon Samant to enter into action jointly with the other contingents to TUJAC. Samant, while appreciating their solidarity, chose to go it alone. "I am worried about what they might do later if I agree to conduct the strike along with others," was Samant's explanation for choosing to fight alone. "even a veteran like Dange called off a 44 day old strike in 1974, after getting just Rs.4 p.m. more to workers. What is the use of strikes?"

On the eve of the indefinite textile strike, Samant discarded the tricolour flag of his union (a legacy of his Congress(I) and INTUC days) and instead chose red and white. The red colour was chosen because "the red flag symbolises the sacrifices made by the working class movement internationally to advance the cause of labour" leaving a portion of the flag white for a union emblem. The emblem consists of a tight fist of a worker sticking out of the chimney of a factory. The birth of workers' power?



The indefinite strike of 2.5 lakh mill workers was total on January 18, even by the admission of the BMOA and the RMMS. Striking workers and even senior security staff at some of the mill gates informed curious newsmen that even managerial staff had been "persuaded" to go back home. Boiler attendants and watermen, who normally reported for work even during earlier strikes did not come to work.

Despite the fact that the police had brought section 144 in force, prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons in front of any of the mill gates, striking workers in their thousands defied the police order to ensure that no "black-legs" got into the mills. No attempt was made by the RMMS to enter Podar Mills as on January 6. Kohinoor Mills (Naigaum), India United Mills (No.5) and New Great Mills, which were the other mills where a handful of workers had tried to get in on January 6 remained deserted. In Phoenix Mills, Lower Parel, about 100 RMMS supporters were reported to have gone in at 7 a.m., only to leave again at 7.45 a.m.

Shiv Sena Chief Bal Thakeray who had stated on January 6 that he was convinced Samant would never call an indefinite strike, declined to comment "at the moment" when contacted by a newsmen on the evening of January 18. The RMMS President, Vasantrao Hoshing, while admitting that the strike was total added that his union supporters would resume work "in a few days time after the present surcharged atmosphere has subsided" (In fact, however, it took much more than a few days for the "surcharged atmosphere" to subside).

"I have taken an active part in every mill strike since the massive bonus strike of 1950, but never has the morale of the workers been so high," remarked Jaggannath Kumtekar, an employee of Khatau Mills and the Vice-President of the CPI's, Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union.

THE NEW Congress (I) ministry in the state took office a day after the indefinite textile strike began - on January 19. Incidentally, it was also the day the first ever nationwide general strike of workers was called by the National Campaign Committee (NCC) of opposition trade unions to protest against the various anti-labour

legislations introduced by the Union government in the past year.

Samant chose to initiate the textile strike a day before the general strike. This decision, labour observers felt, was motivated by two factors. Firstly, it expressed Samant's anxiety at that point (as also for quite some time subsequently) to let it be known to the government in the state and more importantly, at the Centre, that the textile strike he led was purely for the "economic" demands of the workers and that no "political" calculations were involved.

In fact, for the first few months of the strike, Samant and his lieutenants never publicly criticised the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi, nor even the former Chief Minister, A.R. Antulay. At one or two public meetings, Samant even went to the extent of saying that the Prime Minister was perhaps not fully informed about the genuine grievances of the workers. All his criticism of the government was directed specifically at the then labour minister, N.M. Tidke, whose antipathy to Samant is well-known.

Secondly, by calling for a strike a day before the general strike, Samant wanted to make it plain to other opposition union leaders in the mills that he called the shots in the mills, not the joint front of unions.

* * *

As a slight diversion from the textile strike, it is interesting to note that just the day after launching the historic and unique textile strike, Samant was dubbed a strikebreaker. While all industrial and other units with Samant's unions participated in the general strike of January 19, the Samant-supporters in the BEST bus service in the city reported for work, with the management claiming that 80% of the buses could thus be put on the roads.

The Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS)-affiliated, George Fernandes-led BEST Workers' Union condemned Samant for acting as a strike breaker on the day of the general strike. Samant supporters in the BEST argued that they were angered by the strike-breaking activity of Fernandes supporters on January 15. According to a Sarva Shramik Sargh leader, Samant had first insisted

that BEST workers must not work on January 19, but subsequently relented to pressure from the BEST activists.

Be that as it may, on April 19, when all the opposition unions had called for a "Maharashtra bandh" in support of the textile strike, in spite of Fernandes' call to join in the strike, his lieutenants and followers in the BEST chose to settle the score with Samant supporters and acted as strike-breakers .

* * *

SOON AFTER assuming office, chief minister Babasaheb Bhosale announced that his first concern would be to settle the textile strike, for which he did not mind meeting "anyone". Through a press statement issued on January 24, Samant "welcomed the prompt offer by the new Chief Minister to look into the grievances of the textile workers and hoped that they will get an adequate pay-rise through his good offices".

Bhosale, incidentally, had got himself elected to the state legislature from a constituency neighbouring Samant's own during the March 1980 elections. "Bhosale is a good man and he might do something," Samant said in private. Samant's hopes were presumably also raised by the fact that the minister of state, home ministry, in the new government was Shrikant Jichkar - one of the three members in Antulay's high-powered committee.

The "good man", however, changed his tune after a single trip to Delhi and instructions from the Congress (I) high command. If Antulay could be said to have exercised some degree of independent thinking and action, Bhosale in his own words had declared himself as a man "100% loyal" to the Prime Minister.

Workers must first resume duty before any talks could be held on their demands, Bhosale now announced. Having stated on one day that rumours about the high-powered committee's dissolution were false, Bhosale himself confirmed its dissolution only two days later.

Meanwhile, the strike continued to be total, with not even management personnel wanting to risk entering the mills. In a number of cases, senior management personnel took special "permission" from the local strike leaders to enter the mills.

A brief look at textile union history in Bombay

- 1850's: Start of the first mills.
- 1881: The beginning of industrial legislation in India.
- 1925: First city-wide union of textile workers in Bombay. Called the Bombay Textile Labour Union, it reached its peak membership in 1927.
- 1928: The communist-dominated Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) emerged, which led the famous six month long general strike of mill workers on the issues of retrenchment, rationalisation and wage-cuts.
- 1939: Beginning of two and three shifts in the mills to meet war time requirements. Recruitment of workers on a large scale from the plains and districts of Maharashtra, as against the earlier Ratnagiri workers.
- 1940: 40 day strike on the demand for D.A. The D.A. system is thus brought into existence thanks to textile workers struggle.
- 1945: Formation of the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS).
- 1946: The "black act", Bombay Industrial Relations (BIR) Act is born. RMMS becomes the representative union for the textile mills.
- 1948: Following the split of Congress Socialists from the Congress party vast majority of workers along with the best activists leave RMMS to join the newly formed Mill Mazdoor Sabha (MMS).
- 1950: The unsuccessful 67 days strike on bonus demand in the course of which 12 workers lost their lives. Strike led by the MMS under the leadership of Ashok Mehta. Workers' rallies in the textile district were prohibited but meetings organised in Kurla, Bandra etc. drew crowds of one lakh and over. The MMS pressed for recognition under the BIR Act, but was unsuccessful inspite of massive following.
- 1953: Merger of MMS and GKU (Red flag).
- 1956: Mills closed for four days on the Samyukt Maharashtra issue. 105 workers lost their lives in the course of the agitation.
- 1959: All opposition parties joined hands to form a single Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union in the textiles, which enrolled one lakh members in a single day's membership drive, but the RMMS still remained intact.
- 1962: Only communists and Lal Nishan remained in the MGKU.
- 1966: 12 days strike withdrawn after an assurance from the C.M.
- 1968: Lal Nishan split to form a separate Kapad Kamgar Sangathna (KKS).
- 1970: CITU split from AITUC and CITU's Lal Bawta Girni Union formed.
- 1974: 42 days strike led, in the main, by Dange.
- 1979: Girni Kamgar Sabha (GKS) of the HMS formed which initially aroused lots of hopes amongst workers. The indefinite strike proposed was called off after the Sharad Pawar-George Fernandes award.
- October 23, 1981: The strike of workers in seven mills protesting against bonus declarations and their shift to Samant snow-balls, workers shift to Samant en masse.

INSIDE THE GATES of Khatau Mills, the striking workers had put up effigies of V.R. Hoshing, Bhai Bhosale and Ramchandra Hulawle (President, General Secretary and Secretary of the Khatau Mills RMMS committee respectively), and would not allow the management to remove them for several days.

A few "informers" of the striking workers who claimed to have smuggled into a closed door meeting of the RMMS came back to report that a majority of the RMMS mill representatives refused to pay heed to the directives of the leaders to try and enter the mills. Even the threat of the representatives being divested of their status in the organisation for disobedience did not work, it was stated. (The RMMS has over 3,000 representatives spread over the 60 mills in Bombay).

Since mill managements were not allowed into the mills, in at least one case the management worked out a system whereby officers kept daily contact areawise, through meetings held in different local hotels. A handful of RMMS supporters were reported to have gone to Phoenix, Piramal and Matulya Mills but they were sent home by the respective managements. (As late as April , the government could only claim a return to work by about 8000 out of a total of 2.3 lakhs workers. Even these figures were claimed to be concocted, as we shall see later).

THE POLICE had enforced Section 144 in almost all the mill areas, prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons. The workers, however, were not to be deterred. While the police continued to harrass and intimidate small groups of workers, they found themselves quite helpless when confronted by large numbers, whose morale had to be seen to be believed. For example, in total defiance of the prohibitory order, a huge demonstration of workers was taken to the Delisle Road Police Station, culminating in a meeting in front of the station towards January end.

On the morning of February 2, mill workers assembled at a routine area-meeting at Ranibaug Park, presided over by Samant's elder brother and vice-president of the MGKU, P.N. Samant. Just as the meeting was drawing to a close, a few score workers came

charging to announce that around 200 workers had entered the Hindustan Mills that morning and insisted that the "black-legs" must be made to leave. P.N. Samant first tried to tell the workers that 200 out of 2.3 lakhs meant nothing. But the pressure of the workers was so intense that an on-the-spot decision to proceed in a morcha to the concerned mill was taken.

The morcha was stopped by a police cordon Jacob Circle, hardly a few hundred yards away from the mill, after having already marched past several mills en route in flagrant defiance of the prohibitory order. In the excitement that followed, stones and bottles were hurled and the police resorted to a lathi charge, resulting in a few injuries on both sides. Later a deputy commissioner of police, who came to visit an injured A.C.I. in Nair Hospital, warned a prominent MGKU office-bearer that the police would retaliate "if the union does not ensure peaceful behaviour on the part of the strikers".

For anyone who has moved around the mill area since last November and has witnessed the mood of the workers, particularly outside Podar Mills on January 6, it is obvious that Samant's union, alleged to have built its following on sheer muscle power, has repeatedly strained itself to ensure that the seething anger of the strikers against the RMMS and the police does not take violent expression. In fact, many unionists from the red-flag unions repeatedly complained that Samant was leading "too peaceful" and "too vegetarian" a strike.

Notwithstanding the propaganda about violence and intimidation indulged in by striking leaders, as alleged by the RMMS and the official statements of the government and the MOA, several months later even government officials, individual millowners and senior police officials were privately admitting that considering its magnitude, the strike had indeed been "by and large" peaceful. "I can in no conscience blame Samant for the stray incidents of violence and assaults indulged in by small groups of workers here and there," said one millowner. "If anything, Samant needs to be complimented for having ensured a peaceful strike."

Quite obviously, whether it was tactically right or wrong, at every stage Samant has

tried to ensure that there is no direct confrontation between the striking workers and the "black-legs" (which would also bring the police immediately in the picture). In making his decision to run a "vegetarian style" strike, Samant seems to have been influenced by three considerations.

FIRSTLY, over-confident of the near total and enthusiastic support, Samant harboured no fear of the strike fizzling out because of the "blacklegs". He proved to be right in this assumption for six whole months of the strike. (According to MOA claims made to the press, hardly 17,000 - around 7% of the total workforce in the mills - had resumed work at the end of six months of strike). No sooner had the strike started, reportedly over 50% of the workers returned to their villages and as several news reports made it plain from time to time (till end October) these workers were not going to return to

the mills till some settlement was arrived at and the union officially gave a call for resumption of work.

A number of people within labour circles, however, clearly began to feel uneasy once the claimed attendance in the mills exceeded several thousand. The absence of any picketing effort to prevent the strike breakers, could have had an extremely demoralising effect on the striking workers and that could have had dangerous implications for the strike. A unionist from the U.K., who visited Bombay during October 1982, simply could not believe that the strikers had not thought of picketing.

IN FACT, however, opposition mill unions in the past always had to resort to picketing to ensure the continuance of a strike (the longest of which in post-Independence India lasted 51 days in 1950 and 44 days in 1974).



One of the several unique features of the present strike lies in the fact that for over 6 months of the strike no picketing was necessary to keep workers away from the mills.

Several trade union leaders have remarked that this is an unprecedented example of a worker-led strike, not only in the mills, but also in the labour history of the country. Veteran textile unionists in Bombay have stated that in the past the burden of continuing the strike always lay almost totally with the striking unions and their activists (who had to organise picketing and engage in regular battle with the strike breakers and the police), but this time the workers are running the strike on their own conviction and determination. At a number of public meetings, Samant rightly pointed out that "95% of the credit for continuing the strike goes to the mill workers themselves and only 5% to me and to other unions".

Besides Samant's complete confidence that the strike cannot fizzle out ("Today's working class has become quite conscious of its rights, you see. It cannot be easily fooled, nor can its morale be destroyed just like that. They are literate and read, but newspapers, radio or television propaganda cannot mislead them in any way,") two other considerations seem to have weighed heavily in Samant's calculations.

"If there is violence, for which they already keep blaming me falsely, the government can use that as a pretext to break the strike by using force. Who will benefit by that? I will at the most be put behind bars, which I do not mind, but poor workers will lose their lives and their families would be destroyed. I don't like that idea".

Perhaps an additional factor that could explain Samant's decision to rely almost solely on the single tactic of a "peaceful war of attrition" is the fact that Samant has steeled himself over the last decade by leading several protracted strikes (one agitation being led by his union, has been going on for almost four years now!). Many unionists complain that Samant makes a virtue out of long-drawn battles, which are highly detrimental to workers. Indeed, several examples could be given off-hand where the workers have lost heavily in such strikes and lock-outs. For better or worse, Samant chooses to ignore

these cases, and instead emphasises those (of which again several major examples can be given), where such agitations have ended in a restructuring of the management-labour equation in favour of the workers. It could perhaps be argued that when faced with a certain kind of management, nothing short of a protracted and total withdrawal of the workers' labour power will force the management to its senses.

AS A HYPOTHESIS, it is worth exploring whether the long drawn battles led by Samant are not merely an outward expression of the incessant and unrelenting pressure by a new generation of workers on an old type of management demanding a "new", "modern" redefinition of the management-labour equation.

One indication that the hypothesis is not just idle speculation was the seminar on "Emerging Perspectives in Personnel Management", organised by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in January this year, exactly a week before the textile strike began. Interestingly, while it was well-attended by senior managerial personnel, not a single representative of the millowners attended the seminar!

* * *

For the first time on February 4, the Union government broke the studied silence it had maintained so far. Union Labour Minister Bhagwat Zha Azad issued a statement endorsing the Maharashtra State Chief Minister's appeal to striking mill workers to return to work. The Centre was of the "firm opinion" that the legitimate demands of the workers, if any, should be resolved only through recourse to the existing industrial relations machinery.

In reply to a calling-attention motion tabled in the Rajya Sabha by some opposition members on February 9, Azad reiterated that the Chief Minister's stand had the full backing of the Union government and added that there could be no talks with Samant.

February 8: The first of the strike-affected mills reopened its gates to welcome those wanting to return to work. There were not many takers of the offer. As it subsequently turned out, whatever the declared intentions of the millowners in reopening the mills, in fact that opportunity was used to

take the earlier stocks of cloth out of the mills at dead of night under heavy police protection.

March 11: Samant's union organised a "long march" of workers from different industries in Bombay and elsewhere to demonstrate their solidarity with the striking mill workers. The "long march" which started from Byculla and ended at Kala Ghoda turned out to be the largest-ever rally of workers in the city.

Union leaders from the Trade Unions' Joint Action Committees (TUJAC) and also opposition party leaders addressed the rally to extend their "full support to the just struggle of the mill workers." A delegation of TUJAC representatives, along with Samant, met the Chief Minister to present a memorandum. The CM however repeated his call that the strikers should return to work first.

Samant announced the TUJAC decision to hold a rally at Shivaji Park soon, followed by a statewide bandh and a "jail bhara" (fill the prisons) subsequently to intensify the agitation.

Towards the end of February, the Lal Nishan Party's Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad organised a statewide conference of agricultural workers at Nasik. Prior to the conference, leaders of the Lal Nishan-affiliated Sarva Shramik Sangh in Bombay, had successfully sold the idea to Samant that since a large number of the striking mill workers had gone back to their villages, Samant should tour the rural parts of the state to sustain the tempo of the strike. This tour, it was pointed out to Samant, could also be used to propagate the idea of the unity of urban industrial and rural labour. Samant started off his tour of the countryside with the Nasik conference.

The Nasik conference had a spin-off benefit from the point of view of the labour movement. With the beginning of the textile strike, there had been increasing talk about a Samant-Sharad Joshi axis for a united struggle. (Sharad Joshi has been championing the cause of rural India (Bharat) against its urban exploiters. His two-year-old movement, apparently meant to benefit all sectors of rural society, has in fact

worked only to the advantage of the rich farmers.) The Nasik venue for the conference of agricultural labourers deliberately chosen by the Lal Nishan organisers, since Sharad Joshi had called his own conference proved to be a useful lesson in "class politics" to Samant, who till then had thought highly of Sharad Joshi.

"I think there must be some misunderstanding," Samant told a newsman just as he was leaving the conference, "Sharad Joshi says he wants to fight for landless labourers and poor farmers, and the Lal Nishan also wants to do the same thing. Why then this difference?"

The difference, however, seemed to become increasingly plain to Samant as he moved around different parts of rural Maharashtra. Only once after the Nasik conference did Samant mention Joshi's name and that too only cursorily. Meanwhile, the joint rural tours by Samant and the different Lal Nishan leaders went a long way in further boosting the morale of the mill workers. Several truckloads of grain were collected and brought to Bombay to help the strikers in the city. While the amount of grain each of the strikers got was insignificant, the emotive value of the gesture, however, was undoubtedly great. (Amongst the various unique features of the mills strike is the fact that over Rs.1 crore was collected in cash and in kind, both in the city and from outside. Even poor adivasi farmers and agricultural workers from Thane and Dhule district, who often have to go half-hungry themselves, contributed their own little bit). On March 15, the state government came in for sharp criticism from Samant and the opposition leaders in the course of a four-hour-long debate in the state legislative assembly. Samant and the opposition stated that the government had made the textile strike a prestige issue. The government, however, stuck to its guns.

Bitterly criticising the Congress(I) government in the state and at the Centre, Samant called for the formation of a single workers' party (to comprise of his union and the left political parties) to fight for the cause of the workers.

April 2: At a huge rally of workers called at Shivaji Park, the Trade Unions Joint

Action Committee (TUJAC) leaders announced a one-day Maharashtra Bandh on April 19. This was the first ever rally of workers held at Shivaji Park, being the largest public park in the city it can easily accommodate needs far more than a lakh demonstrators. (incidentally Samant had called for a rally in the same park on May 16 last year, but the police lathi charged the workers and never allowed them to assemble. Samant himself was arrested under the National Security Act).

Once the Maharashtra Bandh was announced, the Union government was suddenly galvanised into action. A host of Union ministers (Shivraj Patil, Pranab Mukherjee and several others) air-dashed to Bombay in quick succession. The city was full of speculation that the Central government was making a desperate bid to end the strike and preempt the Maharashtra Bandh.

April 9: Three prominent millowners in the city had a detailed meeting with the Union industries minister, N.D. Tiwari, at the Times of India office, to hammer out a scheme to end the strike. The millowners concerned made four concrete suggestions for the consideration of the government:

- a) they wanted the strike to end as soon as possible;
- b) they were prepared to concede a wage hike of Rs.150 - Rs.200 p.m. to each worker;
- c) however, they would not sign an agreement either with the existing RMMS leaders or with Samant. An RMMS-signed agreement would not be accepted by the workers, they pointed out, while a Samant-signed agreement was neither acceptable to the government nor the millowners;
- d) the alternative suggested was that some other Congress(I) INTUC leader replace the existing RMMS leadership, and after a show of "hectic and spirited" bargaining, an agreement could be signed with the new leader, thus increasing the chance of its acceptance. Veerendra Patil (former president of the RMMS, presently all-India general secretary of the Congress(I) and an influential leader in the state) was the most favoured for this task.

When the report was published in *The Daily*, the Millowners Association (MOA) tried to refute it even if in a somewhat roundabout manner. *The Times of India*, however, maintained a discreet silence. What is more, just two days later, it also reproduced the essential content of the earlier report of *The Daily* prominently on the front page. (In retrospect, it appears that the millowners who met the minister did so in their individual capacity and, perhaps, did not have the formal sanction of the MOA).

A short while later, Veerendra Patil himself told newsmen in Delhi that he was considering becoming the RMMS leader. He came to Bombay, travelled around the rural parts of Maharashtra, discovered for himself what the score was and decided not to jeopardise his own credibility and political career by taking over the RMMS.

April 11: In a long article on the textile strike published by the *Times of India*, the president of the Bombay Regional Congress (I) Committee, Murli Deora, publicly criticised the RMMS for having lost credibility amongst the mill workers. He thus became the first prominent and loyal member of the Congress(I) to have publicly and explicitly taken the RMMS to task.

Inside party circles many Congress(I) leaders claimed to have repeatedly criticised the RMMS for having brought itself to such a sorry state of affairs and at the same time damaged the credibility of the party. From April onwards, several groups within the Congress (I) repeatedly emphasised to the state and the Union government that the adamant attitude of the government may estrange large number of workers from the Congress(I) for a long time to come.

April 11: Shivraj Patil, A.P. Sharma and P.C. Sethi, all Union ministers, came to Bombay and were said to have had confidential talks with various parties concerned to find a solution to the textile stalemate.

April 17: As if to preempt any settlement that may not be liked by all the members of the MOA, the MOA issued a press note boldly asserting that the strike was "on the verge of fizzling out". Nothing came out of the secret parleys of the union ministers and on April 28, Shivraj Patil himself announced the "good news" that with 40 mills having

already reopened, the strike was "petering out". According to him 7,855 workers (against a total of 2.3 lakhs) had already resumed work.

A little earlier in the month, the opposition created a lot of embarrassment for the state government, when they stated after a visit to some of the mills claimed to have already stated functioning (in particular, Century Mills), that the government claims were highly exaggerated and false.

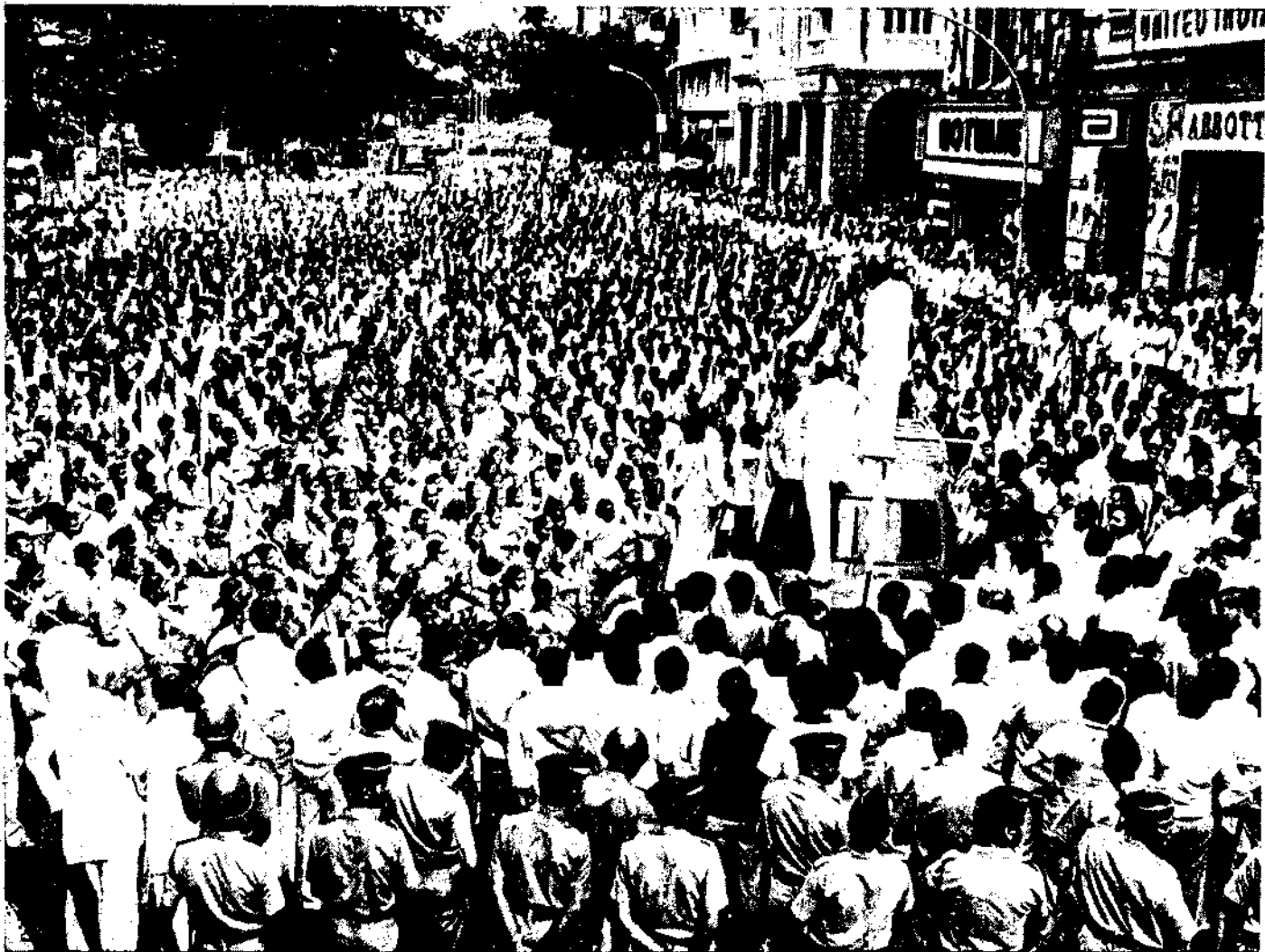
April 19: The chief minister once again held out a carrot to the strikers that if they resumed work, the grievances of the workers would be solved within a maximum of two-and-a-half months with the assistance of the central government.

April 19: The Maharashtra Bandh, a "flop" according to the state government, was

successful to the extent that all industrial units with TUJAC unions observed a strike. The sole exception was BEST (as mentioned earlier), where the supporters of George Fernandes kept a reported 50% of buses on the roads. Hotels, restaurants and most shops remained closed for the day, though many Central and state government offices, banks and other establishments in the main part of Bombay reported substantial attendance.

The newly-elected Mayor of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, P.S. Pai, observed a day's fast in support of the striking mill workers, and demanded a settlement move from the government. Later in the evening, while expressing happiness over the mayor's show of sympathy with the strike, Samant warned that this concern should not imply that a meagre settlement would be worked out with some "vague compromise sentiment". Such an insubstantial settlement, if signed by anyone,

An INTUC leader addressing participants of a morcha which demanded a hasty resolution of the strike.



would not be acceptable to the striking workers, said Samant.

April 20: The Union government turned down an opposition parties plea in the Lok Sabha that the Central government should intervene directly to find a solution. The government spokesmen reiterated that the workers should first return to work and then seek a settlement of their demands.

April 29: Through a written order dated April 20, the Registrar of Trade Unions had rejected the application filed by the MGKU asking for the derecognition of the RMMS on the ground that its membership claims for the months of January, February and March 1982 were false and fabricated.

The Union however moved the high court and on April 29, the Registrar agreed to withdraw his order and to verify the membership claims of the RMMS. (While the high court had asked the Registrar to expedite the verification process and come to a decision, as far as possible within six to eight weeks, the examination, if started at all, was not even completed by October end. The next hearing was postponed till November).

April 29: Shiv Sena Chief Bal Thakeray, who had kept a judicious silence all this while, announced after a long meeting with the Chief Minister that he was "hopeful of an early settlement". Around the same time, however, he also held out the threat that the Shiv Sena would snap its relation with the Congress(I), if the government failed to find a settlement by the end of May.

May Day is celebrated as International Labour Day by workers the world over. By taking out massive, colourful processions on this day, workers attempt to make the presence of their class felt to other classes in society.

But in Bombay, as also elsewhere in India, May Day is observed in a rather routine, dull and boring manner, with the same dry and stereotype speeches dished out by union leaders.

Nearly two months back, this correspondent asked union leader Datta Samant why it is not possible for unions and workers to think of more imaginative

ways of observing May Day. Isn't it true that if May Day were celebrated in a way that gave the workers far more joy and energy than that which was spent by them in participating in it, it will automatically bathe May Day with a special significance and make it a day they look forward to year after year?

"Sounds like a good idea," was Samant's reply. "Let's see what can be done", he had added.

The creative imagination with which over 50,000 textile workers owing allegiance to Samant's Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU) organised the procession which marched from Ranibaug to Five Gardens, Dadar, this May Day, is something well worth looking forward to, come next May Day.

Mindless of the scorching sun and oppressive humidity, workers sprinkled *gulal* on each other, burst crackers, displayed the art of stick fighting, performed gymnastic feats, danced to the beat of a music band and shouted slogans, as the procession wound its three-hour long journey.

The procession resembled more a cultural or a religious *jatra* or a marriage procession, rather than any demonstration of workers that Bombay is familiar with. The merry-making of the workers proved to be infectious, and brightened up the day for residents of Lalbaug and Dadar, who overcrowded their balconies to witness this unusual *morcha*.

Slogans such "Workers of the World Unite, *Jeena hai to marna seekho, kadam kadam pe ladna seekho*" were intermingled with equally full throated shouting of "*Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj ki jai*". "Shivaji Maharaj" was in fact very prominently "present" during the entire procession. A truck in the procession became the stage for re-enacting (costumes, make-up et al) of a scene from Shivaji's *darbar*.

Later at the Five Gardens meeting a bust of Shivaji was garlanded by Samant and the whole area reverberated to the shouts of "*Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj ki jai*".

Someone blew his lung out playing the "tulari", a musical instrument used to announce the entry of the king in the durbar during Shivaji's era, and which is used in Maharashtrian religious, cultural festivals.

Many "progressives" would most likely have been dismayed by this clouding of workers' class consciousness by such cultural particularism and their open show of affection and respect for a ruler from the past.

But a Luxemburg or a Thompson would undoubtedly have grasped the real content of this procession in which "an apparently childish, but in fact a deadly serious and mature proletariat" articulated its most modern aspirations "fitted into the fantastic whim of a colourful old wives tale".

On the one hand, by according this place of prominence to Shivaji, mill workers and the MGKU robbed two of its adversaries - Shiv Sena chief, Bal Thakeray, and Maharashtra Chief Minister, Bhosale - of a cultural, emotive weapon in their propaganda armoury.

"Shivaji Maharaj stood unflinchingly for the cause of justice and dignity and only workers who are today fighting courageously (like Shivaji) for the cause of justice are the rightful inheritors of his tradition. Those who are trying to compromise the struggle for justice of the workers (Bal Thakeray and the CM) are hypocrites", was the cultural counter-offensive launched by the striking mill workers.

The MGKU had deliberately chosen to carry its procession through the Lalbaug-Parel area, once a stronghold of the Shiv Sena. Just when the Samant wave was blowing through the textile mills last November Thakeray told this correspondent: "Samant must realise that he does not have a chance against us in the mills. Not only are the workers with us; the area as a whole is our stronghold".

Shiv Sena's influence in the area today appears to have vanished into thin air. No longer is it necessary for workers to join different unions for their wage demands and yet turn to Shiv Sena for a

cultural identity. The MGKU is today offering a "package-deal" to mill workers. It is no surprise therefore that, according to reports. Shiv Sainiks of several *Shakhas* openly denounced Thakeray through their public notice boards when he recently issued a call to them to leave Samant's union.

On the other hand by bringing into play their cultural-emotive energies, mill workers have added a qualitative new dimension to their morale to continue their "struggle for a just cause".

"Look at the enthusiasm and morale this procession has generated amongst mill workers," an obviously pleased MGKU activist told this correspondent in the course of the rally. "Who can prevent such workers from winning their struggle?" he rhetorically asked.

One had only to see over 50 year-old women workers dancing in the procession to keep in step with the mood of the moment, to find an answer to the question that seems to baffle many people. "How can these mill workers, on the verge of starvation, still refuse to budge from their declared positions, even after 100 days without work or wages?"

"It does not look as if these people will return to work unless the government comes to some settlement with them," was more or less the response of five police officers separately approached by this correspondent in the course of the procession.

May 5: According to a news report (filed by the Bombay Correspondent of the *Deccan Herald*) Congress-I leaders in the state were getting increasingly alarmed at the future political fate awaiting them and their party in the state, given the attitude of the government to the strike. It was also stated that the speaker of the state legislative assembly, Sharad Dighe, who was elected from a predominantly labour constituency in the previous elections, expressed concern over the prolonged strike in a private meeting with the chief minister and Shivraj Patil.

May 16: At a well-attended meeting of his union activists, George Fernandes painted

a highly-depressing picture of the strike. Millowners, the government and the RMMS, after having been proved wrong in their assessment that the workers would flood the mills soon after Holi, were now totally confident (so far as their public posture went) that with the annual marriage season coming to a close and with the schools re-opening in June, the strikers had no choice but to return to work.

According to the MGKU and the Lal Nishan Party, a large number of RMMS activists who had fanned out to the villages of Maharashtra during April and May were not given much of an audience and even received a thrashing in many cases. The two unions continued to be confident that the strike would carry on from strength to strength.

Fernandes, however, predicted in his meeting that the strike was quite likely to collapse by mid-June. "We have also led strikes, but have made a compromise rather than let it reach a point of fizzling out", said Fernandes, implicitly criticising Samant for not appreciating this basic tenet of trade unionism.

May 18: An "Indira Congress Workers' Action Committee" was formed by mill workers with Congress-I sympathies and led by Gajanan Loke and Dinanath Kamat. It suggested a three point formula to the prime minister, as a means of ending the strike:

- a) a high-level committee be set up by the Central government to examine the various demands of the mill workers;
- b) an interim wage increase of Rs.125 p.m. be granted to the workers;
- c) no victimisation of the workers for their participation in the strike.

May 20: Meanwhile, much to the total surprise of labour observers and union leaders Samant announced his decision to contest the parliamentary by-election from the Thane constituency. The Congress-I was fairly annoyed at this decision. Though certain that Samant himself could not win the elections, Congress-I circles were justifiably worried that he would nonetheless cut heavily into Congress-I votes and thus ensure the victory of the BJP

candidate, whose chances were even otherwise considered good. (The party's fears were fully borne out by the election results and the Congress-I candidate lost by a huge majority).

Whatever the political calculations, labour circles were far more concerned with the implications of the election results on the textile strike. No one could understand why Samant had chosen to commit himself to election campaigning while leaving the textile strike unattended. Moreover, if Samant lost the elections it would result in a massive demoralisation among the textile workers. Wasn't Samant then ensuring the collapse of the strike by a "foolish" decision guided by his "personal political ambition"?

Whatever the merits of Samant's decision, the fact remains that he got a large majority of the workers' votes in the election, but ended up third in the running.

Putshottam Parulekar, an employee of Estrella Batteries, Mahim, came to participate in the "jail bhato" at Azad Maidan on October 11. (The Daily)



Squeezed Between Looms

SHIVAJI GHADIGAOKAR, 46 years old, bespectacled and fairly well-built, left his village in Ratnagiri at the age of 11 and reached Bombay at the height of the Samyukta Maharashtra agitation in 1956. "Samitiwala garib ka bhala ka baat karta tha, ham ko bahut accha laga". Shivaji became an activist at a very young age and as a result he worked as baldi worker in Morarjee mills for seven years and then became permanent in the weaving department.

"I worked on only two looms in Morarjee, but had to work on four in India United. I worked hard in order to get permanency and landed up with T.B. He had to take injections for treatment daily for one and a half years, "par tabse ek dam first class hai."

In memory of the work he did amongst the hutment-dwellers of Sewri in 1964, as part of the Communist agitation to secure tenancy rights, the Sewri Jhopadpatti has been named Shivaji Nagar by its residents.

Shivaji was the first one in India United No.4 to welcome Datta Samant in.

"Kya bolega, kaam karne ko bahut haeta hota hai. Though the duty time is from 7 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., we have to come half an hour early to clean up the machines before work starts. Except for the half-hour lunch break, we have to work without any rest, standing up all the time and running around four machines. Hands, legs, mouth, eyes are all in constant exercise.

"Imagine keeping your eyes on the fine threads for eight hours a day. It is really very straining. Spectacles make work even more difficult with all the steam and the humidity inside. Because of my open and active involvement in the Communist union, the control on me is even more tight.

"I have to be quite careful. If the machine breaks, the head-jobber gives a big firing. It never breaks in the other shifts, he tells us. To the workers in the other shifts, he says the same thing!

"Chot to bahut baar lagta hai." Machines move very fast and are placed very close to each other. The picking stick knocks you on the elbow quite frequently as you are squeezing your way from one loom to another.

At times, when you are picking up one kandi (weft pirn) lying on top of the loom, another one falls on the cloth being woven. When you rush to pick it up, the shuttle can injure you badly. If you don't rush immediately, the thread can break and the needlesharp shuttle flies into another worker. On a number of occasions, workers have died because of this.

"Acchha, paisa kitna milta hai? Khali saat-aath saao (Rs.700-800) Socho jara".. After 25 years of service, only that much. That too not in hand. After deduction of loan repayment instalments etc., only Rs.350.

"Had to take a loan to marry my three younger sisters and two younger brothers earlier. Now, I have to send at least Rs.200 p.m. for my wife, parents and four children living in the village. I have to pay Rs.150 p.m. for food in the khanawall. I have to take loans regularly from the Pathans, and pay interest of Rs.10 per Rs.100 for one month.

"That is why we have brought Datta Samant. Why did I leave the red flag? Dekho... Dange taught us that the Congress party is never for the good of the workers. I will never forget that for the rest of my life, but Dange has forgotten. I left the party because of Dange's support to the emergency.

"Doosra baat. Our Communists make good demands, but finally settle for tiny sums and then try and tell us that it is a victory. We know from reading the papers that Samant never goes back on his demand. Also, he helps the striking workers with good rations which Communists have not done.

"Aur uska pass ladne ka himmat bhi hai. No, I am not saying Communists are bad. They are for the poor, but very ineffective. I will still not oppose them if they take up some activities for workers' good.

"Last mein ek baat aur samajh lo... We want to finish off the BIR Act and the RMMS from the mills. If we don't succeed with Samant, I don't think we will have a chance for another hundred years. The Government is determined to break our strike? We are also determined to see BIR and RMMS out.

- J.A.

If the election results demoralised the striking workers, it certainly did not show in any significant increase in attendance in the mills. The textile strike was none the worse either for lack of any input of time by Samant for almost a whole month or his defeat in the election.

May 28: Union labour minister once again reiterated that the government would appoint a committee to go into the demands of the workmen only after the strike was called off. He also added that a meeting of central trade unions was being called soon to discuss the textile strike.

May 31: Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale, issued a 15 day dead-line for restoring normalcy in the mills, but did not specify any thing further. Meanwhile, Prabhakar More, president of the Mill Labour Union, met Congress (I) leader, Y.B.Chavan, in a delegation and requested him to impress upon the Prime Minister the need for a quick settlement of the strike. Like Fernandes, More perhaps also shared the fear that the strike may fizzle out soon.

Samant announced the commencement of his earlier threatened "jail bhara" agitation "very soon".

May end/June beginning: Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale, after informal discussions with veteran union leader, S.A.Dange, Shiv Sena leaders and the millowners, announced that the textile strike had reached a "crucial stage" and expressed hope of a "sudden end" to the strike.

Meanwhile, Ramrao Adik, (finance minister in the former Antulay ministry, but out of the Bhosale government in June) initiated separate moves to find some means for a settlement. After an initial round of talks with various strike leaders, Adik airdashed to Delhi to inform the Prime Minister and the union finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee, about his progress. Adik told newsmen in Delhi that he found trade union leaders sincerely interested in an end to the strike and expressed hopes of an "honourable" settlement very soon. The Prime Minister was taking keen interest in solving the issues arising out of the strike, he added.

In Bombay, Bhosale told newsmen that while Adik was not holding talks with union

leaders in any official capacity, the initiative being taken by him was nonetheless welcome.

Adik returned to Bombay, held another round of talks with various union leaders, informally told newsmen that he even found Samant quite reasonable and said a settlement formula was in the making. The Millowners' Association when contacted by newsmen around the time made it clear that they were not happy with Adik's "interference". Upset with the "adamance" of the MOA, Adik told a newsman one evening that the then minister for shipping and transport and INTUC leader C.M.Steph was so annoyed after the "intransigence" shown to him by millowners in a meeting, that he was seriously thinking of advising the Prime Minister that the BIR Act be scrapped straight away, leaving the millowners to deal with Samant unit by unit.

Two days later, Adik on the one hand and Bhosale accompanied by the chairman of the MOA, Harishchandra Maganlal, on the other, separately airdashed to Delhi at the same time. Immediately after returning to Bombay the chief minister announced, "I am in full command of the strike situation" and asked Adik to keep off.

As mentioned earlier, millowners and the government were quite optimistic about workers trooping back to the mills in the beginning of June, what with the end of vacations, the end of the marriage season, and the reopening of schools. Why talk with the strikers at a time when the strike was in any case on the verge of collapse?

Even by June end, however, the strike showed no sign of collapsing, forcing the government and the millowners to change their tune somewhat for the first time after January 18.

At the annual general meeting of the MOA on June 23, Harishchandra Maganlal made the first significant concession to the strikers and to Samant. The MOA was now prepared for a reference of the workers' demands for arbitration before the Industrial Court under section 73 of the BIR Act. Normally such a proposition makes sense only if no agreement is possible between the recognised union (RMMS, in the textiles) and the management. Millowners were forced to take cognisance of the "illegal strike"

by the millhands after all and to that extent were ready to modify their "no truck with Samant" approach.

June 28: Madhu Mehta, National Convenor of the Hindustani Andolan, organised a press conference along with some 40 workers from a dozen mills who claimed to owe allegiance to different unions in the mills. A few of them even claimed that they were not members of any union.

In a written note handed out to the press, the workers stated that they were on strike primarily because "the leadership of the RMMS is thoroughly corrupt and has been exploiting the workers for the last 25-30 years".

The statement added that in response to the government's call all workers were prepared to go back to work even if their monetary demands were not conceded, "provided both the government and the millowners assure them that they would not negotiate with RMMS and they will start negotiations with the popular representatives of the workers in every mill".

The statement warned that in spite of "suffering unbelievable hardships for the last five months and more"...if the government and the millowners are going to ignore the corrupt trade union practices of the RMMS and insist that workers should first go back to work, workers are prepared to sacrifice everything to retain their honour".

The statement was signed by "the harassed textile workers of Bombay".

Speaking after the workers, Mehta wholeheartedly agreed with them that the RMMS leadership was "hated bitterly" by an "overwhelming majority of mill workers". He warned that if the government insisted on "spoon-feeding" the RMMS nonetheless and "workers are forced to go back to work due to economic compulsions their bitterness resulting from a humiliating defeat will create most unstable conditions in the industry" which would benefit no one.

He concluded by threatening that if the government failed to see reason, he would launch a signature campaign asking the workers to send in their mass resignations

from the RMMS. (It may be mentioned here, that at an earlier stage of the strike, Mehta had already started a campaign asking striking workers to sign a questionnaire. Not too many workers responded, but those who did emphasised their bitterness against the RMMS. Further having agreed totally with the strikers that their principal demand was for the derecognition of the RMMS, Mehta was to become party to a settlement formula two weeks later, which said nothing at all about the RMMS.)

By June end, with the prediction of workers' returning to the mills not materialising, the millowners and the government were desperate to find some peg, some "legitimate representative" of workers (not Samant of course!) to hang their offer on. The miniscule bunch of workers with Mehta became the "legitimate representatives" of workers with whom a settlement could be discussed.

July 5: Members of the consultation committee attached to the labour ministry and belonging to opposition parties took the government to task for its total callousness and indifference to the strike. In a heated exchange, one of the opposition party members even argued with the labour minister that if some offer was made to the workers and Samant still remained adamant it may help the government isolate Samant from the others. The minister denied the charge that the government was indifferent and claimed that it had been making efforts all along to end the strike. Immediately afterwards, Shivraj Patil rushed to Bombay for talks with the state government and the millowners.

July 6: The chief minister talking informally to newsmen in Pune said that the government was "seriously conducting negotiations for settlement of the strike" (As it would later turn out, the "negotiations" were confined between the government, the millowners, and the 40 odd strikers Mehta had provided).

July 8: According to one newsman, "negotiations" were held between the millowners and the "mill workers" at Mehta's residence one evening. The workers understood only Marathi and Hindi, but almost the entire "negotiation" was conducted in English and Gujarati! It was agreed at the meeting that

the millowners were willing to pay repayable advance of Rs.1,000 to workers "facing great economic hardship" to enable them return to work.

The chief minister had been kept in the picture about the formula in the process of being concocted. Only a few days earlier, Shivraj Patil had given his blessings to the proposal too.

Armed with the "irresistible" offer, the representatives of the MOA airdashed to Delhi with the chief minister, but only after the confidential agreements had been "leaked out" to the press that the millowners were giving advance to workers to resume work. (In matters such as this, the entire credit of solving the strike could not be passed on to the government alone!)

July 8: Textile workers in different parts of Maharashtra observed a one-day strike in support of the Bombay millhands.

In Bombay, 70 corporators of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, led by the mayor, marched to the Mantralaya, squatted in the foyer of the Assembly and refused to move out until an audience with the chief minister was granted. Bhosale was out of station, but the demonstrators refused to vacate despite requests from the minister of state for home, Shrikant Jichkar. The corporators, who also observed a day's fast demanding a settlement of the strike, courted arrest.

Samant warned that the earlier threatened "jail bhara" would be launched anytime after July 20.

On July 8 the strike completed 172 days, to become the longest ever strike in the history of the textile industry in India. Prior to this, mill workers had struck work for 171 days in 1928.

July 9: Just a few hours after the Bombay papers had carried the "leaked" report, the union labour minister announced a settlement formula in Parliament.

The formula consisted of an interim relief of Rs.30 p.m. to workers, and an advance of Rs.650 to be repaid in six installments after the first six months. The millowners

had earlier "dismissed" all the badli workers in the mills, but in their moment of "generosity"(!) all of them were offered their jobs back. There would be no victimisation, it was promised.

In addition, the formation of a National Tripartite Committee was announced to study the demands of the workers as well as the problems of the industry. The committee would give its recommendations on the demands of permanency of badli workers, house rent, city travel and leave travel allowances by Bombay mill workers, within a period of two months. Recommendations on the demand for wage revision, on the other hand, were to be announced within a year's time and would be applicable to mill workers all over the country.

Presumably, the government itself felt awkward and unsure of the workers' response to nothing more than the millowners' proposal of Rs.1,000 advance. Specially considering that the workers' of Ahmedabad have already got a house rent allowance of Rs.35 p.m. through a court order last year. Besides, after the millowners' "leak" to the press, it could be that the government wanted some credit for itself in the "settlement formula". Thus the amount of Rs.1,000 was finally split up into Rs.650 advance and an interim relief of Rs.30 p.m., which over the first year adds upto Rs.360.

The Committee which was supposed to submit its recommendations within two months on several of the demands, had yet to hold its first meeting till end October. (The lame excuse offered by the government for the delay was that the opposition trade union leaders had boycotted participation. But a similar boycott of the National Tripartite Labour Conference by these unions did not prevent the government from sitting together and coming to agreements with the INTUC unions and industrialists on major policies concerning labour which has been systematically opposed by opposition unions).

State labour minister, B.M. Gaikwad, tried to sell the proposal as a "major victory" to the workers, while the RMMS called it an "honourable proposal" which the workers should accept. Shivraj Patil made the comforting remark that the interim relief was "only a beginning" which the workers should accept and place full confidence in

the government for further delivery of goods through the committee.

Mill workers and strike leaders dismissed the formula as a "cruel joke" on the workers. Addressing a press conference on the day of the parliamentary announcement, the secretary general of the MOA, R.L.A. Vijayanagar, gave three "solid reasons" for his optimism that workers would come rushing back to the mills. He claimed:

- i) Thousands of workers were already waiting at railway stations in Allahabad and elsewhere in U.P. and Maharashtra to return to Bombay.
- ii) Of late there was a lot of movement in the mill areas, "which means workers are beginning to look at the mills again".
- iii) Most importantly, the strikers had exhausted every means of survival by now and had no choice but to return to work.

HERE, in this last argument, we have the key to this protracted struggle - the arrogance of power and property. While the workers' economic condition worsened as the strike progressed from month to month, nothing affected the standard of life of the politicians, the bureaucrats and the millowners. True, the reserves of the mills were getting rapidly eroded, but that surely was a "little price" to pay for "teaching the workers their due place". Besides, the public financial institutions were bound to step into the picture at the right time in any case.

The strikers challenged the arrogance of power of property with sheer nerve, gumption, audacity and determination. Whether Samant's tactics have contributed to the further protraction of the strike may be a good question to ask. Many union leaders (Fernandes, for example, who has been quoted earlier) would have rather called off the strike long ago "than let (workers) suffer this acute material deprivation". But it is important to ask how the striking workers themselves work out the balance between a full stomach and self-esteem and dignity. The MOA and the government have been arguing for months now that most workers would already be inside the mill, but for the acts of assault, intimidation, violence and the rest. Mill activists, however, still insisted that they would rather starve than give in to the blatant display of prestige and power from their opponents.

Vijayanagar's optimism proved to be wishful thinking once more. On the eve of the announcement, around 17,000 workers were back in the mills, according to the MOA. Three weeks later, on August 1, the claimed attendance was only 22,000 while on September 1 it was 26,400.

The parliamentary announcement marked the second climbdown of the millowners (and the first on behalf of the government), but it was just not good enough from the viewpoint of the strikers.



Smashed buses and littered roads after the "jail bhara andolan" of August 16. (The Daily)

July 12: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by its state unit and Bombay unit presidents, U.L. Patil and Ram Naik respectively, took out a demonstration of party workers to protest against the government's failure to solve the mill strike. All the participants were arrested as they defied prohibitory order. The party units also organised *dharnas* at various district and tehsil headquarters in the state.

July 15: Veteran trade union leader of the Socialist Party of India, S.M. Joshi, held a meeting with the Prime Minister, asking for her intervention in the settlement of the textile strike. Mrs. Gandhi was

understood to have told Joshi that the government was not rigid on the strike issue and was prepared to have a dialogue with the strike leaders. This was followed by a letter to the leaders of the Trade Unions' Joint Action Committee (TUJAC) in Bombay from the union labour minister, Bhagwat Jha Azad. The letter said that the government was willing to meet the union leaders in Delhi to clarify the intent and content of the July 9 announcement.

TUJAC leaders met in Bombay to consider their response to the letter. Samant himself did not come to the meeting but was represented by his elder brother, Dada Samant. Several of the participants suggested that the unions could use the "clarificatory" meeting to explain their point of view to the government and try and push open a dialogue towards a settlement. This line of reasoning was felt to be judicious by many, since they were not quite sure how long the strike could be continued. It is even claimed by some that the union government, while offering only a clarificatory meeting on paper, had informally expressed its openness to consider alternative proposals by the union leaders.

Dada Samant it seems was agreeable to the proposal, but when a reply from the union leaders was drafted to Azad's letter, Samant refused to sign it. The parliamentary announcement he argued was totally clear and totally unacceptable. The workers' have no faith in committees which take endless time and therefore the government should express its readiness for negotiations before meeting. The union was and is prepared to meet anybody anytime, to discuss the demands and to explore negotiation possibilities but no "clarification" meetings are necessary, he argued. Leaving aside the government, many of the TUJAC members found this attitude of Samant "too intransigent", though the Sarva Shramik Sangh argued that Samant was well justified in his stand.

Samant's apparent "intransigence" was however, motivated, possibly, by certain behind the scene developments. According to a senior spokesman of the MGKU, there had been meetings between Pranab Mukherjee and Samant before the announcement was made. Samant, it was claimed, had told

Mukherjee that his union would give serious consideration to an interim relief offer on the condition that the RMMS was derecognised or the BIR Act scrapped.

Having nonetheless made a unilateral decision, Samant assessed that there was little point in a meeting so soon after the announcement as the government's attitude could not have changed. Samant also hinted several times that some of the TUJAC members were "chickening out" of the struggle and was therefore wary of placing himself in an awkward situation in a joint meeting with the government.

Whatever the case, the latent tension within the TUJAC surfaced into the open after Azad's letter, even though all the unions publicly continued to play down their differences.

July 18: The strike entered its seventh month. Though the legal position was not quite clear, many newspapers reported that the RMMS was in danger of "automatic derecognition" if the strike completed six months. Even the chief minister warned the RMMS, through newsmen in Pune, to be "cautious, otherwise it might get derecognised under the standing rules".

Amongst the many ploys invented by the millowners to frighten the strikers into submission, there was talk of the mills being shifted out of Bombay. Several newspapers swallowed this propaganda onslaught of the millowners and carried alarming headlines, but the workers were not moved. Whatever else, the chief minister made it clear through his Pune statements that the mills would not be given permission to move out of Bombay.

August 18: Several thousand mill workers, led by Samant and the president of the Sarva Shramik Sangh (SSS) participated in the "jail bhara" agitation and courted arrest at Hutatma Chowk. The "satyagrahis" were taken in specially requisitioned state transport buses to the Azad Maidan police station and later released.

Samant claimed that the police were not interested in detaining the workmen. Consequently, he told the "satyagrahis" that they could disperse since the union's purpose of expressing their protest was

served and there was no point in a confrontation with the police.

Later in the evening, a few thousand workers owing affiliation to the CITU, AITUC, HMS and BMS unions in the mills took out a separate procession and courted arrest at Chowpatty. The police released them as well.

At the end of it all, the minister of state for home tried to imply that the striking union leaders and workers had chickened out, and did not really want to court arrest. Therefore, the police had let them go. Samant protested against this official interpretation of the "jail bhara" agitation but before he had time to react, the agitation of policemen that broke out on August 18, took the city by storm.

August 18: The Bombay police, including the armed constabulary, struck work on August 18,

in protest against the sudden midnight swoop and arrest of several leaders and activists of the police sanghatana. Havoc was let loose in the city and by 10 a.m., suburban train services were totally disrupted. By noon over a 100 BEST buses and even private cars, taxis and trucks were smashed and a few set aflame. The city came to a total halt. The army had to be called into the streets of Bombay for the first time in post independent India.

In the utter chaos that prevailed, striking mill workers, who were peaceful by and large for seven long months of the strike, gave spontaneous vent to their pent-up emotions. Acting on their own decisions, scores of workers ransacked the houses of the RMMS president and general secretary, V.R. Hoshing, and Bhai Bhosale, respectively, and also that of the Congress(I) MLA, Bhaurao Patil, who was a member of the high power committee set up by the Antulay government.

Workers from different industrial units led by the leaders of the TUJAC, marched from August Kranti maidan to Chowpatty on August 16. (The Daily)





August 18: An army patrol at Bhaurao Patel and Vasantao Hoshing's house. Both leaders of the RMMS felt the fury of the textile workers who took advantage of the police riots. (The Daily)

None of the three persons concerned were at home when the workers arrived. Wives, children and other occupants in the houses were left untouched, but after the riots had finished, their houses looked as if a hurricane had been unleashed. The workers made away with some of the property and much more of it was ripped apart, rendered useless and ruined beyond repair.

They even attempted to put Hoshing's house on fire, but the neighbours rushed in to put it out before it got out of control, it was reported. In the B.D.D. Chawls and in parts of Prabhadevi, grain, grocery and pawn shops were raided for two days running. Groups of mill workers even tried a forced entry into the mills but succeeded in only one case, where the timekeepers' office was pulled apart.

The police agitation was under control by the evening of August 20, but the city remained tense till the end of the month.

September 6: On the opening day of the monsoon session of the state assembly, the RMMS held its first ever public meeting in an open space since the beginning of the strike. A few thousand loyal workers, many of whom had been brought by trucks, assembled at Hutatma Chowk to protest against alleged assaults on loyal workers and to demand government action to put an end to the strike.

Nearly a week later, INTUC contingents from different industries, descended on the city to express their support to the RMMS. (Incongruous as it may sound, amongst the many slogans shouted by the INTUC demonstrators on the occasion was "Inquilab Zindabad").

The Deputy Registrar of Trade Unions requested the Bombay High Court and was granted additional time till November 4, to complete his enquiry on the MGKU demand for the derecognition of the RMMS. When the writ petition was filed by the MGKU in

May, the High Court had emphasised that the verification of membership should be completed speedily, "as far as possible, within 8-10 weeks".

For the first time since the strike started, Shiv Sena chief Bal Thakeray called a workers' rally at Kamgar Maidan, Parel. Aside from formally announcing the end of the Congress(I) - Shiv Sena alliance, which was already known, the Shiv Sena wanted to sense the mood of the workers and, luck permitting, lure them back into the Shiv Sena fold.

The leader of the Shiv Sena's Girni Kamgar Sena in the mills, Datta Salvi, spoke first. He praised the "historic struggle" of the mill workers, lashed out against the RMMS and the Congress(I) and swore that the Shiv Sena "whose very raison d'etre is the betterment of *Marathi manus* (Maharashtrian people)" was fully behind the just struggle of the mill workers "most of whom are *Marathi*".

Having established the credentials of the Shiv Sena with the mill workers, Salvi then criticised Samant in passing and then handed the mike to Bal Thakeray.

Of course the Sena was with the mill workers, said Thakeray, but the workers must decide whose side they really were on. Claiming that he would have long delivered justice to the millhands had they remained under the Sena banner, Thakeray, however, made the "comforting" announcement that it was still not too late to make amends.

Denouncing Samant for having completely destroyed the life of the millworkers through the protracted strike, Thakeray invited the workers to desert Samant's union, rally under the Sena banner and see sweet justice knock on their doors in no time.

The only outcome of Thakeray's speech was to provide additional emotive charge to the MGKU rally held the next evening at Nardulla Tank.

In fact, both the chief minister and Thakeray, deserve some credit for their own peculiar, but useful contributions to the strike. Each time they opened their mouth, they helped increase the workers' determination.

(As union leader, R.J. Mehta, stated in the course of a conference, everytime Bhosale predicts a fizzling out of the strike, he contributes to added worker morale. Similarly on the few occasions that Thakeray tried to demonstrate his love and concern for mill workers, the workers rallied with even greater vigour under the MGKU banner).

At the Nardulla Tank rally, all the speakers lashed out furiously at Thakeray and the "Sena's pretence of sympathy" with workers. An aged woman mill activist came on to the dais wanting to speak. The mike had to be snatched away from her when in her emotion charged state she started getting abusive against Thakeray.

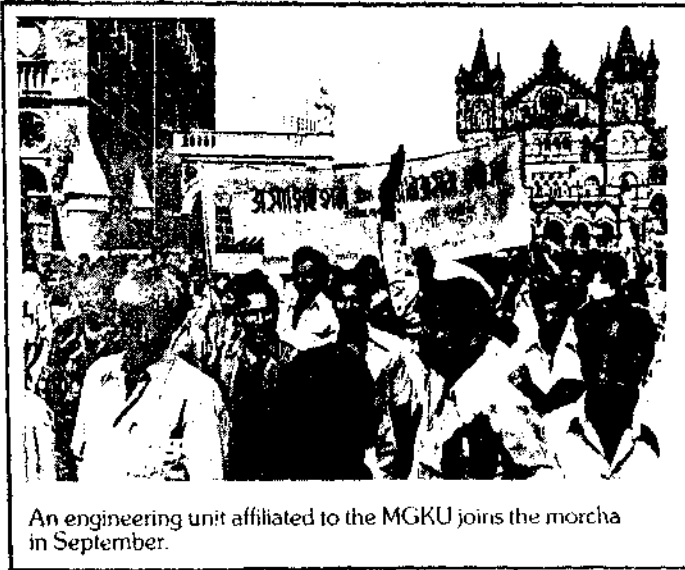
(Restrained from expressing herself, she sat near the dais in an extremely agitated state for the rest of the meeting. Nearly an hour later, Shramik Sangh's Chavan got up to speak and said that the woman concerned should not misunderstand why the mike was taken away from her. We know that every worker is extremely upset with the Sena, he said and everyone shares your anger and agitation. As Chavan spoke the woman began sobbing uncontrollably).

Decrying the government claim that the strike leader and workers had chickened out of their threatened "jail bharo" agitation, Samant announced that the intensification of the agitation, which had been postponed for a while to diffuse the tension in the city following the police agitation, were to be revived after another "massive" workers' rally at Hutatma Chowk on September 16.

September 16: The rally did indeed turn out to be the biggest rally of workers ever in the city. Also the whole atmosphere was intensely tension-charged.

Much before the workers marched out of the Azad Maidan, following some altercation between a group of workers and a police officer, a section of the workers suddenly started stoning the police, injuring a few of them in the process. Union leaders immediately rushed to form a protective cordon in front of the policemen on duty to prevent any further stone-throwing.

The police officer in-charge on the occasion, DCP, M.N. Singh, was in a different spot. A lathi-charge on the demonstrators



An engineering unit affiliated to the MGKU joins the morcha in September.

would almost certainly have escalated to a point where the police would need to open fire if only to save its own skin. Even if the opening of fire were to succeed in dispersing the crowd (after casualties on both sides), the dispersing workers were bound to let loose their anger in some other part of the city.

Singh warned the leaders of the consequences if the stone-throwing or any other "untoward incident" were to recur, and then let the leaders themselves handle the excited workers from then on. That was just as well, since any one who was witness to the demonstration could testify there was no way the police could have kept the demonstrators under control.

Before addressing the rally Samant went to submit a memorandum to Bhosale and was told once again that the "pro-labour" government assured justice to workers through the tripartite committee. In the meantime, workers were well advised to call off their agitation.

Samant came back to announce a two week long "jail bhara" starting from the next morning, to continue till October 2. If there was still still no budging in the government stand and a "fair settlement" of the strike, he threatened to follow-up the agitation with a

"massive" state-wide "jail bhara" and an "indefinite utpadan roko" (halt production) by several lakh workers from Samant's unions immediately after October 2. Samant claimed that at least one lakh workers would court arrest before October.

As it happened, only about 10,000 workers courted arrest before the deadline. Several thousand- strong demonstrations would gather each day at the announced "jail bhara" spots, but only a small section would court arrest.

* * *

The limited response to the "jail bhara" was quite understandable. Large numbers of the strikers could survive the protracted strike only because they had managed to find themselves all kinds of odd-jobs.

Mill workers worked as construction labour, taxi drivers, casual labour in small industrial estates, fruit and vegetable vendors, gardeners, porters, polish-wallas, etc. Most of these jobs fetched the workers daily wages much less than what even the mills paid. To any person prone to converting all considerations into their cash value, the "irrational behaviour" of the strikers made absolutely no sense whatsoever. In the villages, workers who had gone back to the villages for the strike period, worked in the rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) of the state government, where wages received were not even one-third of what the least paid worker got in the mills.

"My dear man, go and find out the agony of the strikers," a prominent union leader in the city (not connected with the strike) told me soon after the strike began. "Tell me what sense you make of the three month long strike of 25,000 workers for a little additional bonus? Even if they get some extra bonus, they have already lost three month's wages to get it. Calculate the monetary gains from such an idiotic exercise yourself and find out what the workers have to say now".

I did some quick calculations and met workers who had been on strike since end October.

"You won't understand a thing, if you try and understand our struggle from a *bania's* (shop-keeper's) point of view," is what all the workers I met told me in their own different ways. "This is not an everyday strike, we are fighting for a new future. Not only for ourselves, but for the coming generation. Our fate is completely sealed with the RMMS as our union. Even if we do not

get a rupee extra, after six-eight month's of strike, but succeed in throwing out the RMMS, it would have been worth all that we undergo."

"Yes, what about the fact that we are in a bad economic state. When were we prospering in any case? How come no one came to ask us how we were living all these years? We were doing badly all along, now we are doing worse. But the strike will go on."

I went back to the union leader who had asked me to find out from the workers and told him what I'd been told. He said nothing.

But perhaps the craziest thing of all has been the decision of a section of the strikers who reportedly have been working in the powerlooms in Bhiwandi (in neighbouring Thane district). It sounds crazy, not simply because the full-swing working of the looms during the strike period have partly ensured an absence of cloth famine in the country or the region. Many of the millowners have simply taken recourse to purchasing powerloom cloth, processed it and then sold it off in the market as "processed by....". The average brand conscious purchaser of cloth does not quite know what he has bought.

A wholesale cloth dealer confided that the quality of the powerloom cloth is nowhere near the mill cloth produced by some of these mills, but the difference would become apparent to the average consumer only after a wash or two. By the time the consumer complains, it is hoped that the mills will once again be producing their own cloth, he added.

Be that as it may, the fact is that striking workers found one means or another to keep their families surviving through the strike. If they courted arrest, as "state guests", their personal requirements of food would be no problem. But the family members could find themselves in the soup as a result.

Understandably therefore, while thousands of workers joined the spirited demonstrations

before the courting of arrest near different mills between September 16 and October 2, not all of them courted arrest. It is not clear whether Samant had taken this factor into consideration before giving the call, and if he had, whether he was actually serious about one lakh people courting arrest. However, through the course of the agitation, the MGKU clearly did not try to do any mobilisation to gather volunteers for the "jail bhara".

The government and the millowners made no comment on the fact that 10,000 workers volunteered to court arrest during those two weeks (unlike August 16, the arrested workers were remanded into jail custody for two weeks, perhaps owing to the fact that the union had called upon the workers to repeatedly court arrest if released by the police). They did not fail to point out, however, that the "jail bhara" programme was a "big flop" because the claimed one lakh people never courted arrest.

* * *

October 2: At yet another huge rally of workers held at Shivaji Park on Gandhi Jayanti Day, Samant announced a "jail bhara" programme on October 11 and a three-day "utpandan roko" starting the same day. This time, workers from industries all over Maharashtra that owed allegiance to Samant's unions were to participate in the "jail bhara". Along with that mill workers and lakhs of workers were to put down their tools for three days.

Mill workers who had courted arrest on September 17 and were later sent to jails in different parts of the state were released and brought back to Bombay on October 2. The "satyagrahis" insisted that they should be brought back straight to the union office or to the park itself directly so that they could participate in the rally and in the "jail bhara" which was earlier expected to start on October 3 itself.

In some cases the "satyagrahis" cajoled their bus drivers to rush the workers to Bombay non-stop for 15 hours and over in order that they came in time for the rally.

Samant-supporting workers were to court arrest at 7-8 different points in Bombay, as also in Thane, Kalyan, Nasik, Lonavala, Tarapur and Aurangabad.

October 10: The minister of state for home, Maharashtra, told a reporter of *The Daily* that this time the 'jail bhara' programme would "not be a joy ride". The meaning of his threat became clear the next day when, without provocation in many cases, the police let themselves loose on the volunteers.

October 11: The authorities had clamped Section 144 all over Bombay (as also in other places where the "jail bhara" agitation was to take place). Samant had called upon the workers to come out in the open and defy even curfew orders, if imposed, in order to court arrest.

At the same time, however, he had emphasised to them that the agitation must be totally peaceful and the workers should not protest even if the authorities tried to detain them in schools or open places converted into makeshift prisons.

The intelligence wing of the police, however, anticipated violence, based on two assumptions. Firstly, it thought that this was the last ditch battle by both Samant and the strikers. Secondly, it drew its own conclusions from the tension charged workers' rally of September 17 and increased their reports of the alleged "intimidation" of loyal workers.

It is some comment on the facilities of the intelligence gathering wing of the state not to appreciate the fact that Samant was nowhere close to any desperation, nor was the workers' morale ebbing, notwithstanding the fact that a section of the strikers, in desperate straits, were returning to the mills.

To give only one example of Samant's state of mind on the eve of the new phase of agitation, between midnight of October 10, and the early hours of October 11, he talked of the next day's programme as if it was just "one of those things".

"This massive arrangement that the government has made for tomorrow morning. What if we made an announcement now postponing the agitation by two or three days?" asked Samant and everyone present in the union's Ghatkopar office burst out laughing. "If

I were the government, what if I announced last minute that Section 144 is being withdrawn?"

For the rest of the time, he jocularly recounted before his audience how he had dodged the police for twenty hours last year, just before the Shivaji Park rally which was broken-up by the police. Samant himself was arrested under the National Security Act when he reached Shivaji Park. "I wasn't bothered about getting arrested. The more they arrest, the more popular I and my union becomes with the workers. But I decided I might as well make the police sweat a bit before they got to me".

Samant could afford to be in a jovial mood because he was sure of an overwhelming worker response and also because he had no idea of the government's calculations. When asked a few days before how he could be so sure of a good response from workers in different industries, Samant gave a one-line answer, "There is a massive increase in the consciousness of the workers."

The intelligence wing of the police had made a wrong statement, on the one hand,



even assuming that the demonstrators would be peaceful, it didn't quite know what to do with thousands of workers courting arrest in any case. On the morning of October 11 therefore, it adopted the simple stratagem of arresting a few and dispersing the others by force.

Samant and Yashwant Chavan of the Sarva Shramik Sangh were to court arrest after a meeting at Azad Maidan. The police however cordoned-off the maidan and picked up small groups of workers just as they came out of the Victoria Terminus station.

A group of mill workers, including women came from the Lalbaug area to court arrest at Azad Maidan. They were expected to do so in front of Morarjee Mills in Lalbaug. "We have come here to court arrest because the police lathi-charged us at Lalbaug after just filling up four-five buses," some of them complained. They even showed bruise marks and cuts that they had received in the course of the lathi-charge.

Just as they were going to enter the buses, one of the activists told them that Samant (who had not yet arrived) had asked the workers to stay put till he arrived. The workers delayed entering the buses and the police lathi-charged. Few buses were in sight at the time of the lathi-charge, but soon after a huge row of buses came to be parked outside the maidan.

The buses lined up at Azad Maidan were clearly part of the propaganda stunt of the government. Bombayites converge into the city area during the morning hours for work. If many of them had seen there were more buses than workers courting arrest, it would make it simpler for the government to give credibility to whatever it wanted to say later in the evening.

Elsewhere in the city, thousands of workers who had collected in different parts of the city were lathi-charged after a few buses had been filled up in each place. At Sakinaka however, the workers got the upper hand. Presumably not expecting much response from the area, only a handful of policemen along with a mere five buses were present. The over five thousand crowd of workers who assembled there got excited when the police asked them to disperse after filling up the five buses. Heavy stone-throwing resulted.

Samant who had courted arrest at Azad Maidan was taken to a police station along with the few hundred workers who had courted arrest with him. Later Samant was remanded to 15 days judicial custody and sent to Nasik jail. The rest of the workers who had courted arrest at Azad Maidan as well as other parts of Bombay were all taken to the Aarey Milk Colony, Goregaon, where a make-shift, open prison seemed to be in the making.

The police claimed that the workers suddenly turned riotous and they had no option but to resort to a lathi-charge. The workers claim that the whole scene was a frame-up and the police just lashed out at the workers, the moment they started demanding water and food.

Whatever the case, the fact remains that scores of workers were severely hurt, including about twenty of them who fractured their limbs. The union claimed that many of the injured workers did not go to the hospitals for treatment for fear of further police brutality. At the end of it all, Chavan and well over a hundred workers were arrested on charges of riot, arson, attempt at murder and so on.

October 11,12,13: Even by government admission, nearly 1.5 lakh workers had stayed away from work for all three days. The union claimed that over 4,000 large and small industrial units remained shut. While exact figures were difficult to collect, independent reports pointed out that at least 2 lakh workers struck work and the consequent loss in production was a minimum of Rs.25 crores during the three days.

In protest against the police repression on the workers, industrial units with CITU unions all over the state struck work for one day on October 13. Nearly one lakh workers under the CITU banner participated in the solidarity strike, claimed CITU leaders.

October 21: The strike in eight of the city mills completed one year.

October 23: With Samant still in jail, three central ministers - Pranab Mukherjee (finance), Veerendra Patil (labour, replacing Azad) and Shivraj Patil

(commerce) - descended on the city for marathon talks with chief minister Babasaheb Bhosale, finance minister Ramrao Adik, labour minister B. Gaikwad and a few other prominent party leaders.

Before returning to Delhi, Veerendra Patil, in an interview with a city paper "hinted" at the government considering offering additional interim relief to the strikers to lure them back to work. Others present in the meeting confirmed the "hint" given by Patil, and added that even the scrapping of the BIR Act was discussed, which could open up the possibility for talks with Samant.

The meeting ended with some kind of a stalemate between the hard-liners in the party and the soft-liners. The hard-liners vehemently argued that any credit given to Samant was fraught with consequences for the industrial relations climate as well as for the Congress(I). The strike in any case was fizzling out and there was therefore, no need for any talks with Samant.

The soft-liners did not accept the argument that the strike would just fizzle out with-

out coming to some understanding with Samant. They argued for an additional interim relief on a graded basis. The additional interim relief to the workers should vary between Rs.50-100 p.m., depending on the financial condition of the different mills. Talks with Samant were suggested and even the scrapping/staying of the BIR Act was discussed.

The only thing the soft-liners and the hard-liners seemed to be agreed upon was their apprehension on the consequence of any settlement to the future of Samant's union. The soft-liners were prepared to face facts and take a pragmatic view, but the hard-liners tried to stick to their guns. Shivraj Patil and N.M. Tidke (state industries minister and former labour minister) were the chief spokesmen of the hard-liners, while Pranab Mukherjee, Ramrao Adik and Murli Deora were the chief proponents of the soft-line.

A day later, even Bhosale told newsmen in Sangli that the government was making every effort to settle the strike to the "satisfaction" of workers before Diwali (November 16). He did not even rule out possibilities of talks with Samant.



Workers participating in the "utpadan roko andolan" in October raise their hands in support of the textile workers.

Was Samant contacted by the Congress(I) state government circles while he was in Nasik jail? No one would confirm it, but it appears certain that some emissary of the party had met Samant at least "informally". When office-bearers of his union visited him in jail, Samant was in very high spirits and had hinted to his lieutenants that some approach from the government could not be ruled out.

In fact, Shivraj Patil himself was to meet Samant at a hotel in Bombay on October 9, but the former changed his mind at the last moment.

Only a few days earlier in Parliament, Patil had stuck to the earlier government stand that the strikers must resume work and await the recommendation of the tripartite committee. The "jail bharo" and "utpadan roko" agitations to start from October 11 had already been announced. Patil presumably feared that if the news of his meeting Samant on the eve of the agitation got to the press, it could mean an embarrassment to the government.

October 25: Samant was brought to Bombay from Nasik, presented before a metropolitan magistrate and ordered released. Immediately after his release, Samant addressed a small rally of workers waiting outside the police station. He condemned the police repression on the workers on October 11, but at the same time struck a conciliatory tone vis-a-vis the government.

In a departure from his earlier public statements, Samant placed the question of the scrapping of the BIR Act on top of his list of demands, followed by the demand of permanency of *badli* workers. He added that the union was and is prepared for a "fair" settlement hinting that the union would not insist on all its demands being met.

October 27: Ever since the formation of the Shiv Sena in 1965, the Shiv Sena has organised every year a *dassera maitri* gathering at Shivaji Park, where in the tradition of Shivaji, important announcements are made by Thakeray. Only rarely has an outsider been invited to the occasion

This *Dassera* however, the rally was jointly addressed by Thakeray as well as former chief minister of the Progressive Democratic Front government (during the Janata regime), Sharad Pawar and George Fernandes. While formally announcing the birth of the new Congress(S)-Lok Dal-Shiv Sena alliance, the three leaders issued an ultimatum to the government and to Samant to be "reasonable" and to settle the textile strike within seven days.

Failing such a settlement, the new alliance would directly intervene to find a settlement, the leaders claimed. Thakeray had already announced the new alliance on October 22. The leaders claimed that it was a measure of their significance that within 24 hours of the announcement of the alliance, three central ministers had come rushing to Bombay to find a settlement of the strike. This was a good propaganda bluff, which evoked applause from the *sainiks* gathered for the rally. But given their experience of the strike, it is highly doubtful if the leaders themselves believed what they loudly claimed.

The ultimatum, however, provided added excitement to the rally which the MGKU had called the next day. Following press reports about an early settlement, after talks with Samant, and the likely scrapping of the BIR Act, attendance in the mills as claimed by the MOA, dipped by over 4,000. While 46,100 production workers were said to be back at work on the day the central ministers reached Bombay it came down to 42,100 it was admitted ("Only 1,000-1,500 of these would be new recruits who are now sufficiently trained," said an MOA spokesman).

October 28: An unusually large number of mill workers attended the rally at Nardulla Tank to repeatedly applaud Samant's warning to the alliance leaders to keep their hands-off the textile strike. He threatened that neither mill workers, nor lakhs of other workers in Samant's unions would tolerate the alliance attempt to introduce their "politicking" into the textile strike.

October 30: Bhosale told a pressman that the new settlement formula could be announced within the next day or two. Meanwhile, Bhosale and millowners had rushed off to Delhi to hold talks with general leaders and got back to Bombay for further bilateral

talks keeping Samant out of the picture. Shivraj Patil reached Bombay on October 30 and there was a two-hour long meeting between the government and the millowners.

It was already clear from the Delhi meeting, that the strong stand taken by the millowners had strengthened the hands of the hardliners within the government. The non-invitation of any of the soft-liners to the meeting in Bombay on October 30 was enough indication to observers that, at most, some paltry offer was going to be palmed off as a new settlement formula.

October 31: Five dissident MLAs of the Congress(I) and one MP jointly addressed a public meeting at Shirodkar Hall and squarely condemned the hard-liners in the government for their "anti-labour" stance which was doing incalculable damage to the image of the party in the state. As an aging Congress(I) leader present in the meeting aptly put it, "why should the entire party and party workers in the state have to pay for the sins of the RMMS"?

Evidently, the open defiance of party discipline by the dissidents was motivated not so much by their over-powering concern for the mill workers, as by their disgruntlement with inner-party wrangles. That however, in itself did not invalidate the legitimacy of what they said at the meeting, as many loyal and senior Congress(I) leaders within the party themselves confirmed.

The growing anti-Congress(I) feeling particularly amongst the working class in the state has been a matter of serious alarm to a large number of Congress(I) leaders. Their fear has only been so much more aggravated in view of the coming elections to the Bombay Municipal Corporation, due in early 1983.

October 31: "I have time and again expressed my deep anguish at the acute hardship caused to mill workers because of the prolonged mill strike," the chief minister told a crowded press conference. To relieve workers of their acute hardship and himself of his "deep anguish" the chief minister generously announced an additional advance of Rs.850 to mill workers if they resumed work. Nothing more! Many of the press people present could believe their ears, but that was that.

When contacted for their responses to the "new formula" just announced, the millowners stated that the proposal is "worth considering" (as if they had not been a party to the formula just the previous night) and next afternoon announced their "acceptance" of the formula.

To make the offer seem more generous than it actually was, the government and the millowners tried a clever trick. The bonus payment due for last year (which the millowners were legally bound to pay in any case) was announced as a part of the new formula and it was stated that millowners could be asked to pay the bonus "immediately".

The interim relief amount of Rs.30 p.m. and the advance of Rs.650 was to be paid to workers on condition that at least 80,000 workers reported back on duty. The government and the millowners now revised their stand to state that those who had reported for work would also be paid an interim relief amount (with effect from July 1), irrespective of actual attendance in the mills.

The package deal, it was proudly announced would mean a minimum of Rs.2,500-2,700 to each worker to help him "forget the bitterness of the strike and to enjoy the sweetness of Diwali", if only the workers would "see reason." What the government and the millowners did not talk about was that the workers were being robbed off their non-returnable dues, to be paid in returnable advance.

For the accounting year 1980, the bonus amount declared to mill workers ranged between the minimum 8.33% and 17.66%. This year, except for two mills, all the others will pay only 8.33%. The saving from bonus payment is thus being generously offered as an advance to the workers.

As was only to be expected, Samant flatly rejected the offer, calling it an "insult to the workers". Quite appropriately, the dissident Congress(I) MLAs and party workers who observed a day's token fast to protest against government indifference to the strike, displayed a placard which read "the textile workers have not been on strike for 10 months for a mere loan from the government".

Labour observers pointed out that by their

"absurd formula", the government and the millowners had unwittingly ensured that the strikers resolve remained unaffected. Had the government announced the additional and graded interim relief it was contemplating, but kept the BIR Act and the RMMS untouched, it may have created some confusion for the workers and Samant. Since nothing in effect was being offered except an additional loan, Samant and the workers had little difficulty in rejecting it.

November 5: The Additional Registrar of Trade Unions, S. Bhattacharjee, finally announced her verdict: there was no case for the derecognition of the RMMS.

According to the BIR Act, a recognised union must have at least 25% of the total workforce as its members (which means 56,250 members presently). If the membership falls below this number for three consecutive months, the union stands to lose its registration.

While the RMMS had claimed a membership of 1,07,392, 92,011 and 77,809, respectively, for the months of December (1981), January and February (1982), the verified membership for these months based on the membership receipt counterfoils turned out to be 38,281, 18,032 and 1,116 respectively.

Nonetheless, the RMMS escaped derecognition on account of a benefit of doubt,

leaving the union swinging precariously by a slender legal thread.

Section 15, sub-section-2 of the BIR Act stipulates that the "registration of a union shall not be cancelled under the provision of this sub-clause unless its membership (for the calendar month in which the show cause notice under this section was issued) is less than such minimum".

The membership fee records for the month of May, 1982 - the month in which the show cause notice was issued - shows 9,593 members. The union, however, went on to argue that it was not in a position to collect the fees from all its members on account of the economic hardship of the mill workers consequent to the strike.

The Additional Registrar held that but for the exceptional circumstances prevailing, the RMMS may well have been in a position to recoup its membership and therefore needs to be given a benefit of doubt.

Whether such a benefit of doubt granted to the RMMS would stand scrutiny in a court of law, which the MGKU proposes to appeal to now, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, however, the RMMS continues to manage to hang on, while the government and the millowners are making desperate bids to woo and coerce the workers back into the mills before Diwali.

Employment in Mills

The textile mills which were first established during the 1850's, represent the development of the first modern industry in India. This is why it is often referred to as the "mother industry" of the country.

According to the latest figures, 12,49,000 workers are employed in the textile industry in India, of which 8,31,000 work in the cotton textile mills. In Bombay there are 60 mills, of which 47 are privately owned and 13 are state-owned (with the National Textile Corporation and Maharashtra State Textile Corporation.)

The private mills employ an average 1,36,812 workers, while the state units employ another 28,314. In addition,

there are estimated to be 1,00,000 workers in the "badli" (substitute) workers pool.

The table below gives figures of employment in Bombay mills over the years:

Year	Workers employed
1884	39,716
1910	1,02,275
1939	1,45,691
1947	2,05,491
1961	2,08,000
1980	1,65,126

Modernisation on a large scale in recent years has led to massive retrenchment. For every 100 workers employed in the mills in 1961, there were only 88.2 in 1970 and 83.7 in 1980.

The millowners also started a massive propaganda offensive through newspaper advertisements, posters and direct contact with workers to somehow get them to accept their latest offer. Mill officers, along with RMMS activists were reported to have been sent to rural Maharashtra with buses to convince the workers to return with them.

The government on its part was alleged to be using the police to conduct large-scale arrests, intimidation and harassment of worker activists. Over 400 workers were claimed to have been arrested on November 7 and 8 alone on "false charges".

On November 8, the MOA claimed an attendance of around 44,000 production workers in the mills, still 2,000 less than the earlier claim of maximum attendance of 46,100 workers on October 22.

Senior government bureaucrats, and Congress (I) leaders in the state are themselves convinced that not more than 60,000 workers will be back in the mills before November end. That would still leave over 1.7 lakh workers (over 70% of the workforce) still on strike. Evidently the government has damaged the political prospects of the party in the state. Many of them are also quite uncertain as to whether the Additional Registrar's verdict in favour of the RMMS will hold in the courts.

For the moment, the hardliners in the party, backed by the intransigence of the MOA have had the upper hand. By all indications, a majority of the strikers will hold out at least till the end of 1982, if not further. Will the pragmatists within the government intervene if the attendance in the mills does not improve drastically by November end? If the court rules against the Additional Registrar's verdict would it tempt the strikers and the strike leaders to resume work and continue the battle from within? Or will the unparalleled struggle of the mill workers under extremely pressing material circumstances, finally fizzle out? Only the events in the coming months can answer these questions.

* * *

The nearly 300-day-old strike has already resulted in a whopping production loss of Rs.1,000 crores in the "Year of Productivity". "Textile India Progress", an

industry magazine, has estimated that if the repercussions of the strike on the textile machinery manufacturing industry, the dyes and chemicals industry, the hotel and transport industry and other enterprises related to the mills are taken into consideration, the economy has suffered a loss of Rs.4,000 crores and the strike has affected the livelihood of 15 lakh people.

More mandays have been lost on account of the textile strike than the all-time national high of 43.86 million mandays lost due to strikes and lock-outs in 1979.

Belying every calculation, both the mill workers and the millowners have shown an unbelievable tenacity in trying to outlast each other in this unprecedented war of attrition. The intransigence of the millowners is understandable even if surprising—given their long-term interests which are at stake. The unmoving determination of over two lakh workers, however, has few parallels in the history of the working class movements the world over.

Acute material deprivation is only one of the hazards the workers have had to face right through the strike. The imposition of prohibitory orders preventing the assembly of workers and picketing near the mills, intimidation, harassment and beating of striking workers by the police, detention of the prominent activists and office bearers of the MGKU under the National Security Act (in none of the cases, could the grounds for arrest hold the scrutiny of a court of law), the threat of a permanent closure of mills as well as the threatened shifting of mills outside Bombay, show cause notices and dismissal orders, to thousands of workers, the threat of eviction of strikers from their residential quarters in cases where these were provided by the managements, all these methods have been tried from time to time to frighten the workers into submission. Nothing, however, has helped.

Would the government and millowners have behaved differently, if they had any inkling of the mood and morale of the workers when the strike started? Equally significantly, would they have taken a different stance if a union leader other than Samant were to be leading the strike? Would another union leader have been able to sustain a strike for so long? Would he have allowed the strike to continue, con-

sidering the acute economic deprivation of the workers?

From all the pronouncements made by the government and the millowners so far, it is evident that the demands of the strikers have weighed as heavily with them, as with Dr. Samant.

But from the establishment's point of view Samant simply has had to be contained and it matters little if two lakh mill workers have chosen him as their leader. The concessions that the determination of the workers may have otherwise wrested from the millowners and the government have been rendered more difficult to secure because a gain for the workers necessarily implies an added impetus to the "Samant wave".

Irrespective of which way the strike now ends, it remains to be seen whether the government and the millowners actually succeed in keeping the "Samant wave" in the mills, as elsewhere, under check.

The implications of Samant's leadership of the strike is itself a subject matter for detailed study. Paradoxical though it may sound, Samant has contributed enormously and yet insignificantly to the strike.

It is commonly agreed that the textile strike is a unique example of workers' self-determination, short of which no union could have sustained such a marathon struggle. It is equally evident, however, that the strike could not have lasted even for a few months if it had been led by some other union leader or even if it had been a totally spontaneous form of protest by the mill workers.

The workers have undoubtedly been very much on their own with little help from Samant and his union in terms of ideas, strategies, programmes or material support. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Samant has acted as an agency which has concentrated, re-charged and even amplified the determination of the workers to accept no paltry compromise. Also the solidarity extended to the mill workers by the Samant-affiliated unions in the Thane-Belapur belt has been an important source of support.

Undoubtedly, the issues at stake in the strike are such that it would be idle specu-

lation to suggest that victory to the strikers could have been ensured easily.

Many other unionists have, however, criticised Samant on two counts and these cannot be easily dismissed. Because the strike has dragged on for so long the workers have suffered so much materially that even a substantial gain now would be barely enough to recover from their losses. It is argued that once it was clear that the government and the millowners were as adamant as the workers Samant should have struck a compromise and asked the workers to prepare for the next round of battle in a year or two. Would the workers have accepted such a compromise though?

Once again a complex set of strategies were called for to continuously apply pressure on the government and the millowners to concede ground to workers. Samant, however, seems to have relied on the simple strategy of keeping the workers out of the mills thereby hoping that the millowners and the government will buckle under such pressure.

Irrespective of how the strike ends, what cannot be denied is that the workers have jolted both the government and the millowners out of a deep slumber which had resulted in the large-scale obsolescence that characterises the industry today. Large-scale modernisation in the coming few years will therefore be an inevitable outcome of this protracted strike.

If the strike fizzles out and the workers return to the mills demoralised, the millowners are bound to take advantage and resort to large-scale retrenchment (as a precursor to modernisation) without even paying any compensation.

If the workers, however, return to the mill victoriously, they will be in a position to substantially determine the course of modernisation so that it is of maximum advantage to them. Substantial compensation to workers willing to retire from the mills for their own reasons, combined with significant improvements in wages and working conditions for those remaining behind could help bring the textile industry and mill workers at a par with the rest of modern industry in India.

— Javed Anand



Force And Counter-force

A report from the front



AS THE MOST protracted textile strike in India moves into its tenth month (in eight mills the strike enters its twelfth month), 'Girgangaon', as the mill area of central Bombay is known, wears an increasingly embattled look. The roads and railway stations of Parel, Curry Road and Worli, normally crammed with workers at shift time, are deserted in the afternoon. Instead, the unaccustomed void is now filled in by patrolling police vans which ply around the mill areas and blue SRP trucks full of card-playing cops in front of every mill.

No smoke rises from the towering chimneys and as the huge steel doors of the mills are shut under seige, so are hundreds of chawl tenements in the area padlocked, for at least a lakh of striking workers have made their way back to the villages to eke a living off the land during the strike.

In the fierce battle that rages on till today, the textile worker is sticking to his guns. He has long surpassed his holding capacity; yet he knows that if he returns to work without a settlement,

he will have to kiss the dust for the next ten years. The worker also knows that the strike is not merely the concern of the striking 2.25 lakh textile workers. The entire working class of the city has been drawn into the struggle, and the strike has become a national issue. The fate of hundreds of strike or lockout bound companies in the city are dependent on his strike since a victory in the mills will mean a quick settlement; a defeat there would further erode the position of other agitating workers. Meanwhile, the millowners and other company managements in the city are also watching the course of the strike with tense impatience. For they know that if the textile workers win, Bombay's working class will never be the same again.

Because of this situation, the state, its police force and the administration, has intervened on behalf of the millowners to crush the strike. Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale and other state ministers have adopted the stance that the Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union or Datta Samant does not exist, and if the strike is carrying on, it is because of Samant's musclemen who have "terrorised" the workers. The

Blacklegs being escorted out of Century Mills.



government has maintained that the RMMS (Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh) is the officially recognised union under the BIR Act and the negotiations will only be carried out with it. Therefore, the current strike is illegal and must be suppressed.

TO CRUSH THE STRIKE, the government has unleashed a two-pronged attack. On the one hand, it is attempting to overawe the workers and break their morale by a massive use of force. On the other, it is rendering every assistance to the millowners to restart their mills. The police stations in the central Bombay region, where most of the mills as well as mill workers' residences are located, are almost completely on anti-strike duty and have standing orders to deal with mill workers forcefully. Again, almost all of central Bombay from Matunga to Byculla is under partial curfew. Prohibitory orders do not allow any procession or protest action in this area, while the vicinity around each mill has been placed under Section 144, since February 3, banning assemblies of more than four persons.

Almost every morcha and other forms of protest adopted by workers has had to face brutal lathi charges. On July 18, mill workers thronged in thousands to gherao Congress (I) MLAs. At Prabhadevi a large contingent was mercilessly lathi charged when they refused to change course and continued to head towards the RMMS's president Vasant Hoshing's house. Later, on July 30, another morcha which had marched to the Mahim police station to protest against goonda attacks with police collusion on two strike activists, was set upon by lathi-wielding police even as the women were peacefully squatting in front of the police station.

A common method of harassment and intimidation being resorted to by the police is to pick up mill workers at random from the roads or public meeting spots. Once in the police station they are detained for a few hours, administered a few slaps, threatened with dire consequences if they do not report for work, and then let off. Sometimes, for good measure, some fraudulent charge is also foisted on the workers - like carrying a dangerous weapon - to ensure that he has to face

the further burden of constant court appearances. Harassment to break morale may also take the form of denial of cooperative loans and cancellation of ESIS (Employees State Insurance Scheme) medical facilities. A rather crude attempt at tempting the workers back was to offer free books to the children of those workers who returned to work.

SIMILARLY, another tactic to break the workers' strength is to put the militant workers and their leaders behind bars for a sufficiently long spell, thereby hoping to create chaos among the mass of workers left leaderless. The police believes that most of the workers are violent because their leaders are instigating them. Thus a policy of reprisal has been followed for every act of violence or mass agitation which cannot be pinned down to any particular groups of persons, the known leaders are rounded up and made to pay, whether they were involved or not.

The secretary of Century Mills, Shirke, was arrested when workers of his mill stoned a busful of strike breakers. When he secured a bail order from the Dadar P.S., where he was interned, he was re-arrested on charges of robbery by the CID! Once in custody, he was beaten continuously for three days and denied bail for three weeks. Similarly, Singh, the secretary of Prakash Cotton Mills, was arrested when workers resorted to a 'rasta roko' near Worli on June 4 even though he was nowhere on the scene. He too was kept behind bars and beaten continuously for 15 days.

Those workers who cannot be pinned down on any particular charge but are considered to be sufficiently 'troublesome' have been locked up under the NSA (National Security Act), under which about two dozen leaders have already been arrested, including two of Samant's most militant office-bearers Budhbadkar and Talekar. (According to a report in *The Times of India* of September 24, Budhbadkar was released on September 23, after being detained for five months). Most of these arrests have unfortunately remained legally unchallengeable even though the charges are insubstantive. For example, Mohan Patil of Jam Mills was arrested under the NSA as, according to the police, he was involved in two cases of "rasta roko" and has also been accused in a case of "blade slashing".

He is thus considered to be a "threat to peace in the area". Rajaram Ambre, secretary of Standard Mills, however, had only "provocative speeches" in his record for classification as "dangerous" and therefore requiring NSA internment.

Finally, those who have been able to evade arrest have either run away to their villages or are being forced to lie low. In both cases they are prevented from being in a position to guide the course of the strike.

TORTURE, too, has been used as an instrument to break the resistance of the activists and to extract the names of their associates. Narayan Pandurang and two other young workers of the Madhusudan Mills were strapped on to blocks of ice and beaten. Uncooperative workers have been known to be dangled on the *dharamkanta*,

A "daroga" and watchman guard the gates at Century Mills.



an iron bar on a beam passed under the shoulders on which a person's arms are strapped.

As mentioned earlier, state-sponsored repression of activists and on agitations has been only one half of the government's efforts to break the strike. The second part of the state's strategy has been to render all possible help to the mill managements to begin operating their mills. Besides repeatedly appealing to the workers to reject their leaders and return to work, the government has provided wireless van escorts to all buses and trucks carrying blacklegs to the mills. Massive police bandobust in the mill areas and protection to sword-wielding RMMS goondas has also been part of the government's efforts to overwhelm the striking workers' efforts.

Yet these tactics of the police and the government seem to have failed. The Mill-owners Association has claimed that more than 30 mills are working and that nearly 25,000 employees are reporting for work. But, besides clerical and cleaning work, cloth production has been minimal as most of those who report for work are officers, a few clerks and the technical staff. Apart from providing fictitious figures, mill managements are known to sound their shift sirens regularly and to burn cotton in their furnaces to work up smoke in their chimneys to show that their mills are working. Lately, the mills that have been able to restart partial operations have discovered to their dismay that the produce being turned out by the inexperienced hands which have been herded in is sub-standard and is often rejected by buyers. It is learnt that Century Mills has had two large consignments of cloth, one for the army and the other for umbrella manufacturers rejected.

ONE REASON for the success of the present strike as compared to the strikes in 1966 and 1974 is that unlike before, every department, including the clerical, supervisory and technical staff have joined the strike simultaneously with the workers. In fact in earlier strikes, almost 40 per cent of staff belonging to the auxiliary departments had continued to work, adversely affecting the morale of the striking workers.

In the present strike, the strategy of the millowners and the government has been to bide time and stagger opening up the mills department by department as workers trickle back to work under threat or out of desperation. Workers brought in from outside have also been inducted to restart work but this strategy has failed to deliver the desired results. Century Spinning is the only mill which has managed to restart all its shifts, and that too because it has been the focal point of the joint efforts of the RMMS-millowners-government combine. This was done in anticipation of a general snowballing effect on the other mills. Once again this strategem has evidently failed - the increase in the work force is only marginal in most mills. Earlier, it had been expected that the pressure of mill workers' children re-joining their schools in June would result in a collapse of the strike. This hope too remained uncherished.

Significantly, in mid-June after the visit of the textile secretary to Bombay, it seems that Mrs. Gandhi decided that if necessary the interests of the textile industry would be sacrificed since a victory for such a large section of agitating workers would be disastrous in this officially-proclaimed "Year of Productivity". There is also the possibility that any concessions to the striking workers might be interpreted as a sign of weakness of the government thereby setting off a chain reaction in other core sectors. Such a likelihood balks the government and large industrial houses, who therefore advocate stringent action against this "illegal" strike.

Chief Minister Bhosale's opponent Ramrao Adik had began negotiations with Dr. Samant and other trade union leaders. Fearful that Ramrao Adik may be successful in working out a solution to the stalemate Mr. Bhosale saw to it that Mr. Adik was given no official recognition. There was, therefore, no way out of the impasse. Currently, the government strategy is based on slowly forcing the strike to fizzle out, after which perhaps some face-saving settlement will be negotiated with the RMMS. This would yield favourable results to the government in as much as (i) it would deal a severe blow to the working class movement and (ii) it would ensure the survival of the RMMS.

All this prevarication has taken its toll on the striking worker. With hunger in his stomach and hatred in his eyes, he is desperate. He has watched the ineffectiveness of the RMMS for the last ten years. During this strike particularly, he has watched the RMMS filling bus loads of blacklegs and escorting them safely into the mills, either with state-sponsored police chaperones or gangs of hoodlums who have been hired by the millowners.

Because of the role the RMMS has adopted no union is hated more than the Sangh. The way the workers look at it, the millowners and the government are a natural enemy, but the Sangh is the enemy's representative among the workers and it is the enemy's agent attempting to break the workers' collective strength by organising the collection of blacklegs.

Free grain being distributed to mill workers.



The textile worker has also been able to recognise that the police is the immediate representatives of the Indian state. He has seen how arrogant and brutish sub-inspectors have pulled down his union tent at the gate of his mill. At morchas the police have beaten him with lathis. The CID has hounded him at home while flocks of plainclothes men are sent to spy and foil his plans. Everyday the worker sees the armed police escort taking in blacklegs, and everyday he clenches his fists burning for revenge.

AS THE STRIKE proceeds, the spontaneous violence of the young workers is getting more intense and organised in the shape of reprisal and warnings against those who are recruiting blacklegs. Those who ignore these warnings and continue to report for duty, are doing so at their own risk. Karande a blackleg, of Spring Mills was stabbed to death. Twenty technical staff members were gravely injured when their bus was attacked with bombs and acid. Two among them have succumbed to their injuries.

A "bharti" notice displayed prominently outside Century Mills.

सेचुरी मिल
 निरवाड (सर्नर) अुम्मीदवारों की
 भरती चालू है।
 अपने मिल में कार्डिन. ग्राउन. वरिडिन. टारडिन.
 कपडा. प्रोसेसिंग और फोल्डिंग खाने में निरवाड
 (सर्नर) अुम्मीदवारों की भरती करने के लिये अपनी
 मिल की तरफसे निरवाड. अुम्मीदवारों को काम
 निरवाने की एक 'थडक' योजना चालू है।
 इस योजना में निरवाड. अुम्मीदवार को एक
 महिने में काम निरवाया जावा है। काम निरवाने
 के लिये अनुभवी शिक्षक रखे गये है, जिससे
 अुम्मीदवार के समय और पैसे की बचव होती है।
 निम्न लिखित योग्यता वाले अुम्मीदवार
 मिल में आकर व्यक्तिगत सुबह 6-00 से 10-00
 बजे तक संपर्क करें। (1) शिक्षा 10 वी कक्षा, (2) आयु
 18 से 25, (3) स्वास्थ्य - कुन्दरुस्त। प्रशिक्षण काल
 में अुम्मीदवार को कंपनी के योजना के अनुसार
 पाठ्य धेतन दिया जायेगा। कृपया आते समय
 जाधमें स्कूल सर्टीफिकेट लेकर आये।

Despite the attempts by the CPI, CPM and some MGKU leaders who want to ensure a peaceful agitation, independent protest programmes are being converted into militant anti-police actions. For example, at Worli on June 4, nearly 1,000 workers defied the pleas of union leaders of CITU etc., and fought a pitched battle with the cops in which at least a dozen police officers were injured. Traffic was closed for nearly three hours on the highway and no BEST bus in the area was left with its windowpanes intact.

We can now turn to the question of examining the leadership provided by the MGKU and the other unions who had formed a joint action front at the commencement of the strike.

Throughout the strike, the central MGKU leadership has provided very little guidance to the workers and has preferred spontaneity to any thoroughgoing organisation of campaigns and other agitprop. Besides the once-a-month mass meetings or morchas, no day-to-day programmes have been chalked out. As a result, for most of the workers it has been a passive strike more akin to a "sit-at-home" situation, than an aggressive display of solidarity. Bereft of any active participation, many workers have got demoralised and left for their villages. The MGKU leadership has thus been guilty of dampening the militancy of the workers. As a case in point, time and again youthful militant activists are told not to "indulge in violence" as it is feared that this will lead to the arrest or harrassment of the central MGKU leaders.

Attention must be drawn to the 'left' union activists who have played a particularly sordid role in the course of the strike. Not only have they fought shy of militancy, but have openly

propagated against it. At meetings they are known to call upon workers to regard the police as their friends and have repeatedly made hysterical appeals to the workers to betray those elements who are allegedly 'provoking' the workers.

Unionists who have spoken to Dr. Samant say that he fears that excessive militancy of the workers will lead to his arrest, leaving the movement without a key figurehead. Such a situation, if it arises, would leave a clear field for the BJP and the CPI et al to take over leadership, which is something he would like to avoid.

In such a situation, characterised by a bankruptcy of active leadership, the workers, especially activists who operate at the mill-level, have been developing their own forms of organisation and independently planning attacks and counter-attacks on management personnel and strike-breakers. After assembly outside each mill was forbidden under Section 144 from February 3, areawise independent mill committees have emerged in Parel, Worli and Sewree.

Apprehending trouble after the violence displayed on June 4, Dr. Samant delayed the earlier "jail bhara" agitation twice before finally giving a call for this form of agitation on August 16. While it attracted massive participation involving nearly 30,000 workers yet the younger workers came away demoralised when the police refused to jail them turning the agitation into a bit of a farce. Also, the insistence on a 'peaceful satyagraha' by the MGKU left them deflated.

To add to these problems, since August, a lot of tension seems to have erupted between the MGKU and the other constituents of the joint action front. When the strike had begun the CPI and the CPM were evidently sceptical and had predicted that it would quickly peter out. However, once the strike gained momentum, they cautiously began supporting it and pushed for a joint action committee. Out of all the left parties only the Lal Nishan Party (LNP) had supported the strike and the MGKU right from the start.

The LNP's textile front, Kapad Kamghar Sanghatna (KKS), had merged its funds with MGKU and quit functioning as a separate

organisation, but stopped short of legal merger. While the KKS could claim some support amongst workers, the CPI and CPM unions were almost defunct when the strike started. Thus, it was surprising that, given the almost overwhelming support among textile workers for the MGKU and the opportunistic behaviour of the CPI and CPM, Dr. Samant agreed to form a joint action committee with the constituents of the National Campaign Committee of trade unions, which included the BJP.

As the strike proceeded, the 'left' unions demanded a greater participation in the strike and equal rights in a final settlement, which Dr. Samant refused to accede to. The participation of the BJP in the action front has a touch of black humour. While BJP activists cried themselves hoarse in support of the workers, RSS activists secretly tried to coax the striking workers back to work. When Dr. Samant heard of this, he expressed the desire to ask for the expulsion of the BJP from the front.

The CPM too has played a rather ambiguous role within the strike. It began by criticising Dr. Samant, but with its evident inability to offer a concrete alternative programme, this merely worked towards demoralising the workers. Later, it also began to circulate membership forms independent of the MGKU. Both these moves were fatal errors. Already unpopular and considered as opportunists and weak elements, workers refused to allow CPM activists to criticise their leaders. Some area committees have in fact banned them from entry into their zonal meeting spots and have declared that they do not recognise the action committee any more.

In mid-August, some All India Communist Party (AICP) and CPI activists in the Kalachowkie Cotton Green Mills' committee tried to initiate Mr S.A. Dange's efforts at resolving the impasse. Besides these incidents which seemed to threaten his direct control, Dr. Samant found that workers enrolled with the MGKU were being taken for morchas and programmes organised by these parties without his knowledge.

By the second week of August, the rift in the joint action committee was a yawning gap and it seems almost certain now that Dr. Samant has decided to function inde-

pendently. The joint action committee is presently defunct, meetings are being conducted directly under the MGKU banner and significantly, the call for the 'jail bhara' programme on August 16 was given by Dr.Samant without consulting the constituents of the joint action committee.

August 31, 1982

(The following section on mill committees was added by the author, who takes into account developments till mid-October 1982).

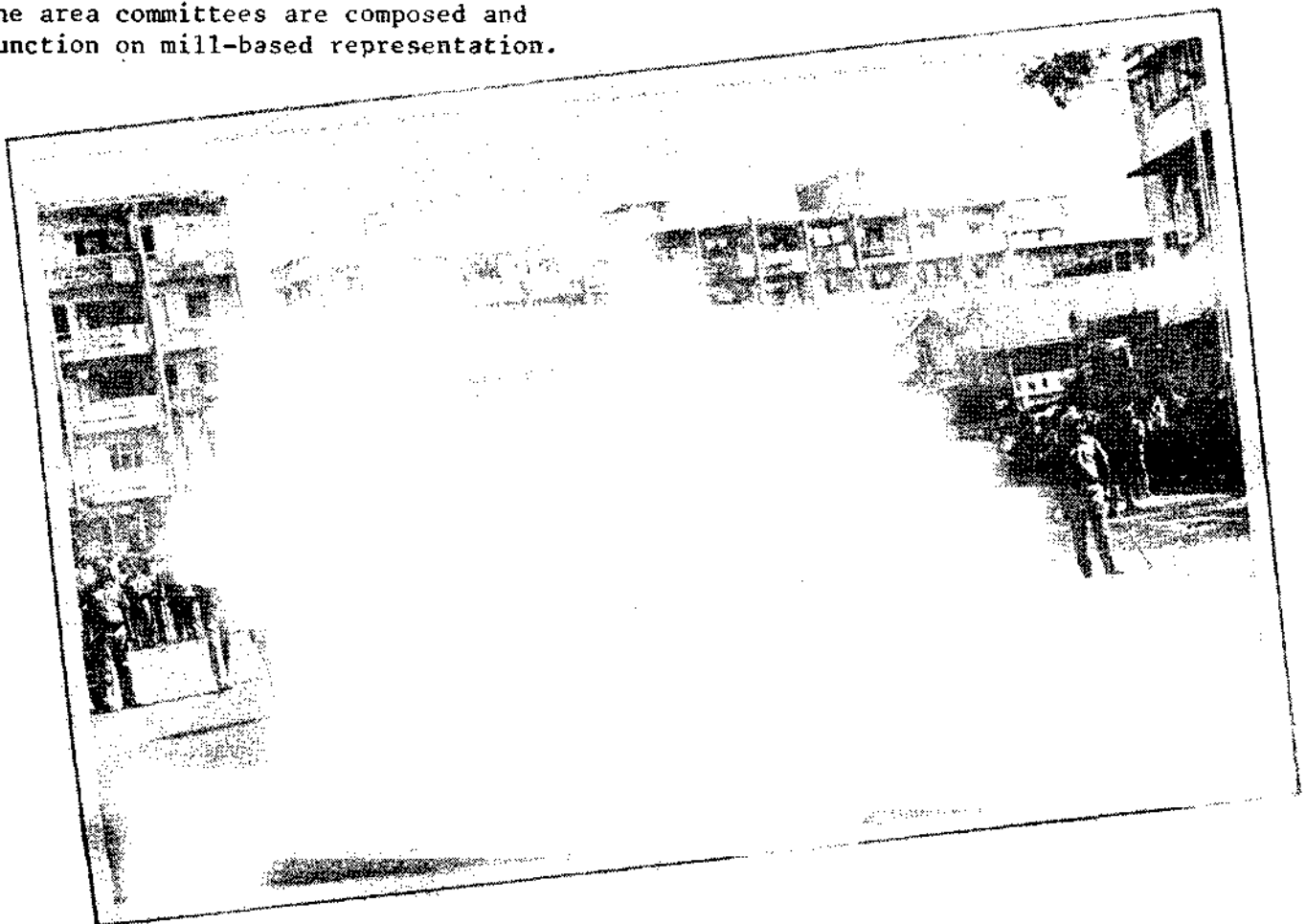
The formation of these cannot be placed in time, nor were they pre-planned by the union. They just "grew up" to meet the needs of the situation.

At present, there are at least six functioning area committees and a number of locality-based committees. After the ban on assembly and meetings in front of mill gates, the need to meet, disseminate information and to mobilise for the programmes of the union, was the chief motivating factor behind the development of these committees.

The area committees are composed and function on mill-based representation.

However, no formal elections were ever conducted to form these committees. Yet they are popular as they are composed of the most assertive elements of the mill workers who have been berthed on such committees. An ineffective or unpopular committee member will soon find himself "replaced" not by any formal 'no-confidence' vote but by someone more assertive and popular who rises up on the basis of his performance in an atmosphere of dissent.

Such informality has naturally led to loose functioning and each committee's future has been almost wholly dependent on the strength of the immediate leadership. Thus the Deslile Road committee which met at 'Shivakripa' maidan grew to be the most assertive because it had a number of experienced unionists, who made it a point to conduct daily meetings, keep attendance registers and take out regular morchas. Since this twelve-mill committee posed a serious threat to the police and administration because of its militant nature, the police, after the August 18 riots, banned the assembly



of workers at 'Shivakripa', thus causing a setback to the work of the committee.

The six-mill 'Ramdoot' committee, which met at Supari Bagh (below Ramdoot buildings) near Bharat Mata Cinema, similarly was a strong committee, which had a number of Lal Nishan activists in it.

The functioning of the Worli eight-mill committee was more haphazard, but its mobilisation was equally strong because of the strength of the individual mills. The Sewree, Kalachowkie and Jacob Circle committees are not that strong, meet less frequently and are constantly afflicted by abdication of leadership by the older elements fleeing to their villages.

Over the many months of the strike, these committees have evolved to become the main contact point between activists and the mass of workers. Through regular, sometimes daily meetings the leading activists held, convey the decisions of the union and the discussions held at the central office. Mobilisation for the central programmes of the union is also handled by area committees.

Besides, local morchas, public meetings and sometimes grain collection drives are

also organised by these committees. While distribution of money has been chiefly executed by the central office, distribution of donated grain, collection of membership forms and other administrative work which involves direct contact with the workers has been handled by the area committees.

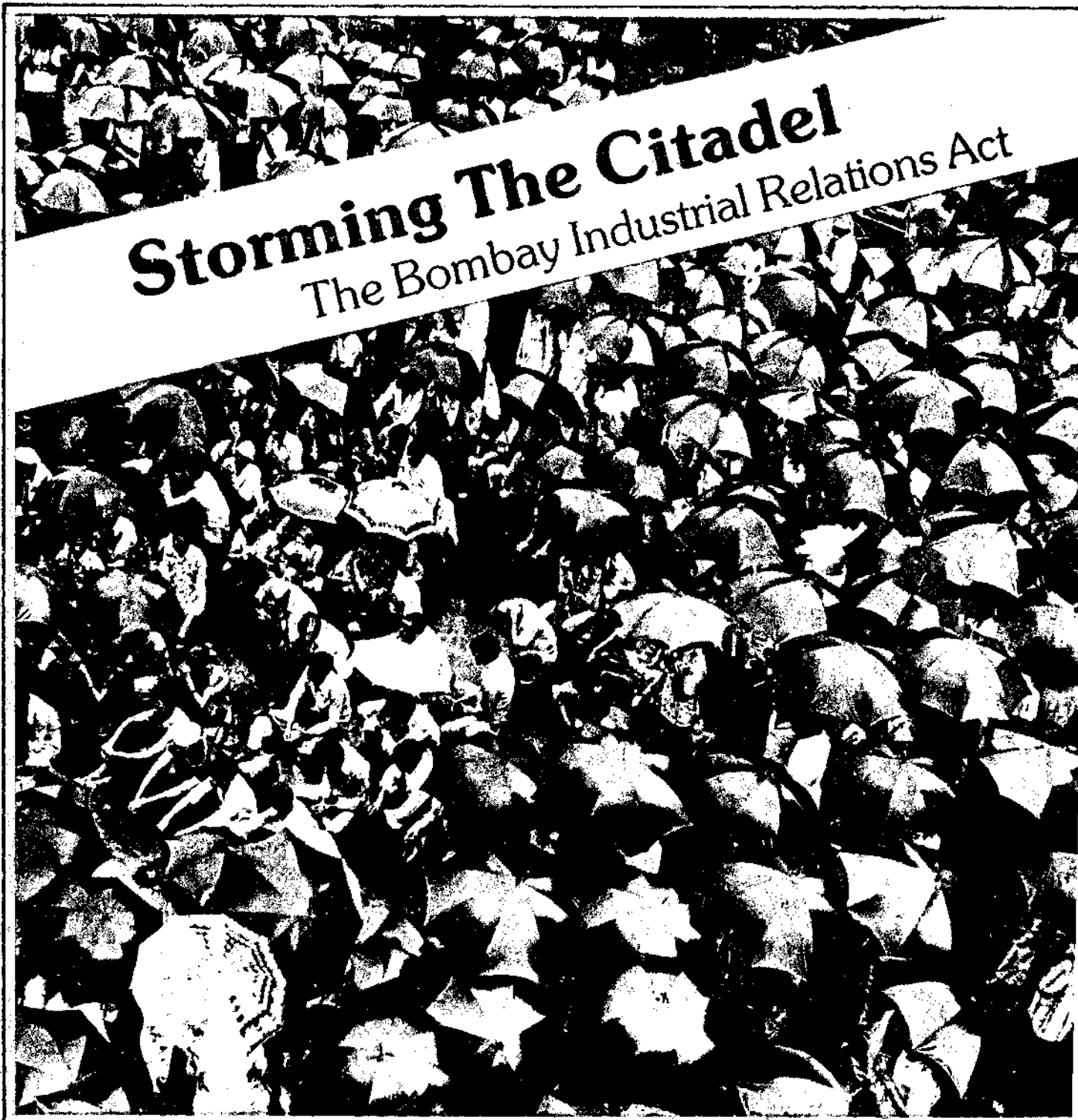
Apart from the jockeying for power within these committees among the various members, the main contradiction that has emerged during the strike has been the disputes between the younger militants demanding stronger action and the older leaders with a RMMS past. In the beginning it was the militants who found themselves slightly isolated and suppressed; but as the repression of the police worsened, the older sedate elements often acquiesced to the younger lot and sometimes even lost leadership to them.

Right now, however, with the police having gone on a rampage after the announcement of the 'utpandan roko' programme, the fate of these committees is in limbo. With most committee members arrested and all assembly of workers inviting brutal lathicharges, the question being asked is: will the area committees be able to regroup and function or not?

— October 15, 1982

— Gurbir Singh





Storming The Citadel

The Bombay Industrial Relations Act

The strike of the textile workers assumes greater significance when we realise that the work force of the cotton mills represents the oldest, the most organised and, perhaps, the most militant proletariat in the country. (Courtesy: The Daily)

An analysis of the factors that contributed towards the enactment of the BIR Act, in the light of the known militancy of the textile workers, and an outline of its repressive nature.

IN THE RELATIVELY short span of ten months, the striking textile workers of Bombay have compressed more than 35 years of history, thereby encapsulating an era marked by the predominance of the RMSS (Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh) and the aegis afforded to it by the shielding BIR (Bombay Industrial Relations) Act.

The ongoing strike is pregnant with history, for it threatens to herald the demise of the framework of industrial relations instituted during the optimism of pre and post-Independence. And perhaps later in history, the years 1945-82 will be viewed as an aberration in the fabric of trade unionism in the mill industry of Bombay.

When the present strike began in January this year, few would have thought that the time was near for a dramatic turn-of-events. As the struggle has got more prolonged and intense, however, the apparently primary economic demands for which the strike was called have been transcended. The central issue at stake is no longer a wage or a bonus demand, but one that is far more troubling to the millowners and the government - the derecognition of the RMMS which has been the sole bargaining agent for the agitated body of 2½ lakh textile workers since the end of World War II.

Even though this demand is neither exceptional nor unique - the majority status accorded to the RMMS has long been a bone of contention - the doggedness of the pursuit that we have witnessed during the year is certainly distinctive. Armed with the hindsight of history we can take cognizance of the fact that the year-end will hopefully bring to culmination, a series of events in the cotton textile industry of Bombay which were sparked off by the enactment of the BID (Bombay Industrial Disputes) Act, 1938.

The strike of the textile workers assumes greater significance when we realise that the work force of the cotton mills represents the oldest, the most organised and perhaps, even the most militant proletariat in the country. The present situation thus bodes ill for the industrialist and the government since it threatens the interests of every labour-intensive industry, particularly those that evolved during an earlier colonial period and are today on the brink of obsolescence, take for instance the jute industry of Bengal.

THE FIRST DECADE of the 20th century witnessed an upswing of organised protests, caused by the entry and the growing

influence of the communists who began unionising textile workers under the Red Flag.

The first World War had caused a boom in the Indian textile industry, but unfounded financial expectations led to over-capitalisation which soon degenerated into a slump by 1924 when world-wide trade conditions returned to normal. A serious economic crisis set in by 1930. The Bombay mills now began to lose their foreign markets to Japan and began facing stiff competition from the up-country mills.

In order to rationalise production, the millowners introduced a number of new production and marketing schemes which amounted mainly to a reduction in man-machine ratios, resulting in retrenchment on the one hand and increased workloads on the other. Moreover, wages for the newly-defined work units were standardised which meant reduced earnings for some categories of labour. The introduction of these measures, therefore, provoked a wave of labour unrest which possibly accounts for the upsurge of trade union activity in these years.

WRITING ON THE WALL: A sketch on the boundary of a mill vividly illustrates the worker's attitude towards the millowners and the RMMS. Here, a RMMS tough and a millowner join hands to squeeze profits out of a worker.



By 1928, the hold of the communists over the textile mill unions was strong enough to lead a strike-wave in which more than a hundred thousand workers stayed out of the mills for a period of six months, hitherto the lengthiest strike in the industry.

The growing strength and militancy of the "Lal Bauta" unions (with a membership of over 65,000 workers by 1929) was fast-becoming a thorn in the side to both the colonial administration which abhorred the "communist menace" as well as to the millowners, most of whom were intimately linked with the leaders of the nationalist movement led by the Indian National Congress.

FACED WITH a situation where the entire workforce of the city was in the hands of the communists, the Congress had to evolve an alternative move in keeping with their political philosophy and one that was opposed to the militant class-struggle approach advocated by the communists. The entry of M.K.Gandhi into nationalist politics in India in 1927, and his almost total control over the INC by 1935, ensured that his class-collaborationist beliefs in trusteeship and paternalism became the stated policy of the Congress vis-a-vis the working classes of the country. Already these Gandhian notions were being translated into practice through the establishment of the Bharat Sevak Sangh and its working class front-the Mazdoor Mahajan in Ahmedabad. It was through these organisations that Gandhi and the Congress hoped to realise their aspirations of charitable employer-employee relationships.

In this quest, they had the support of the industrial bourgeoisie constituted by the Tatas, Birlas, Walchands and the Modys amongst others, who were nearly equally split between being supporters of the British government and staunch nationalists. It was the latter, particularly, that started apprehending the dangers emanating from the working class.

In 1929, Dorab Tata was of the firm opinion that, since the existing political parties had "failed to stand up against the

red leaders of disruption a new party should attempt to add to those forces (the Servants of India Society) who are on the side of law and order". His secretary later elaborated that the growing menace called for every possible measure of counter-action and that the Indian and English commercial communities were "entirely as one with us where the Red Flag is concerned".

So far as the workers were concerned, the Congress was already viewed with suspicion and significant absence of support from the nationalist bourgeois forces between 1928-29 confirmed their apprehensions. Mirajkar, one of the members of the executive committee of the Girni Kamgar Union along with S.A. Dange, addressing an audience of striking workers stated, "The National Congress is in the hands of the capitalists. Not a single thing is done in the Congress for the benefit of the labourers and the peasants. It will be the real National Congress when we enter into it and kick out these leaders".

TO SUM UP briefly the emerging trends that were to lead to the promulgation of the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act, 1937:

- a) the militancy of the labour force in Bombay mills;
- b) the intercession of communist-led unions;
- c) the alarm of the industrial and nationalist bourgeoisie;
- d) the growing trade union aspirations of the INC;
- e) the influence of Gandhi on the Congress-led unions; and finally
- f) the desire to translate these Gandhian principles into active bodies.

All these factors had already laid the groundwork for any industrial relations legislation that the administration was considering. Some of the essential characteristics of the legislation could already have been identified by this time. The legislation would attempt to squash the militancy of the textile workers, isolate the communists and lay the broad framework for the emergence of a union that sought to further the Gandhian



On September 15, 1982, over one lakh workers with Samant-affiliated unions gathered at Azad Maidan in support of the striking textile workers. Some of them rested awhile in the shade of Dadabhai Naoroji's statue.

approach towards industrial relations using peaceful instruments such as negotiation, conciliation and arbitration.

Earlier, H.P. Mody, president of the Bombay Mill Owners Association, had addressed a meeting of the "citizens" of Bombay at the Sheriff's Office and stated on behalf of the BMOA: "If you are satisfied that the situation is as I told you, that this is a communist menace, I ask you to assist us in the struggle and to urge the government to deal with the situation with a firm hand.....If you are satisfied that the existing machinery of the law is absolutely powerless to cope with the situation, then my appeal to you gentlemen is to use all the influence you have to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear on the government to deal firmly with the communist menace in Bombay.

Significantly, the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee saw in H.P. Mody's plea for a coercive bill, a treat to their own movement for independence. It, therefore, opposed any such measure, scarcely realising the extent to which the Congress would later benefit through legislation which curbed the militancy of the workers.

THE FACTORS HASTENED the passing of stringent controls on trade union activities in Bombay in the period that succeeded the unrest of 1928-30. Exogenously, the imminence of war in Europe which necessitated a stronger control over the colonial economy that would support the British war effort. Endogenously, the Congress demanded certain concessions prior to the war which the British had to grant to ensure support from the national bourgeoisie in the event of war. The Government of India Act, 1935, created the so-called Dyarchy, wherein provincial autonomy was granted. Significantly, labour was placed within the jurisdiction of the proposed State administrations.

In 1937, the first elections to the state assemblies resulted in the return of a majority of Congress-led governments. Placed within the freshly-donnad administrative binds, the government of Bombay realised that it perforce had to put on a populist garb to quell the rising aspirations of the workers.

In the state of Bombay, B.G. Kher as CM led a cabinet of ministers that included such staunch Gandhians as Morarji Desai (revenue minister) and Gulzarilal Nanda (labour minister). The appointment of the latter was especially important since he had gathered considerable experience in his work as general secretary of the Mazdoor Mahajan at Ahmedabad.

The enactment of the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act in 1938 was, therefore, a foregone conclusion. It also heralded the active entry of the Congress into trade unionism in Bombay, reflecting Jawaharlal Nehru's doctrine of involving the working classes in the nationalist struggle, as yet another pressure group which had been ignored so far. A noteworthy result of the tussle between the old guard and the younger radicals of the Congress was the formation of committees to inquire into the working conditions of the mills in Bombay. A committee was appointed under the chairmanship of Jairamdas Daulatram to inquire into the conditions of the textile workers.

WHILE THE FIRST World War had radicalised the mass of workers in Bombay, the Second World War was to deal a severe blow to the communist leadership of trade unions in Bombay.

Inhibited considerably by the repression let loose during the war, the communists blundered greatly by their decision to support the British war effort, alienating themselves completely from the rising wave of nationalist, anti-imperialist sentiment that was sweeping the country.

As expected, the war once again created favourable conditions within Indian industry. Significantly, the cotton mills which had so far been operating only one shift with a complement of around 80,000 workers, began running three shifts, thereby increasing the work force to nearly 2,40,000. A majority of these new recruits came from the traditional Congress strongholds in rural Maharashtra - Satara, Sangli, Nasik, Kolhapur, etc.

While the Congress was riding on the crest of the wave of popularity warranted by their anti-war, anti-British stand, the communists marginalised themselves completely by actively discouraging strikes and other forms of popular protest, preferring to remain loyal to the war effort. The decision was fatal, since it gave a rare opportunity for the Congress to acquire a social base amongst textile workers, considering particularly the injection of more than a lakh loyal Congress sympathisers. The nucleus of the Congress-affiliated Mill Mazdoor Sangh therefore managed to explode into the RMMS which was registered as a trade union in 1945.

It must be noted that the Congress unions enjoyed the full support of the millowners and their total agreement to the guiding principles of Congress-led unions undoubtedly contributed largely to the mushrooming of the RMMS. Accorded the status of "approved union", under the terms of the BID Act, RMMS unionists were given access to official records inside the mills, thereby placing them in a position of strength vis-a-vis the communists who were left picketing outside the gates. Again, the facility of collecting membership dues and enrolling new members within the mill on pay-days aided the RMMS in no small measure to augment its membership.

BY THE TIME the war was over and the prospect of independence lay around the corner, all that remained to be done



On the same day, Datta Samant led a mammoth morcha towards Flora Fountain.

was the formalisation of this structure vested within the RMMS, which constituted a comfortable arrangement for the millowners and the government since it ensured peaceful and cordial solutions to the problems of the workers. It was thus necessary to enact a bill which would freeze the status quo of 1945 into a timeless coma.

The Bombay Industrial Relations Act was adopted in 1946, bearing in essence all the essential features of the BID Act of 1938, and going further to incorporate the experience of a decade of work within the mills of Bombay. The concept of the approved union which facility the RMMS had enjoyed considerably, was further expanded into the idea of the "sole bargaining agent" which extended a virtual monopoly of the RMMS over the workers.

Interestingly, in keeping with the spirit of "democracy" that pervaded the British colonists and the Congress nationalists, the establishment of a majority status in the mill unions was governed not by the more democratic secret ballot process, but was instead founded on the basis of membership dues.

The rationale extended in support of this curious logic was that only those workers who had sustained membership with a union for over three consecutive months in a period of six months were considered to be eligible "for the count", so to speak. In effect, this mechanism sought to perpetrate the dominant status accorded to the RMMS at the expense of the communist unions, since the RMMS was solely in the privileged position of recording sustained collection of dues from paying members.

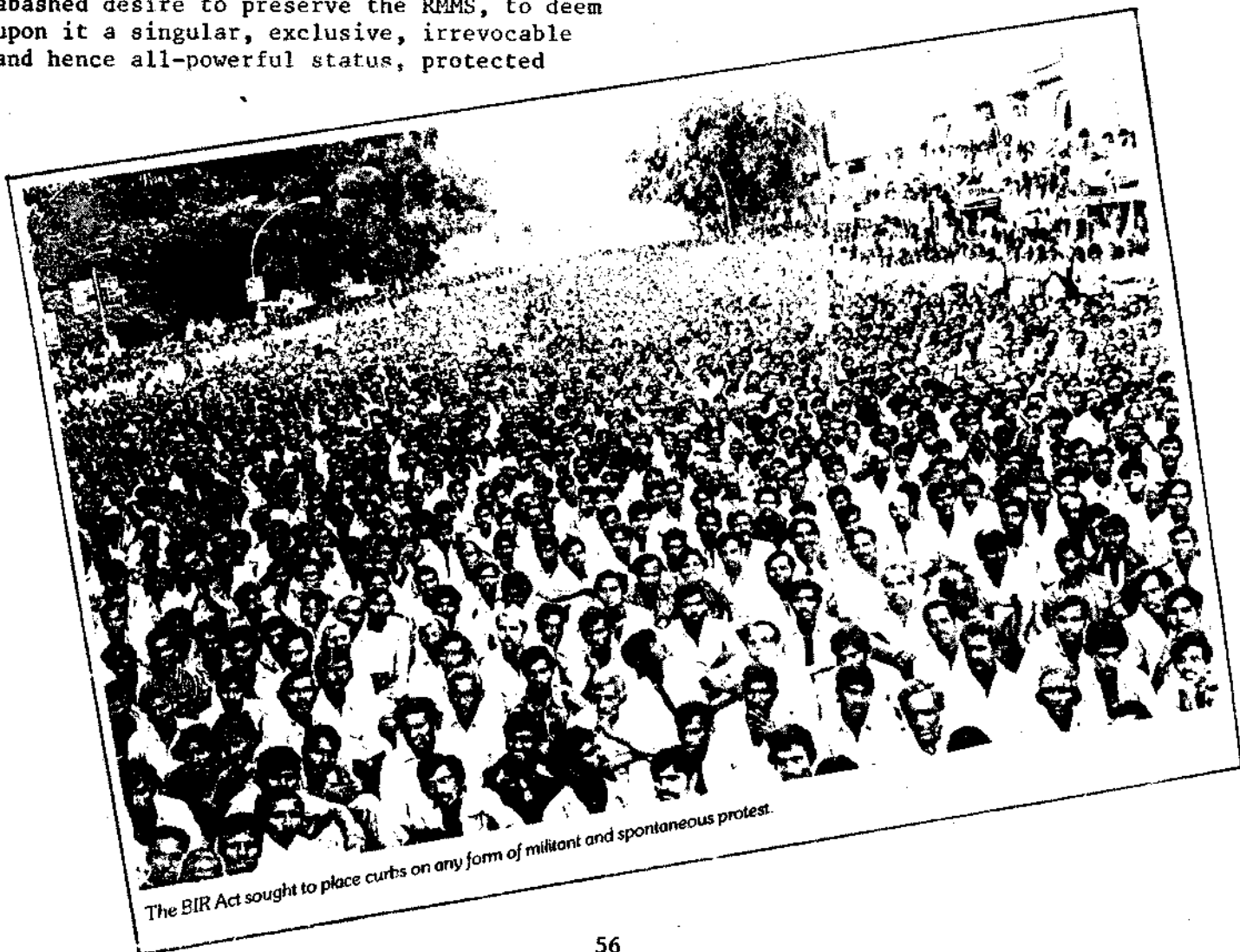
THIS EVIDENT SHOW of sham democratic norms was adequately reflected in moves which sought to limit the exercising of ballot votes for the state assemblies only to "citizens" - academics, landowners, and the progressive members of the minorities, seeking to leave out of this fold, women and other "illiterate" masses in the Indian countryside.

Underlying these machinations was the unabashed desire to preserve the RMMS, to deem upon it a singular, exclusive, irrevocable and hence all-powerful status, protected

fully by legal legislation extremely difficult to challenge. That the act has survived for more than 20 years is itself eloquent testimony to the farsightedness of the framers of the BIR Act.

Basically, the BIR Act sought to put an end to the militant forms of trade unionism by making arbitration in disputes compulsory. Further, any matter referred to for conciliation had to go through a prolonged period of adjudication, during which strikes, sit-ins, go-slows and other similar protest strategies within the hands of the workers could not be employed, leaving them at the mercy of labour tribunals and industrial courts and thereby ensuring their alienation from any decision which was in any case binding upon them. The genesis of the term "illegal strike" can be traced within the BIR Act, too.

Essentially, the BIR Act was characterised by its bias towards a non-militant trade union. The act was adopted keeping in mind



the militancy of the trade unions and sought to place curbs on any militant and spontaneous protest, thereby ensuring the deification of the formula of "negotiation, conciliation and arbitration".

TO BEGIN WITH, as mentioned earlier, the membership of a union seeking recognition is not determined by a secret ballot. On the contrary, a government labour officer has to submit a confidential report, based on a survey of membership dues collected in a period of six months. This method is said to be an extremely convenient arrangement since it leaves ample scope for the government and the millowners to manipulate records and prove that, in fact, the union of its choice, its sponsored union, continues to be in a majority while the onus of disproving this is the charge of the union which challenges the status of the "recognised union".



State Reserve Police look on while textile workers begin their "jail bhara andolan" on August 16, 1982.

Further, in an elaborate two-tier arrangement, the case moves from a labour court to an industrial court, which can overrule the decision of the lower bench of appeal. As an appellate body the industrial court is understandably merely an extension of the combination of the interests of industry and by the government.

This was made amply clear in 1960, when the majority status of the RMMS was challenged by a coalition of most opposition unions who were then in the throes of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement. A broad united front

consisting of the CPI, SP, RPI, PWP and LNP managed to launch a concerted drive towards securing recognition and after extremely successful collection of dues from enthusiastic workers, filed in their application to the labour commissioner, Mr. Shedke. To the dismay of the RMMS and the millowners, Mr. Shedke gave a verdict in favour of the GKU. The decision was then challenged at a higher level and the industrial court granted an appeal made by the RMMS, we might add on behalf of the millowners and the government. Mr Meher, presiding over an extremely learned and distinguished bench, threw out the case basing his decision on technical grounds. S.A. Dange, had filed the application as general secretary of the union, but since his selection to this position was not ratified in accordance with the union's constitution, his appeal did not have any validity in a court of law even through S.A. Dange's appointment had the sanction of nearly a lakh workers who had assembled at a public meeting.

Moving on from the procedures adopted for granting and judging the status of a recognised union, we can now examine the curious logic of an act which deems almost every strike "illegal". In passing, we may note that in a singularly undistinguished track record of nearly 30 years the RMMS has not led or called for a single strike, even though it has been the "recognised union" with sole rights to take up demands of the workers.

WE MIGHT ALSO add that this is completely in keeping with the essence of the BIR Act which stipulates that any strike which is called without giving 14 days notice; or during the pendency of conciliation proceedings; or during the pendency of arbitration/ adjudication proceedings; or even after the award of adjudication is illegal.

Hence, the only possible "legal" strike under the terms of the BIR Act is one which is called after the failure of conciliation but before the matter is referred to adjudication. The difference in time between these two can be merely a few minutes!

The act further states that a union can be derecognised if it leads a strike in the six months following its recognition, or if the government thinks that the union does

not intend to adopt peaceful methods to resolve industrial disputes. Therefore, apart from the precautionary procedures governing the process of seeking recognition, there are sufficient back-up clauses that leave enough leeway to squash any militant union that actually manages to overcome the first hurdle.

Once again, we may note that neither the government nor have the millowners ever had to take recourse to the clauses outlined above since the RMMS has remained unflinchingly obedient to its masters.

There are other serious implications of the provision for recognition in the BIR Act. Once a union is recognised, all the workers are forced to get their grievances redressed only through this union, leaving them with no option which can be exercised outside of this framework. This clause is patently undemocratic since if the union refuses to take up a particular grievance, for whatever reasons, and the workers resort to a strike, the strike is deemed "illegal" and is therefore not cognisable by the management or its union.

Additionally, it also ensures the workers dependence on the officially recognised union since it is the sole avenue for redress.

Finally, the act empowers the labour courts with the powers of criminal courts to try certain offences which have been declared cognisable. When evoked, this clause can result in a denial of the right of access to higher courts since, so far as workers are concerned, the labour courts are the final court of hearing.

OSTENSIBLY, THE BIR Act was adopted to regulate industrial relations on an impartial and efficient basis as also to promote industrial harmony and stability. However, the tenacity with which it has been supported by the government and the millowners, on the one hand, and the pursuit of the workers to overthrow it, on the other, gives important clues about the real purpose of the act.

This is borne out even further by the adoption of the BIR Act as a model which has been replicated in other states as well as at the Centre. At the same time it has also served as a foundation for later legislation



Since the strike has taken a specific political position, the government-millowner-RMMS combine stands to lose far more than what it had bargained for.

which further tightens the government's hold over the working class.

The Industrial Disputes Act (1947) and the Maharashtra Recognition of Trade Unions (MRTU) and the Prevention of Unfair Labour Practices Act (PULP, 1971), provide a glimpse of the machinations of the employers and the government to secure the "fair" cooperation of labour in an atmosphere which is fast becoming vitiated by the growing contradictions in the sphere of labour-employer relations. On the other hand, however, all industrial legislation also, in some way, symbolises the advance of the trade union movement since every small concession wrested from the industrialist and the government is one more step, however small, forward.

Seen against such a background, the present and ongoing struggle to dislodge the RMMS and the BIR Act is extremely significant. Since the primary issue is no longer economic but is one that has assumed a specific political position, there is far more at stake for the millowner-government-RMMS combine whose citadels have never faced such a lengthy and protracted onslaught.

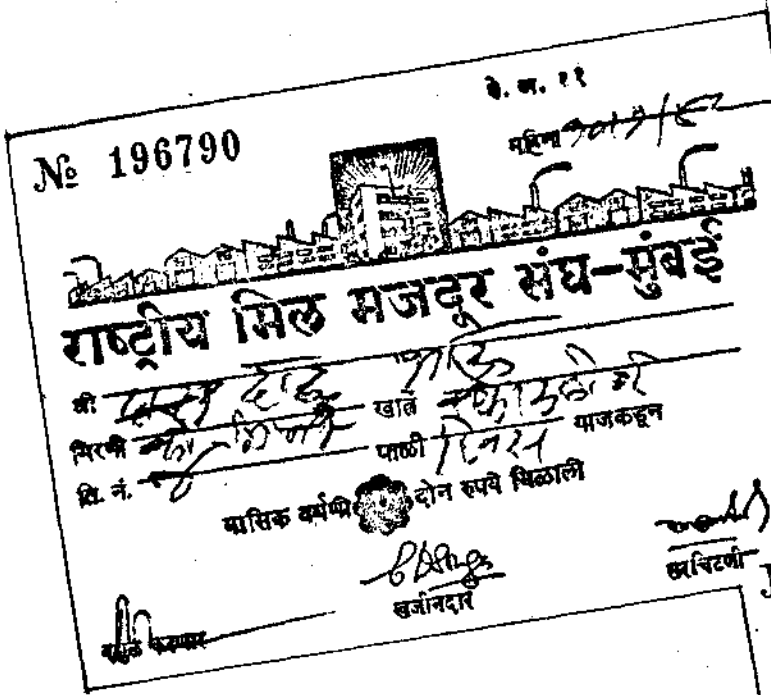
WHILE ALL THE FACTORS contributing towards this position are far too complex to deal

with in this article, it might be pertinent to note that the mood and morale displayed during the course of the strike has been significantly different from earlier strikes for this is the first occasion since the promulgation of the BIR Act that its very existence has been challenged. Whether the strike proves to be a success in this regard not not, it certainly signals the arrival of a consciousness and militancy among workers to do away with and / or disrespect most of the industrial legislation that has been conceived and enacted with such care and attention paid towards legal solutions to workers demands.

In this respect, the helmsmanship of Dr.Samant has contributed in no small measure since he seems to be the only trade union leader capable of reflecting and articulating the demands of more than two lakh workers in the textile industry.

However, if the strike has benefitted from its obvious disimilarities and peculiarities when compared to other agitations led by the established politically-affiliated unions, the role of Dr.Samant within the emerging framework raises a number of questions, which will, perhaps, remain unanswered till a conclusive settlement is actually signed.

(This article is based on reports filed in by Kumar Ketkar of The Economic Times and Anjum Rajabali of the CED. In addition, certain facts from Georges Lieten's article in the Economic and Political Weekly Annual, 1982, and a pamphlet distributed by the Lokshahi Hakk Sanghatana, outlining the undemocratic features of the BIR Act, have been used in this compilation).

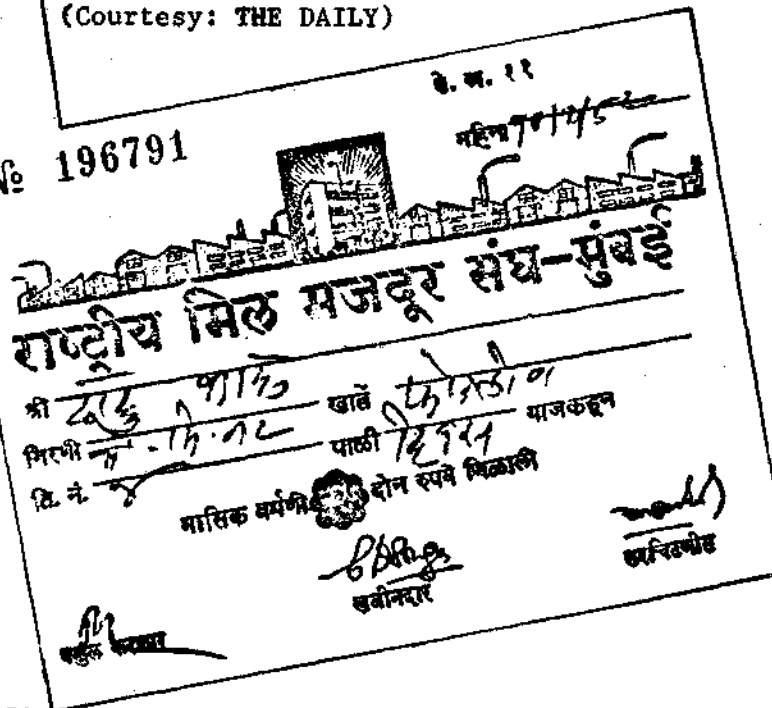


such receipts from workers for a number of months with consecutive serial numbers.

Though according to the BIR Act, membership fees are to be collected monthly, it appears that the representatives of the RMMS issue receipts at one shot for several months together.

The only other possibility seems to be that the RMMS union is so short of members that only one worker paid the fees for January and February to an RMMS representative!

(Courtesy: THE DAILY)



Collection — RMMS Style

Dadu Bhai, a worker of Kohinoor Mills, has been issued membership fee receipts by the RMMS dated January 10 and February 10(1982) carrying consecutive serial numbers. Producing a photocopy of the two receipts to The Daily, a spokesman of the Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU) cited them as examples of the fudging of membership records by the RMMS. The spokesman claimed to have in his possession several sets of

The Wages Of Wrath

The need for a new union policy

Since one of the basic issues at stake in the textile strike is one of wages and working conditions in the cotton mills of Bombay, the following report documents in some detail the present situation and goes on to question the rationale behind the various wage settlements that have been negotiated in the industry.



THE BOMBAY MILL strike of 1982 will form a watershed in the history of labour relations within the industry for two closely related reasons. In the first place, if workers are no longer prepared to accept a definition of their industry as a low-wage sector and their behaviour is increasingly likely to reflect aspirations for parity with more highly-paid groups of workers, the underlying wage pressure is bound to increase the level of restructuring within the industry.

This would take several forms, ranging from immediate closures or further nationalisation to intensified re-equipment in the remaining mills. Secondly, within a contracted and progressively reorganised industry where the leading firms are no longer the traditional labour-intensive operations, the bargaining process can no longer retain a multi-employer, industry-based form. As we shall see later, rationalisation has necessarily created a form of 'articulated bargaining' where industry-wide agreements defining service conditions for the industry as a whole are supplemented by agreements at department level within individual mills. However, the strike will mean a further evolution of this process not only because the restructuring of the industry must in itself involve an increase in the level of bargaining activity, but more importantly because workers' control over the bargaining process is the essential meaning of the strike in any case. Not only will there be *more* bargaining at plant or department level, but there will be a more conscious attempt by workers to ensure that the results of that bargaining reflect their own interests and needs. The only way workers could do this is if the strike is successful in transforming the bargaining structure of the industry and breaking the millowners' traditional control over it.

WHAT WORKERS FEEL: A GENERAL PICTURE OF DEMANDS

WEDNESDAY 25th: Ghatkopar union office. A large group of workers had assembled here in the evening. We started a discussion on pay. The major characteristics of the wage structure of the industry

emerged clearly in this discussion.

i) Mills don't pay according to any 'standard'. (In May 1947 the Industrial Court passed an award fixing standardised wage rates for the main occupations in the industry. We shall come back to the issue of standardisation later). In each department the Sangh signs agreements increasing workloads, reducing the work force and securing small increases in pay. As a result *the amount of 'fixed pay'(basic) fluctuates from one mill to another.* These differences are important because they determine differences in overall earnings. For example, in the folding department a cutlooker gets a fixed pay of Rs.65 in Digvijay, Rs.95 in Century, Rs.125 in Bombay Dyeing and Rs.171 in Swastik's processing unit at Chembur. (In the millowners' Handbook the standard for this occupation is given as Rs.42) Such differences in pay cannot be accounted for in terms of variations in job content. In spinning, an 8-sider is paid Rs.110 in Ruby Mills, Rs.157 in Shree Ram and Rs.190 in Bombay Dyeing. These are figures taken from workers themselves. However, in the pages of the M.G.G. (Oct.23, 1980) a Junior Clerk's gross salary (basic plus D.A.) is said to vary by the following amounts: in Dec.1979 a person in this designation earned Rs.594 in Kamala Mills, Rs.722 in Mafatlal, Rs.818 in Bombay Dyeing and Rs.846 in Finlay.

Workers say such differences depend on your willingness to fight.

ii) Except for jobs on the engineering or clerical side of the industry, there is no regular system of *annual increments*, so that length of service has absolutely no impact on the level of wages. For example, after over 30 years of service a wireman in Khatau receives gross earnings (basic plus D.A.) of Rs.900 - a position inconceivable in other major industries in the Bombay area. A woman and her daughter both work as bundlers in Shree Ram; she has put in 32 years of service and gets Rs.700, which is ten rupees more than her daughter.

iii) If there is any single factor within the structure of textile wages which accounts for their low level, this is the level

of D.A. earning. The Bombay textile industry has one of the worst conceivable D.A. schemes of any major industry.

iv) Mill workers receive none of the fringe benefits which unions have won in other industries, nor do they receive shift allowance.

v) The Rs.45 ad hoc increase and ad hoc annual increments of Rs.6 secured in 1979 are both exempt from variable D.A. and from the 8 p.c. increase of 1974. Thus neither of these elements of pay can count as part of the worker's basic wages.

vi) In every mill throughout the industry the Sangh makes massive deductions from bonus settlements. Thus there is a considerable difference between what mill managements declare as the bonus for the year and what workers actually receive. In Shree Ram management declared 12.5 p.c., workers received 10 p.c. In Shreeniwas where management declared 16 p.c., the workers were offered 12½ p.c. but refused.

THERE IS WIDESPREAD and intense hatred of the Sangh among ordinary mill workers. The Sangh is not a union with which the mass of these workers have ever identified. It is not a union which workers see as their own. The R.M.M.S. represents a pure form of compulsory unionism, of a state-supported monopoly, and the strike is intended chiefly to break its stranglehold over the industry. Mill workers want the right to choose their own union, "we don't want anyone's monopoly". In some of the N.T.C. mills workers are supposed to report for the morning shift 15 minutes before scheduled time. If they're late by as much as 10 minutes, they are sent home for the day and lose a day's wages. The lunch break is half an hour - in theory. Management's obsession with production is such that the break has been reduced to 15 minutes.

Changes in quality are used by managements as an excuse for cutting piece rates and depressing the overall level of piece-rate earnings. The rates themselves appear to vary from mill to mill in a completely arbitrary manner.

Workers ask, how is it that production has expanded massively - this is their

own experience - whereas the mills are running at a loss? One worker points out that when the Reserve Bank visits the mill, thousands of metres of finished cloth are stacked away in the basement. Another worker asks, why has there never been a government enquiry into 'sick mills'.

27th: As new machinery was introduced, the union signed machine-wise agreements at shop level, reducing the work force, increasing work loads and revising base rates. This is the main reason why the standardised earnings structure has fallen apart, and different mills pay different rates for the same or similar jobs.



G. has worked in Bombay Dyeing for close to 30 years. He calls for a standardisation of effort values, that is, of the amount of pay workers receive for a given level of effort. In many cases when new machinery is introduced workers are not paid a new rate for the job. Management starts with a so-called 'trial run' and after a few months of this workers find they are no longer entitled to claim higher wages on the new machines. A standardisation of effort values would mean determining by how much production expands on the new machines and paying in proportion to effort/productivity.

It is the union's job to make a thorough study of these factors. For example, in the spinning department of one mill, workers are paid less on the high-speed machines (super spinners) than on ordinary ones, even though production is considerably higher. This happens because helpers are taken on to man the new machinery. In any case, agreements negotiated at department level are never shown to the workers, nor does the Sangh ever consult them.

In Bombay Dyeing reduction in the work force was accomplished after work study, which is used to determine possible manning levels. On this basis close to 2000 permanent posts have been abolished and standards of work intensity raised massively. In the late 50s, in an orgy of work intensification, management went over to a 32-loom system. As the effort levels were too high and quality progressively deteriorated, by the early 70s loom complements had stabilised at 16:1. A weaver on 16 looms earns about Rs.1,250 at Bombay Dyeing, but on the same quantity of looms around Rs.200 less in other mills. G. sees wage differences mainly in terms of workers' aggressiveness - if you're ready to fight, you can get more. In Bombay Dyeing the plant-level union leaders are drawn from the work force itself, and this acts as a control on the type of agreements they negotiate, since their terms will also affect the work they themselves do. G supports plant bargaining, but there should be a single union in the industry which could negotiate separate agreements for the different mills after studying the financial position of each company.

Many textile workers live in the same housing board colonies as workers from other industries, e.g. Tagore Nagar, an area composed exclusively of industrial workers, and in these massive concentrations they get to know about wages and employment conditions in other companies and compare these with their own. They know that in engineering, at the time of settlement workers normally receive 'service increments', that they receive no such increments because in their wage system length of service has no impact on the level of wages, and this only further reduces the final value of their own settlements.

They also know that settlements in other industries normally make provision for arrears whereas in textiles industry-wide agreements have consistently ignored the period that has lapsed. They know that on average the bargaining cycle in other industries is four years at most, so that every eight years workers in those industries negotiate at least two major wage revisions, whereas almost 9 years have passed without any change in the rates of neutralisation negotiated as part of the D.A. scheme of 1973. They know that low relative pay means low P.F. and gratuity so that the retirement benefits they receive will be much less as an absolute amount. Finally, they know that one of the major differences relates to canteen facilities and to the kind of food workers can take for granted in most companies outside the industry. (The tea is described in countless different ways by workers. The most trenchant description was goat's piss.)

OVER AND ABOVE these differences, effort is a dimension textile workers are persistently conscious of. Work in the mills is continuous, 8 hours at a stretch work. Continuity is repeatedly emphasised as a major part of work intensity. If conditions are ideal, a weaver on 4 looms might go without any major interruptions for a maximum of 15 minutes. But physical exertion is only one component of effort. If 'effort' is defined as the sum total of deprivations experienced in the course of work—and deprivations could include a lot of things down to the way a supervisor treats workers, temperature levels, accident rates, and whether you get water to drink—then few industries in the world would show a level of effort costs as high as Asian textiles. Yet when the strike started the *most* a 4-loom weaver would have earned was Rs.900— as we shall see, this is less than the starting pay in several major industries.

28th: On the spinning side there is a basic difference in the pattern of work intensity, depending on the kind of cloth or yarn count. Spinners on the coarser counts with faster operating speeds and higher breakage rates but with wage levels generally well below Rs.800 are especially conscious of the disproportion between effort and pay. The idea that pay should be proportional to effort, that there

should be a standardisation of work-loads and effort values, is especially strongly rooted in these groups of workers. In Hindoostan Spg., Crown Mills division, the sider has to fetch the bobbins himself, and if he protests because he feels "ye bigari ka kam hai", the Sangh tells him he can always get out, "gate khulla hai".

Apart from a general feeling that textile pay bears no sort of relation to the prevailing levels of effort in the industry or that rationalisation has meant increases in workloads while pay remains low both absolutely and relatively, other grievances relate to the arbitrariness with which pay is often determined in the industry. Thus in the same company one mechanic may receive a basic of Rs.104 because he supports the



Sangh, while another gets Rs.65 because he doesn't. Or cutlookers in the folding department of Mafatlal No.2 receive a basic of Rs.78 following an agreement which raised their production standards by 150 p.c. and redesignated the 'semis' (semi-clerks), while another group of workers is paid Rs.58 for the same work and called 'helpers'.

But the stronger bargaining groups in the industry are clear that if you fight you'll get more. It depends on your mili-

tancy. Thus part of the reason for the peculiar process of wage drift that has broken the standardised earnings structure of the industry is the unequal distribution of bargaining power, the ability of workers in some mills or departments to reject contracts negotiated by the Sangh as against the inability of others to hold out against agreements they resent, or even their hopeless persecution and domination by the Sangh.

31st: Seniority is the main principle by which unions throughout the world have attempted to regulate competition among workers. But if such a principle were strictly enforced in the mills with respect to permanency and promotions, the Sangh would lose a vital basis of its power within the industry. A union that lacks the active support of its membership is either thrown aside or it is compelled to establish controls over workers through the allocation of jobs and promotions.

One of workers' deepest sources of resentment against state-controlled textile unionism lies in this issue of seniority and its open flouting by the Sangh. In Kamala Mills a helper in the fancy department is today a weaving supervisor because he is a supporter of the R.M.M.S. But in the spinning department of one mill, when this happened workers closed down the mill and got the decision reversed.

TATA MILLS - HERE workers are kept going through the statutory rest period on the night shift and not paid for it either. Weavers are promoted directly to the position of supervisors without becoming jobbers. In the spinning department management removed the motor from the machinery so that now speed and output are machine-controlled. In screen printing they introduced a new rotary machine which resulted in the transfer of some 150 workers from this department. Today a total labour force of 12 (4 per shift) is all that is required to man the new equipment.

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not strictly part of their job description. Pressure for production is so unrelenting that workers are told, "*machine pe khana la ke khana khao*". A head jobber who lost his job in the closure of the screen printing department was demoted following his redeployment, but refuses to accept work of a lower grade.

Bombay Dyeing Spring Mills - A woman Cimnco winder complains, "Akkha din takleef hai". You're working continuously, no rest pauses, no water to drink, no time off for a piss, if you're late by one minute they shout at you, if the bundles are spoiled, they fine you.

Textile division, folding department - an inspection machinemán's rate of production has increased roughly in this way: in the '60s he inspected 900 metres per shift; in the early '70s this was increased to 1,200 metres; in 1974 to 1,500; in the late '70s to 1,800; today the standard is 3,000. And over this period his fixed pay has increased from Rs.39 to Rs.104. He complains of eye strain and headaches.

In the printing department of the company's New Bleach works, 9 acid machinemén got together to draft a list of their grievances early in 1980. They complained that while their duties had increased their pay and grading remained the same; they demanded "terrycot socks for safety from acids"; that there should be strict seniority in the allocation of jobs; and finally "There were 5 working hands on this machine but now 3 are made to do the same work". A special feature of their work is the manual handling of acid.

It is obvious that only union structures rooted in the shop and controlled by workers themselves can take effective action on grievances of this type. An industry-wide bargaining system fails in two respects. Firstly, unless work groups are strong enough to take action on their own and press for an immediate solution of their demands, there is no way in which grievances can be resolved short of a lengthy process of arbitration which is one of the specific features of the B.I.R. act. Moreover, the results of arbitration are always likely to be less favourable than the results of a directly negotiated settlement because the strategic element of

pressure that underlies negotiation is absent under arbitration (or adjudication for that matter). Secondly, a union that identifies itself completely with an industry-wide bargaining system and consciously espouses the need for centralised bargaining is not likely to be able to evolve a shopfloor-related bargaining policy capable of limiting and reversing management initiatives on the control and organisation of work.

THE MAIN REASON why Communist unions suffered heavy membership losses throughout the 50s in most countries where they were previously strong was their fatally misguided opposition to the decentralisation of bargaining. The emergence of mill committees in the early '70s precisely signified an underlying pressure for decentralisation of this sort. Their revival in this strike is therefore crucial.

1st: A worker from Bombay Dyeing recounts that in the early '70s the struggle for leadership within the Sangh was largely related to how much bonus the union thought workers were entitled to. Some 2000 mill-level representatives voted in a secret ballot to decide the leadership issue in the conflict between Hoshing and Deshpande. Hoshing's main platform was higher bonus, with the specific rate depending on the mills' ability to pay. For this purpose the entire industry was stratified into some 4 major groups, with the leading firms in group 1, and the NTC mills in the bottom group. Workers in the top group were entitled to 17 p.c., those in group 2 to 15 p.c. and so on.

What was the reaction of mill workers to this scheme? If, as he maintains, the scheme won general acceptance among workers and contributed to Hoshing's victory, then clearly already in the early '70s a basis existed, in the feelings and consciousness of the mass of workers, for a new type of bargaining structure.

In fact, the early '70s were also a period when at mill level workers formed their own committees as potential centres of negotiating power in conflict with the union's full-time secretaries who used the centralisation of power within the Sangh to re-establish their own control

over bargaining. Thus the decline of the mill committees in that period signified a temporary victory of industry-wide bargaining, a victory that was crucial to the employers' intensified drive for rationalisation after 1973.

3rd: That the reorganisation of the textile industry with the introduction of man-made fibres and the intensified technical evolution of the leading firms introduces a period in the life of the industry when industry-wide bargaining is merely a facade concealing widening discrepancies between individual firms is confirmed by the following picture.

Gajarmal, an employee from Shree Ram, felt the industry as a whole can be stratified into three groups of mills in a broadly descending order of progressiveness.

1) A leading sector of the most progressive companies - Standard Mills, Mafatlal, Bombay Dyeing, Khatau, Century. In terms of managerial behaviour a distinguishing characteristic of this group of mills is concentration on quality, better working conditions and lower accident rates. In terms of union characteristics, this is a sector less intensely dominated by the Sangh, with a greater tendency to negotiate on the part of managements and thus presumably a greater degree of plant-level control over bargaining processes. The workers in this group of mills are described as "more conscious", as protesting more, and yet the level of industrial conflict is, relatively speaking, lower than in most other mills.

2) The second group - Shree Ram, Shreeniwās, Podar, Morarjee among others - is the area of maximum industrial conflict within the industry. Production is organised and conducted on a job or contract basis and the level depends on the flow of orders. This means there is less standardisation in terms of counts and less interest in quality. Mills of this intermediate category - smaller, less diversified concerns where management's main obsession is production - are also those where the domination of the Sangh was so far most entrenched and where labour relations were chiefly controlled through collaboration between employers and the Sangh. Working conditions are altogether worse, accident rates higher and

feelings against the union intense. In industry-wide conflicts, such as the present strike, this group of employers depends on the state for a solution to the conflict. The majority of mills in Bombay fall into this middle mass.

3) The final group consists of the most backward mills in the industry - Sitaram, Jalan, Bradbury, Madhusudan, etc. - where the drive for increased production occurs on a technologically unaltered basis, so that effort costs are greatest in these smaller enterprises - higher workloads on the same obsolete equipment, high breakage-rates, inferior mixings, and no allowance for breakdown or closure. The managements of these mills are no longer fundamentally interested in their concerns, the workers are more visibly repressed, and even a union otherwise so favourable to employer interests might be resented.

IN THE PRESENT strike the feeling of a need for a 'solidaristic' union policy, one which addresses itself to the interests of all textile workers, is greatest among the workers of the most backward enterprises. On the other hand, the more profitable, expansive and diversified concerns in the industry provide a natural basis for the evolution of plant bargaining. One of the most pressing tasks of the new textile unionism therefore is how to reconcile these conflicting needs, how to allow for aggressive bargaining strategies related to the paying capacity of individual companies, without abandoning workers in the weaker enterprises to the uncontrolled domination of their employers.

A worker from the Sulzer department of Bombay Dyeing suggested that pay scales should depend on the quality of cloth produced by the mill and thus on the production pattern and profitability of the individual concern, so that pay negotiations occur at enterprise level; however, service conditions of a more general type, e.g. leave facilities, might be regulated under an industry-wide agreement common to all mills. At any rate, workers must be free to choose not only their 'bargaining agent', i.e. the union they want, but also the bargaining structure they regard as best suited to their interests, whereas the B.I.R. act deprives workers of both types of freedom by forcibly imposing on them both the bargaining agent



as well as a certain set of bargaining arrangements.

A whole group of demands in the present strike relates to the special position of the badli worker. The badli is the employer's ideal - general, undifferentiated labour power, infinitely transferable within work processes and infinitely expendable "Substitute workers should be considered eligible (for paid holidays) only if they work *on the same post* on the day previous to and succeeding the holiday", according to an agreement of 1979. Therefore most badlis are denied paid holidays. "For eligibility for casual leave, the operatives must be permanent". Therefore all badlis are denied casual leave. Unless badlis work a minimum of 240 days they stand to lose all their privilege leave - and generally do because 20 days a month is the most a badli can expect in terms of work. "A badli operative shall be deemed to be in 'continuous service' for the purpose of section 2(c) of the Gratuity Act only for those years of service during each of which he has actually worked for not less than 240 days", according to an agreement of 1970. Therefore badlis are likely to suffer a considerable loss of gratuity as well. Finally, the Sangh is known to

deprive workers of permanency as a form of harassment.

In a wage survey confined to a limited but random sample of employees and jobs in the industry we found that the average pay of badli workers was Rs.27 per day. Since actual earnings depend not only on how well particular jobs are paid but also on the number of days worked, and since most badlis work an average of 15-17 days per month, actual monthly earnings of this large group of mill workers - 30-40 p.c. of the labour force - works out to just over Rs.400 p.m.

In all areas workers agreed that there should be a single minimum wage for the industry and they felt that in today's conditions this should be not less than Rs.1000. (Some said Rs.1,200, others Rs.1,500.)

4th: Workers put a lot of emphasis on the gap between gross pay and take-home pay. For example, a wireman in Khatau whose gross salary is Rs.983 actually receives in hand Rs.582. That is to say, around 40 p.c. of gross earnings are deducted by way of P.F. (Rs.94), coope-

relative society (Rs.235), advance(Rs.60), etc.

At lower levels of relative pay such as characterise the textile industry as a whole, the impact of any deductions will obviously be felt more. If a skilled grade in one of the better mills takes home around Rs.600 per month, then there can be no doubt that the vast majority of employees in the industry will be taking home earnings of less than Rs.500. Against this simple fact the claims by the representatives of the millowners that textile operatives in Bombay are earning Rs.900 - 1,500 are meaningless as well as malicious.

D.T., an active trade unionist in the engineering industry who has involved himself in the struggles of textile workers, feels that the earlier standard rate structure has broken down due to the influence of three factors specifically:

- i) the introduction of new machinery into the mills;
- ii) changing patterns of cloth production; and
- iii) the uneven rhythm of rationalisation in the different mills. He feels that rationalisation agreements will become even more common in the post-strike period as employers intensify their drive to raise standards of efficiency. The extent to which redundancies will affect mill workers depends largely on the bargaining position of workers in the post-strike period, on the terms on which they return to work. Voluntary separation schemes have been one of the factors encouraging retrenchment, and they are especially attractive to older workers otherwise deprived of all fringe benefits. If these were available - as they are in most engineering and chemical concerns - workers would not resign so easily. Regarding a policy for fighting retrenchment and continuing job losses, the new textile unionism should demand 4 shift working and shorter working hours.

SOME ISSUES RELATED TO TEXTILE PAY

- a) When the issue of wage standardisation was first discussed extensively in

the '30s, official inquiries supported the programme specifically for two reasons:

- i) Disparities in pay within the same industry were described as a "fruitful cause of recurrent wage disputes" and thus wage standardisation was seen partly as a means of reducing the level of conflicts over pay, as a "measure for the promotion of industrial peace".
- ii) Wage standardisation would also be a means of regulating competition among employers, which was what was meant by saying that it would be a "method of wage regulation". Explaining why the Bombay millowners felt the need to draft a wage schedule for the industry, one report said, "the danger of unfair competition among employers with regard to wages became so serious in 1934 that the employers' association thought it necessary to intervene".

In short, from both points of view, the specific rationale embodied in wage standardisation was largely one controlled by and reflecting the interests of employers. Standardisation was intended to eliminate potential leapfrogging (such as occurs today in engineering and chemicals) and to act as a means of controlling the movement of wages. "A standardized rate, while raising the level in units where it is specially low, will necessarily mean a reduction in the earnings of workers in units where the level rules above the average." And initially the millowners were actually crude enough to incorporate such wage reductions in their draft wage schedule. When official reports spoke dismissively of the "danger of the minimum becoming the maximum", i.e. of a single rate intended as an occupational minimum being enforced throughout the industry, they were describing precisely what was intended by the employers as a group.

Wage standardisation in textiles was thus essentially not a union programme but a means of wage regulation, a way of reducing the level of conflict over wages and of freezing the potential bargaining strength of workers in the stronger mills. On its own, however, this strategy was incomplete - it required a concrete form for its operation, a mechanism through which standard rates might be enforced. This was exactly the role delegated to an industry-wide bargaining system with a

union imposed on the workers by the State. Thus in this case the major decision on bargaining structure reflected mainly the needs and intentions of textile employers. The strike of 1982 is the first decisive attempt workers have made to reverse this entire movement.

b) Wage standardisation within industry-wide bargaining formed the heart of the millowners' strategy on wages down to the '60s. By that stage, it became clear, however, that with dearness allowance accounting for a progressively larger share of employee earnings, controls on the movement of pay would need much more than a standardised rate structure—an employer strategy would have to tackle the issue of D.A. itself. Therefore in 1965 the M.O.A. filed a notice of change "demanding that the existing system of D.A. to operatives.. should be revised to make it analogous to the pattern recommended" for central government employees. The dispute was ultimately referred to the industrial court without any outcome until in Dec. 1973 the mill-owners and the Sangh negotiated a new D.A. scheme for the industry.

under this head. As the new scheme was in some sense the consequence of a dispute over D.A. initiated by the employers, and as their main demand in the '60s had been a reduction in the quantum of D.A., it is worth looking at the main characteristic of this scheme a bit more closely.

Under the D.A.scheme currently in operation, Rs.221.60 is treated as "merged dearness allowance" and defined as part of the "revised basic wages" negotiated in Dec. 1973. Therefore the minimum revised basic wages is made up of the following elements:

	Rs.
i) the standard rate for the job awarded in 1947, or the old basic	30.00
ii) First Wage Board increase	10.00
iii) Merged dearness allowance (under consolidation at index No.200, Simla series)	221.60
iv) Sp.c. of the total of i) - iii)	20.92
Total	282.52



WE HAVE ALREADY pointed out that one of the major reasons for low pay in textiles is the low level of earnings which accrue

Over and above this "revised basic" workers' earnings are made up of three further elements of pay: v) variable D.A., vi) the Rs.45 increase conceded under Sharad Pawar, and vii) annual increments of Rs.6 per year also conceded then for a limited number of years.

Among these various elements of pay the only component which accounts for any movement in overall earnings, the "dynamic element" so to speak, is the variable D.A. Therefore any enquiry into the movement of textile earnings needs to focus on this component specifically. At the index figure prevailing in Dec.1981 the lowest grade in the mills, those on an old basic of Rs.30, would have drawn a variable D.A. of Rs.338.70 - a figure which is way below what most workers in engineering and chemicals would be earning, under this head, even on the first 100/- of their basic. The reason for this disparity in the reason for this disparity in the amount of variable D.A. accruing to workers in different groups of industries is naturally to be found in the rates of neutralisation

negotiated under the different types of D.A. schemes. The D.A. scheme introduced into Bombay textiles in 1973-4 provided for an extremely low rate of neutralisation, namely, 0.444 p.c. of the revised basic upto Rs.400 of basic pay, and 0.144 p.c. thereafter.

But the most striking characteristic of the D.A. scheme of 1973 is not so much the fact that a low rate of neutralisation was accepted by the Sangh as the method by which such a rate of neutralisation was finally determined. The rate of neutralisation was arrived at not through negotiation, it seems, but a more formal process of mathematical reasoning. This is what the agreements said: the D.A. accruing to workers at the index number then prevailing and at the rates of neutralisation *already in existence* minus that portion which would henceforth count as merged D.A. would hereafter be defined as the variable D.A. This figure - which happened to be the meagre sum of Rs.35 - would then have to be expressed as a percentage of the "revised minimum basic wage" (Rs.282.52) and this percentage finally divided by the number of points in the index above 200 - the level at which consolidation was agreed - in order to arrive at "the percentage per point of index number" or the rate of neutralisation. Since 35 (the only portion of D.A. admitted as variable) as a percentage of 282 (the generously inflated basic) worked out to 12.42 p.c. and the index had increased by 28 points when all this nonsense was being contrived, the rate of neutralisation to which millworkers were henceforth "scientifically" entitled was

$$\frac{12.42}{28} = 0.444$$

FOR ALL ITS appearance of reasoning, the scheme contained the following deception: while it used the *old* rates of neutralisation to compute the level of D.A. earnings, it derived the rate of neutralisation by relating the amount of D.A. computed on this basis not to the old basic (Rs.30) but to the revised or *new* basic. Suppose, on the other hand, that Rs.35 variable D.A. were related 'in percentage of' the old basic of Rs.30 plus the F.W.B. increase of Rs.10, then the rate of neutralisation derivable on the same model would be completely different -

$$1) \frac{35}{40} \times 100 = 87.5 \quad 2) \frac{87.5}{28} = 3.125$$

Suppose further that in return for negotiating a rate of neutralisation of 3.125 p.c. instead of 0.444 p.c., we agree that neutralisation will be computed per 3 points slab, then at the index number prevailing in Dec.1981 the lowest grade in the mills would have earned a (variable) D.A. of Rs.794.58. That is to say, the minimum wage in the industry under this D.A. scheme would be Rs.1,134 - a figure which would bring textile wages into line with pay levels in other major productive sectors. On the other hand, if the new basic is to be used in deriving the rate of neutralisation, then the quantum of variable D.A. which is used in this calculation would need to be considerably higher. Suppose, following this alternative, we use a variable D.A. amount of Rs.65 in deriving the rate of neutralisation, then this would work out to

$$3) \frac{65}{282.52} \times 100 = 23.00 \quad 4) \frac{23}{28} = 0.821$$

and in Dec.1981 the lowest grade in the industry would have earned a (variable) D.A. of Rs.626.26. Under this scheme the total minimum wage in the textile industry in Dec.1981 would have been Rs.965, an increase of roughly 300/- over the existing levels.

Whichever of these alternative formulas we accept, the fact remains that the millowners and the Sangh derived the present rate of neutralisation on a completely fraudulent basis, and textile workers have had to suffer in consequence. Workers repeatedly point out that not only has the Sangh never explained the D.A. scheme to them, but they do not even inform them about the currently prevailing index number.

WAGE DIFFERENCES AMONG INDUSTRIES IN THE BOMBAY AREA

To measure the extent of disparity in pay between textiles and the other major groups of industries in the Bombay labour market area (including the plants in outlying centres such as Taloja and Khopoli), we did two things specifically.

In the first place, in order to determine the relative wage levels of the main occupational groups in the textile industry, we

conducted a sample wage survey at random among some 300 workers. The results of this survey were then cross-checked against the wage data compiled by Gulab Gajarmal, an employee on the clerical side of the industry, whose job involves handling pay statistics. The results of the survey and the data compiled by Gajarmal (and published in his book *Girni Kamgar: Vedna ani Vidroha*) show no significant discrepancies and on the whole agree remarkably well, so that in constructing the table of textile wages we have used both sets of figures, supplementing data drawn from Shree Ram Mills by observations based on the survey.

Secondly, we computed monthly earnings for a total of 46 plants in the Bombay area (up to Khopoli), drawn predominantly from chemicals and the metal industries. In 7 of these cases information on pay was taken from industrial court awards published in the Maharashtra Government Gazette (M.G.G.) in the remaining cases from agreements/settlements directly collected from the unions concerned. In all cases we made sure that the pay scales in question were valid for Dec. 1981, the month for which earnings were calculated, and wherever there was any doubt (e.g. the period had formally elapsed, but a new agreement had still to be concluded), this was removed by checking directly with the union. Needless to say, we are grateful to all the unions in these industries who extended their cooperation and made this analysis possible by making copies of their settlements readily available.

TO SIMPLIFY THE presentation, the pay tables are presented separately in appendices at the back. Table I constitutes an approximation to average monthly earnings of specific jobs/occupational groups in the Bombay textile industry, based on the sources mentioned earlier. Table II reproduces only part of the calculations that were made for the 46 plants outside textiles - whereas we computed monthly earnings at the start of the grade for 3 levels of the plant wage structure, broadly characterised as "unskilled", "semi-skilled" and "skilled", Table II presents earnings data for only one of these levels, namely the lowest grade in the plant. Since we are computing wages at the start of the grade, it is possible to see that this table actually presents minimum wages in the 46 plants concerned.

For textiles monthly earnings are defined to mean wages for a month of 26 days, with "wages" including all the components of pay mentioned earlier including the Rs.45 increase and two increments of Rs.6 each. As mill workers receive no fringe benefits, the issue of their inclusion under earnings does not arise.

For industries other than textiles, "monthly earnings" are defined to mean basic plus D.A. plus any special allowances applying to all workmen in the plant but excluding all items which can be regarded as fringe benefits or occupational allowances, and also excluding earnings from overtime, incentives, bonuses, shift allowance, etc. Therefore a substantial part of the pay of engineering and chemical workers is not included in these calculations.

Thus differences in relative pay between the mill companies and other groups of industries are actually far greater than suggested in the comparisons below. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, whereas textile employers pay no fringe benefits, the unions in engineering and chemicals were able to introduce L.T.A., H.R.A. and so on already by the early '70s, and today they are formulating demands for items such as education allowance, social security allowance or house maintenance allowance. Moreover, a major part of workers' earnings in these industries depends on overtime and incentive payments, and their exclusion from the calculations likewise understates the level of wages against which textile pay is being compared.

Secondly, pay scales in the newer industries take the form of "rate ranges", so that the amount of pay an employee receives within the grade increases with length of service. In our calculations this impact of seniority on the level of earnings is ignored insofar as at each level of the wage structure pay is calculated for the start of the grade and so the effect of annual increments is disregarded. However, this way of proceeding is a gross simplification and in reality, if one were to take into account the wage impact of seniority, the level of wages would need to be increased by 50 p.c. to 100 p.c. or more.

To take a simple example, in Boots, a median company in the ranking for the median grades, an employee in those grades

(semi-skilled). e.g. a packer or a bottle washing machine operator, would have earned a basic plus D.A. of Rs.1025 at the start of the grade, but Rs.1928 sixteen years later, at the end of the grade. In this case the difference works out to 88 p.c.

Therefore two alternative estimates are shown - pay at the start of the grade, and the same increased by 50 p.c. to allow for the impact of seniority. The results of comparing the wages in the main groups of industries can thus be stated:

Wages in Dec.1981(inRs.)

	<i>Unskilled</i>	<i>Semi-skilled</i>	<i>Skilled</i>
<i>Textiles</i>	678	823	1027
<i>Engineering, chemicals, etc. Median pay of 46 plants -</i>	915	1015	1210
<i>increased 50% for seniority</i>	1372	1522	1815
<i>% differential over textile wage levels</i>	102.3	84.9	76.7

WAGES IN THE other main groups of industries in Bombay are higher than wage levels in textiles by at least 75 - 100 p.c. depending on which group of jobs we look at. If earnings from incentives, overtime, occupational allowances of various kinds and so-called fringe benefits were included in these calculations, then of course the differences would be even greater. In short, wages in other industries are at least twice as high as wages in textiles.

The table shows something else: the differential (or wage advantage of other sectors) declines as we move up the plant wage structure into the skilled jobs. This is interesting because it is only at these levels of the textile wage structure that one comes across a group of jobs, viz. those on the engineering side of the industry, where workers receive annual increments, unlike the mass of textile operatives. Even so it is possible to see that the skilled grades in the industry performing jobs common to most areas of manufacturing (turners, fitters, etc) receive substantially less pay than skilled groups

elsewhere. "The skilled worker has no value", said a turner from Kamala mills, and he's obviously right.

Finally, if we chose hourly earnings as our measure of wages, the disparity in average pay would be even more striking for the obvious reason that millworkers are also considerably worse off both in leave entitlements and in average working hours. (cf. App.D at the back for some other service conditions).

A NEW UNIONISM IN TEXTILES

Regardless of the terms of any immediate settlement, the real significance of the present strike will be its ability to revolutionise the nature of unionism in the textile industry. This process is likely to occur against the background of massive technical changes in the industry and its transition to a more capital-intensive type of manufacturing. The introduction of high-speed machinery, increases in the extent of automatic control, further rationalisation, etc. will mean continuing job losses in textiles. Clearly, textiles is not an expanding area of employment, and in the long run activists will have to take this into account in defining their bargaining strategy.



GLOSSARY

JOBBER: Traditionally jobbers were crucial to the evolution of work relations in Bombay textiles. According to Morris, describing the position some decades back, 'day to day operations were in the hands of a manager, and the working of the various departments was typically under the direction of carding, spinning and weaving masters and their assistants. Below this administrative and technical cadre were the jobbers immediately supervising the workers in each department Historically the mills were unwilling to invest in a large and efficient staff of highly trained middle supervisors. In the absence of a solid middle management cadre, the jobber became .. the key figure in labour recruitment and labour discipline' (The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India, p36-7). Today the jobber's job responsibilities are mainly of a technical and supervisory nature, although their specific range depends on the job in question, the simple job title concealing a variety of job descriptions. e.g. in a recent rationalisation agreement the duties of a 'doffer jobber' are listed in the following terms: 'responsible for arranging labour as per shift requirement, for proper discipline for getting work done in the proper way, for production of each and every machine as per targets, for quality, waste control, helping shift fitters' and so on.

DOFFER GAITERS: The Millowners' handbook lists their standard duties 'a) To bring empties from bins located in or near the spinning or doubling departments. b) To doff spindles, (i) remove full bobbins, (ii) gait empty bobbins on to the spindles and press them down for proper fit, remove yarn accumulations .. on spindle blades .. (iii) piece breaks at the re-starting of the frame, and (iv) transfer the doffed full bobbins to the doff baskets at the end of frames' (etc).

CUTLOOKERS: Checkers in the folding departments.

MANNING LEVELS: The volume of labour (e.g. number of workers) allocated to a given machine / type of equipment/process/operation. Where unions are strong, manning would be a subject of negotiations rather than management prerogative, because (for a given series of operations) the manning level is only another expression for workloads or production standards. However, this assumes that technologically there is scope for discretion in this respect. 'For some machines the manning .. is determined by physical condition; for example, only one worker can operate a typesetting keyboard at any time. On larger and more complicated pieces of equipment, the manning standard is less closely specified by the machine'. In Bombay textiles the vast majority of rationalisation agreements deal with manning on a machine or department basis, with managements drafting proposals for new 'complements' which the Sangh then endorses.

There are 3 ways of describing the sort of changes in bargaining activity which the activists need to work out. These changes might be seen in terms of :

- i) the need for a shopfloor-related bargaining policy,
- ii) a need to transfer negotiating power to the mill committees, that is, to emphasise new levels of bargaining, moving away from a multi-employer, industry-based structure to forms of bargaining over which workers have more control,
- iii) some form of pattern bargaining as a strategy to defend workers in the weaker enterprises.

BARGAINING POLICY

A shopfloor-related bargaining policy refers to the ability of the union or mill committees both to control the impact of rationalisation and to take initiatives of their own with respect to the entire range of issues in the department. Whereas in the first case the union would, for example, keep a close watch over management attempts to abolish permanent posts, or negotiate the issue of production standards, in the second type of case the union would confront management with its own initiatives and demands on production standards, manning ratios, working conditions, canteen facilities, rest pauses, etc.

The institution of a shopfloor-related bargaining policy would aim not to generate grievances and demands at the level of the workshop (department) but to remove grievances and demands that already exist at workshop level from the machinery of arbitration and draw them directly into the sphere of bargaining.

Secondly, to make agreements on rationalisation a result of joint regulation rather than unilateral control by managements. The issues that have been referred in recent years to the arbitration committees provided under the BIR Act (through joint submissions under section 66 of the Act) are predominantly workshop issues.

For example, in Madhusudan Mills the dispute concerns the grievances of 4-loom

weavers on cotton sorts that "the quality of yarn and spare parts are inadequate and inferior and that the working conditions of the 4-loom system as specified in the industry-wide agreement are far from satisfactory" (MGG, 15 Oct. 1981).

In Ruby Mills "the workers working in the Bleach Folding department of the said company were giving 30 to 35 p.c. more production than the production given by an average worker of the same department in other textile mills and therefore they demanded that their basic wages should be increased by 33.3 p.c." (MGG, 13 Nov. 1980)

In Bombay Dyeing a dispute referred to arbitration concerned the "wages and complement of ancillary categories of workers for the Sulzer weaving machine shed consisting of 308 weaving machines", and "to consider whether there is a case for revision of wages of weavers working on the Sulzer machines and if so to decide what should be the revised wage rates" (MGG, 29 May 1980) (as if an arbitration committee was somehow more competent to decide an issue of this sort).

In New Great the issue concerned "the employment, complement and wages" of workers on the Cimmco and Ruti Auto looms (MGG, 22 Feb. 1979).

By referring issues related to manning, production standards, wages, piece rates, etc. to arbitration, employers are able to shield them from the direct action and pressure of work groups on the shopfloor and effectively render them non-negotiable. A shopfloor-related bargaining policy on the part of the union committees would mean a systematic attempt to compel managements to negotiate all such issues and reach a more or less immediate settlement. It would represent a transition from a pure wage policy to one of negotiating controls over pace of work, determination of manning levels, working hours, etc. In short, a bargaining policy of this type where the union committees are capable of directly tackling management initiatives or of formulating demands that represent their own initiatives on areas which are otherwise unilaterally determined by management would be bound to alter the balance of forces in the union's favour and give a

concrete significance to the operation of plant and department-level union structures.

BARGAINING STRUCTURE

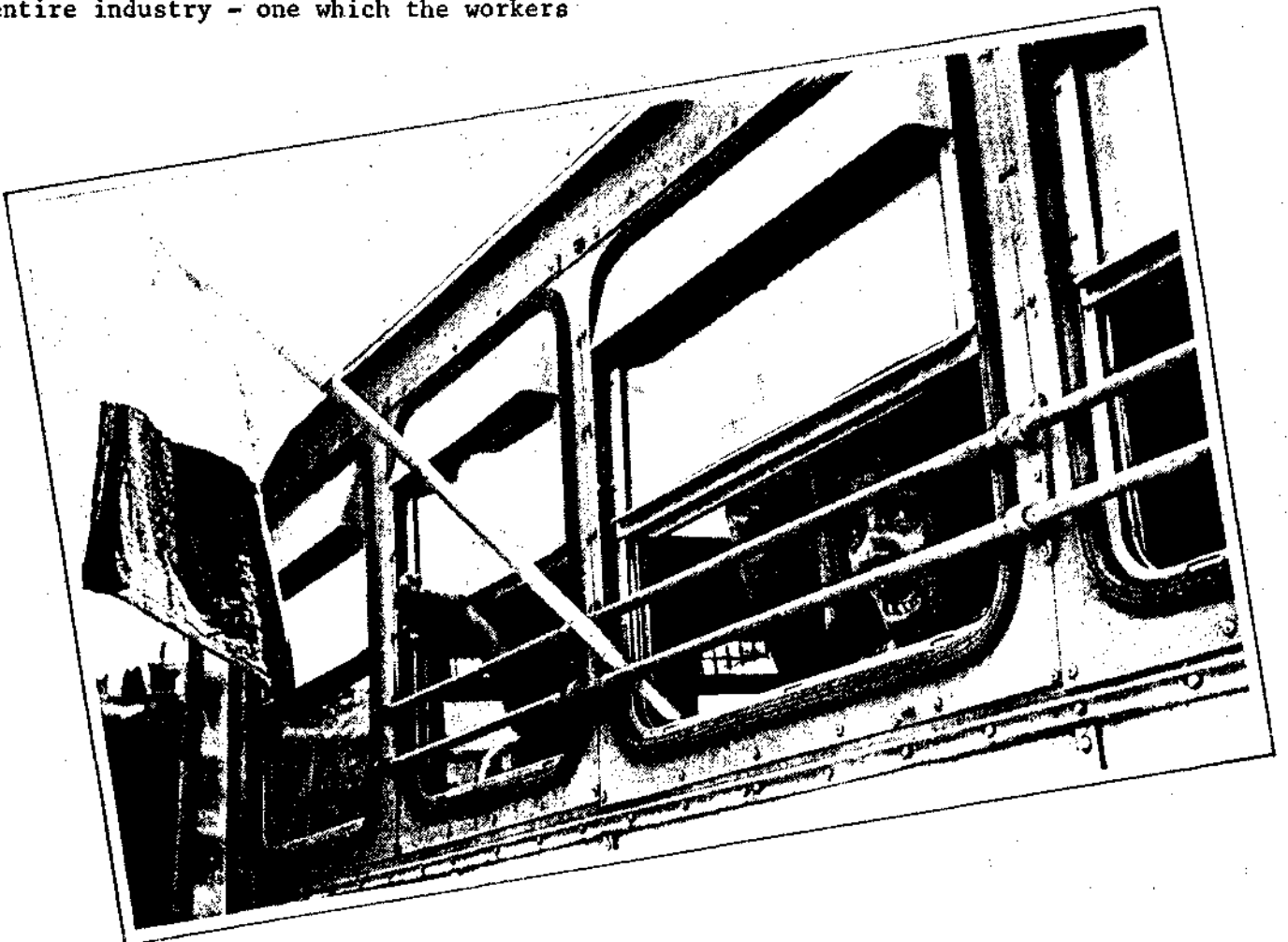
A shopfloor-related bargaining policy is really only possible where the bargaining structure within an industry allows workers to intervene directly in the negotiating process and to control its outcomes. Today this is not possible in the textile industry because the power to negotiate is centralised in the hands of the Sangh and its full-time secretaries. Therefore a change in policy requires a change in structure - to be able to tackle issues effectively at plant and department level, the union or mill committees must have the power to negotiate, and opportunities to do so, and this means that the present traditional type of multi-employer, industry-wide bargaining structure must be replaced by decentralised bargaining.

Decentralisation of bargaining structure does mean, or does not have to mean, different unions in different mills. It is possible to have a single union for the entire industry - one which the workers

have chosen, of course - and yet for that union to negotiate separate agreements in the individual mills. (The most obvious type of strategy that would correspond to this situation is called "pattern bargaining", but this is taken up below under "strategy".)

Centralised bargaining with industry-wide or national agreements was in fact the dominant form of collective bargaining in most countries of the world and in most industries up until the late '50s and '60s when pressure for local bargaining and organisation began to develop, mainly in the engineering industries. Since that period the major trend throughout the world has been for an increased decentralisation of bargaining structures, with the major agreements being negotiated at the level of individual plants or, where several plants belong to a single company, of individual companies.

Decisions on bargaining structure, e.g. employers' preferences for one type of structure rather than another, would



reflect attempts on the part of unions and managements to increase their own *bargaining power* relative to the other party. In Bombay the millowners clearly preferred industry-wide bargaining (and therefore a centralised bargaining structure) because it was seen by them as a means of controlling the movement of wages by eliminating competition among themselves and enforcing a standardised wage schedule. In fact, interest in wage regulation was a major reason why employers throughout the world preferred multi-employer bargaining arrangements, especially in the highly competitive areas of manufacturing with a large number of small establishments. The decentralisation of bargaining which followed this early period was largely forced on employers by work groups no longer prepared to see their earnings depend solely on the nationally-negotiated rates. Therefore in industries where such work groups were able to build up powerful shopfloor organisations average earnings began to rise at a faster rate than official wage rates, until many employers themselves decided to leave their respective industry associations and in future base their bargaining arrangements at plant or company level.

Because decentralised (or single-employer) bargaining means greater workers' control over the bargaining process - the range of issues and the type of outcomes - it means more bargaining power for workers. That workers do in fact exert more pressure or wield more power under decentralised forms of bargaining is proved by studies into the relative outcomes of settlements under different bargaining structures. All of these studies show that wages have risen much faster under decentralised bargaining than under multi-employer or centralised bargaining. For example, one study analysed bargaining outcome for almost all union contracts registered with the department of labour in that country. It found that the best outcomes in terms of pay, working conditions, etc. were associated with industries with;

- i) a high degree of concentration
- ii) high rates of strike activity, and
- iii) single-employer bargaining

Thus bargaining structure is certainly one of the factors determining how much unions

are able to secure for their members. In this case the least favourable outcomes were secured under 'contracts negotiated in area, employer or industry associations' The M.O.A. is all three of these things, since it represents a group of employers from a common industry and single area, and it is a pure example of the kind of structure under which trade unionism has been least effective.

BARGAINING STRATEGY

For employers industry-wide bargaining has the further advantage that in the case of an industry-wide strike there is no danger of losing market shares to competitors who are also strike-bound; the costs of a strike are thereby reduced. Under decentralised bargaining unions recover this crucial element of strategic pressure.

There are two possible strategies the union could follow with respect to bargaining in the industry as a whole:

a) Under "articulated bargaining" negotiations would occur at two levels. The Union would continue to negotiate industry-wide contracts in order to establish *minimum standards* on major conditions, including pay (e.g. working hours, leave provisions, safety standards, canteen facilities, etc.). However, the major part of the union's bargaining activity would then concentrate on the individual plants, negotiating pay scales and other conditions in more or less the same circumstances as happens today in chemicals and engineering. The union or mill committees in the individual mills would then be mainly responsible for the terms and conditions of these mill or company-wide agreements and for the rationalisation agreements negotiated at department level.

b) Under the alternative called "pattern bargaining", the union would first strike a major settlement or key bargain in one of the larger and more profitable concerns, subsequently attempting to generalise the main provisions of this agreement as a *union standard* for the industry as a whole. Here too bargaining would proceed on a decentralised basis.

BARGAINING OBJECTIVES

These would flow directly from changes in the nature of bargaining policy and from the ability of workers, through their committees, to negotiate issues directly at plant level. Four basic areas where the committees need to define their objectives after mass discussions and union-sponsored enquiries are;

- (1) The deployment of labour
- (2) Manning levels, machine speeds, rest pauses, etc.
- (3) The general problems of automation and redeployment of labour, and schemes to control the rate of job loss.
- (4) Working conditions.

Although the restructuring of pay and of the bargaining system of the industry are the main objectives of the strike, there is a vast stock of potential demands contained in workers' grievances about the way labour is deployed in the mills, e.g. the fact that substitute workers are transferred between machines without acquiring the designation of the jobs they perform, or about standards of work intensity, e.g. that there are no relievers or that the reliever system has been abolished, as in the Sulzer department of Bombay Dyeing where there was one reliever to every 4 workers (or 16 looms) until the system was ended by an agreement of 1978 in return for a 90 paise allowance, or finally about actual conditions in the mills because of which the mills have become the mortuary of an entire section of the working class.

— Union Research Group

We are profoundly grateful to the several groups of workers and activists who made this research possible and in particular to the Chembur Kamgar Samiti, Gulab Gajarmal and Bharat Patankar.



APPENDIX A. TABLE I

Average earnings per month (26 days) of major occupational groups in the Bombay textile industry computed at index No.470 (Simla series) for December 1981 (in Rs.)

Group	Pay
Mazdoor, bigari, sweeper, helper, etc. (lowest grade)	678
Mazdoor on old basic of Rs.42/-, doffer boys	707
Reacher	700
Cimmco winder (f.)	714
4-sider (ring spinning)	786
6-sider	892
8-sider (spinning)	964
8-sider (doubling)	969
B.C.Winder (f.)	854
D.Winder (f.)	927
Warper	900-1,200
Drawer-in	750-1,100
4-loom weaver	808
Auto-loom weaver (1:16 looms)	1,064
'Weavers' on Sulzer looms	1,222
Machine operator in finishing	823
Rotary printer-cum-fitter	1,000
Blowroom fitter	1,030
Wireman (gr.IV)	900
Turner-cum-fitter	856
Doffer jobber	1,044
Auto-loom jobber	1,100

Unweighted mean of average pay in 11 occupations a) = Rs.869

a) Mazdoor, sweeper, etc.; Cimmco winder, 4-sider, 8-sider, B.C.winder, drawer-in, 4-loom weaver, auto-loom weaver, m/c operator in finishing, wireman (grade 4) doffer jobber

Unweighted mean of representative pay in 21 departments of G.G.'s table, excluding maintenance and supervisory jobs = Rs.855

APPENDIX B TABLE II

Minimum wages in Bombay Engineering,
Chemical, etc. concerns as of Dec.1981
(old series 2090)

Rank	Company/Plant	Date of Settlement	Starting pay of lowest grade (Rs.)
1.	Ralliwolf	Oct.1977/Apr.1981	1312
2.	Rallis India (Rallifan Factory)	Dec.1981	1162
3.	Ceat Tyres	Dec.1981	1072
4.	Hoechst	Mar.1979	1060
5.	Mukand	Jan.1982(retro)	1058
6.	Ciba-Geigy	Jan.1979	1036
7.	Union Carbide	May 1978	1033
8.	Peico (Philips)	Nov.1980	1030
9.	Roussel	Apr.1980	1030
10.	Roche Products	May 1978	1025
11.	Siemens India	Jan.1981	1020
12.	Musco(Khopoli)	Mar.1982	1001
13.	M.S.D.	Dec.1980	1000
14.	Sandoz	Nov.1980	997
15.	Richardson Hind.	Dec.1978	980
16.	German Remedies	Oct.1979	976
17.	Boots	Oct.1979	975
18.	Boehringer	Mar.1979	966
19.	Glaxo	Oct.1980	960
20.	Herdillia	Jan.1982	936
21.	Nirlon	Mar.1979	932
22.	Bayer	Feb.1978	920
23.	Mahindra Spicer	May 1981	916
24.	Parke-Davis	Oct.1981	914
25.	Golden Tabacco	Dec.1979	900
26.	PIL	Sep.1980	895
27.	IOC (Khopoli)	Sep.1979	890
28.	Blue Star	Aug.1981	885
29.	Polychem	Sep.1978	870
30.	IAEC	Sep.1979	854
31.	G.K.W.	Dec.1978	853
32.	AMP	Apr.1979	853
33.	Cadbury	Feb.1982	844
34.	Larsen & Toubro	Jan.1979	843
35.	Tomco	Oct.1980	843
36.	Bombay Tyres(Firestone)	Sep.1973(unrev.)	840
37.	Pfizer	Apr.1977	839
38.	Nocil	Dec.1979	822
39.	Voltas	May 1978	791
40.	Otis	Feb.1981	789
41.	Hindustan Lever(Sewri)	Apr.1979	783
42.	Mafatlal Engg.(NMM)	Feb.1981	772
43.	T.M.G.	Jul.1980	756
44.	Hindustan Lever(Taloja)	Feb.1980	741
45.	Metal Box	Jun.1978	705
46.	Advani-Oerlikon	Mar.1979	606
		median	915

APPENDIX C

Some of the main jobs included under different skill levels

To represent the group of so-called "unskilled" jobs in the calculation of pay, in every case we chose the lowest grade in the plant wage structure. There is no need to spell out the kind of jobs which, through a process of social evaluation whose basis we shall have to discuss elsewhere, finally and invariably end up at this bottom level.

"Semi-skilled" jobs were typically the following—in chemicals and the related groups of industries, process workers, junior plant operators, packers (including "senior packers"), pharma workers, lab attendants, ampoule fillers, forklift operators, and sometimes the lowest grade of craft jobs; in engineering generally, machine operators of roughly the level of skill which in the exemplary job descriptions of Siemens India might be said to involve work which is "comparatively complicated, though repetitive at times..fair skill and elementary knowledge of the trade" (job level C in this company's job level description method); also furnace attendants and jr.furnace operators in steel...In textiles the semi-skilled group of jobs included in the calculation of average pay for this level were - doffer boys, Cimco winders, B.C.winders, D.Winders, 4-siders and 8-siders in ring spinning, plain loom weavers and machine operators in bleaching or dyeing. Rs.823 in the text represents the unweighted average of the pay for these jobs as shown in Table I.

"Skilled jobs" were typically in chemicals and related industries, senior process or plant operators, team leaders, chargehands, welders, turners, electricians, etc; in engineering, fitters, machinists, and the general run of craft jobs requiring a "high degree of precision and skill"(job level F in the Siemens level description method); in tyre manufacturing, tyre builders, calender operators, cure man.. In textiles the skilled groups whose average pay is shown as Rs.1027 were represented by - Sulzer loom operators, auto-cum-fitter doofer jobber and auto-loom jobber.

Textile jobs are difficult to classify in terms of the conventional grouping of skills based on the requirements of the metal industries. For example, most people we discussed the issue with characterised most conventional types of weaving as a

"highly skilled" activity, and some 4-loom weavers seemed to think that the more highly-paid workers on automatic looms were not quite at the same level of skill as themselves.

This view is in general supported by those who argue that the main forms of automation in the textile industry are of the deskilling type, e.g. an American study says that "the required level of skill of the spinner will be lowered with the use of automatic piecing devices. The shuttleless loom requires less training by weavers than does the shuttle loom"(Zeisel, M.L.R. June 1973).

Perhaps this is one reason why in the traditional or un-reorganised British textile industry 50 p.c. of all employees were classified as "skilled" and only 23 p.c. as "semi-skilled" against an average distribution, for all industries, of 25 and 33 p.c. respectively. On the other hand, in the more automated American industry when Reynolds and Taft did their study of wages in the 50s, the main job groups of spinners, doffers, winders and plain-loom weavers were all characterised as "semi-skilled".

Apart from the impact of technological changes on job content, one reason for such ambiguity is that "skill" is a difficult term and its meaning likely to change from one industrial setting to another. Secondly, as one writer has pointed out, "semi-skilled" is a meaningless categorisation: "a worker may possess one or more developed skills, or none, but he cannot possess "semi-skills".

However, problems of this sort, conceptual or otherwise, do not affect our pay comparison because the skill groupings broadly correspond to the main strata of the textile wage hierarchy. That is to say, jobs regarded as "semi-skilled" for the purpose of an inter-industry comparison also happen to be jobs which are on the whole less well-paid than jobs regarded as "skilled". In fact, the whole exercise could proceed without any reference to skill whatsoever, and skilled/semi-skilled/unskilled are merely convenient terms for designating broad areas of the wage structure in manufacturing.

APPENDIX D
Leave Entitlements

number of days of leave negotiated under settlements since 1978, mainly in the companies for which pay calculations were made.

Some time in the '60s the Sangh actually reduced mill workers' casual leave from 7 to 5 days. Therefore this is all they get by way of C.L. The total number of paid holidays workers get is also 5. Other than what is provided for under the E.S.I. scheme, no sick leave is given. The maximum privilege leave a worker is likely to earn is 18 days.

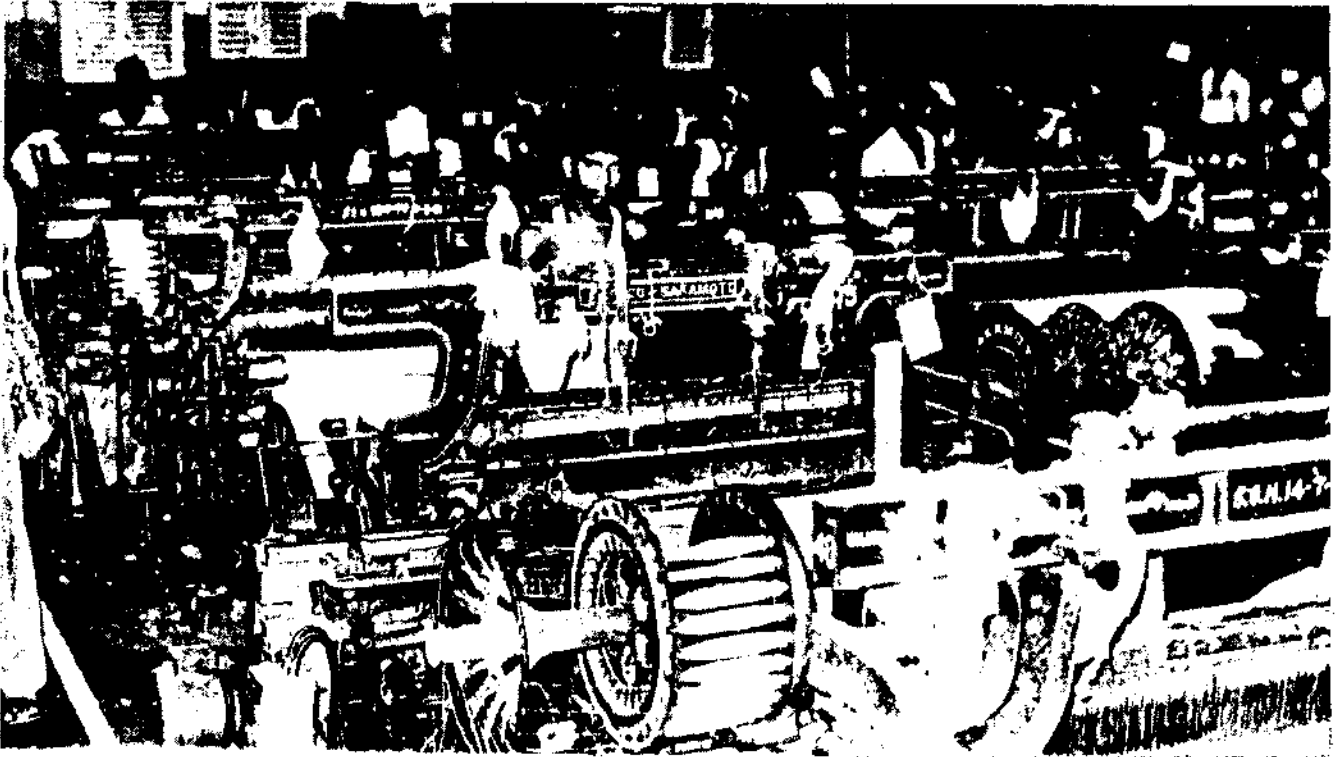
Now, compare these conditions with what workers have won in the other industries. The figures represent averages of the

	Textiles	Chemicals, Engineering etc.
Leave travel assistance (Rs.)	0	530
Privilege leave (in working days)	18	25-26
Casual leave	5	8
Paid holidays	5	10



Hard Times

The imperatives of modernisation



Most Indian cotton mills are museums, or worse, graveyards of machinery.

LESS THAN FOUR years after the last production downswing and profit squeeze, the Indian cotton textile mill industry is once again in deep trouble. The present crisis is in fact the worst the industry has known so far and the mills are now less capable than ever before of coping with it.

Ironically, the severity of the crisis is partially masked by the eight-month-old (now tenth month) strike of Bombay's textile workers. The strike, however, is neither its cause, nor even an impediment to its resolution.

The roots of the crisis go back to the technological stagnation that has prevailed in India's cotton mills for over half-a-century. The failure of the industry to overcome it has meant that the vast majority of Indian mills are, by international standards, technological dinosaurs. At least

one-half of the Indian cotton mills can no longer produce good quality, durable cloth and have already been priced out of the international market. Most importantly, their cost of production is so high that it makes it impossible for the mills to raise cloth output and consumption in the domestic market, step up the rate of capital accumulation and modernise their technology.

The Indian cotton textile industry is plainly very sick. All the available indices of the disease are truly staggering in their magnitude. Taken as a whole, Indian mills are the most inefficient in the world and constitute a large and primitive segment of the world cotton textile industry, not merely in comparison with the industrially advanced countries but also with most of those underdeveloped countries which have a sizeable spinning and weaving capacity.

Today, only 52,131 of the total of 2.10 lakh looms installed in India's 278 weaving mills are automatic. In this respect - and this is the crudest numerical measure of modernisation in the weaving industry - India is four times more backward than China and way behind Brazil, Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan, and even Thailand and Indonesia. Going by the ratio of automatic looms to total loomage, this country is, to take some random examples, more backward than Pakistan, Algeria, Philippines, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Malaysia and all of Latin America.

IN A RECENT publication, the Indian Cotton Mills Federation (ICMF) has stated that as many as 63 per cent of all spindles and 82 per cent of all looms installed in Indian mills are over 15 years old, and hence obsolete.

The latest census of machinery in cotton mills, conducted by the Textile Commissioner's office, is even more eloquent and detailed in its analysis of the technology which is presently being utilised to manufacture cotton fabrics - from the blowroom and other preparatory stages, through spinning, weaving preparatory and weaving, to bleaching, dyeing, printing and finishing.

Thus, over 35 per cent of all blowroom lines in the composite mills (which spin yarn and weave it into cloth) are of the 'conventional' type - a loose, outmoded concept against which is counterposed the 'improved' type. About a fourth of all carding engines are conventional, i.e. thoroughly obsolete, while 49 per cent of combers, too, belong to this category. As for the draw frames and the speed frames ("spindles"), as many as 69.5 and 41.6 per cent of these still remain 'conventional', even though they are integral within the production process.

In the case of weaving preparatory machinery, 77 per cent of winding spindles, 53 per cent of pirn winding (drums) and 81 per cent of warping machines are 'conventional', whereas 45 per cent of all sizing machines and an even higher 75.1 per cent of all looms belong to this category of obsolescence.

The picture is even gloomier in the processing department. The overwhelming

proportion (upwards of 80 per cent) of all bleaching machinery, dyeing and printing machines (between 50 and 70 per cent) are 'conventional'. And over two-fifths of all composite mills have no pre-shrinking machines.

IN TERMS OF vintage machinery too, the Indian mill industry is hard to beat. Fifty-three per cent of all the blowroom lines in the 661 spinning and composite mills covered in the 1979 census were 20 years old or older. So were 60 per cent of cards and 35 per cent draw frames. Over 58 per cent of all speed frames and 47 per cent of all ring frames were at least 20 years old at the end of 1979.

These proportions are estimated to have remained steady since 1978 and even risen. Incidentally, 20 years is considered to be the normal life span of machinery, although under the atrocious maintenance standards prevalent in Indian mills, it could be even shorter.

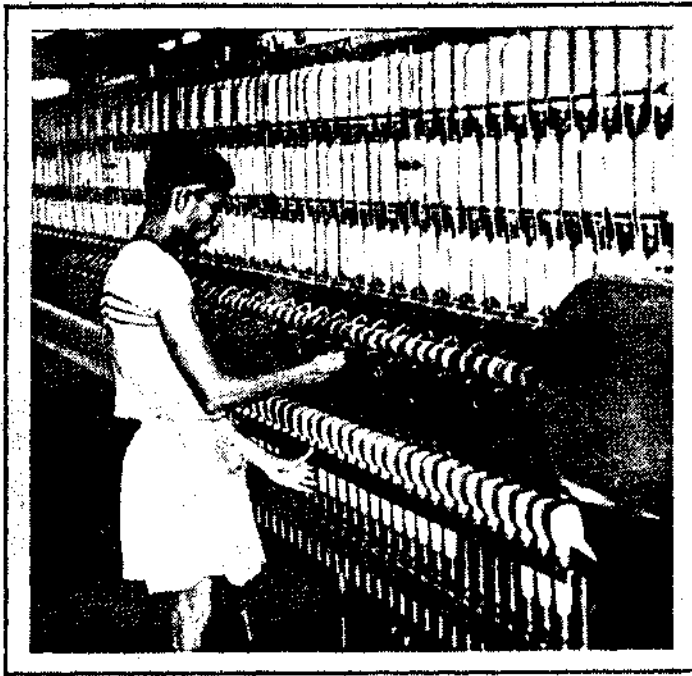
So far as the weaving section (including the preparatory stages) is concerned, the proportion of machinery that has outlived its life varies for the most part between 50 per cent and 75 per cent.

The story of looms is even more pathetic. Of all the plain looms, which are fit only for museums, that the industry boasts of, an astounding 85 per cent have outlived their useful life of 20 years, and as many as 76.7 per cent are over 30 years old!

As for the "modern" automated looms, those of 20 and 25 years' vintage already account for 27 per cent and 16 per cent respectively of the total inventory. Another 27 per cent will join the swelling ranks of these unproductive pieces of junk within two years.

Obsolescence marks the other machines, too, installed in the Indian cotton mills. For instance, 69 per cent of all coal-fired boilers are over 20 years old and as many as 57 per cent are at least 30 years old.

Most Indian cotton textile mills are thus museums, or worse, graveyards of machinery.



The series of major technological changes in manufacturing processes, renewal of machines or their conversion into more productive ones, which occurred the world-over, have bypassed the Indian Industry almost completely. Rendered complacent by the high profits of the cloth boom during World War II and later during the Korean War, the Indian textile industry has turned its back upon the process of technological improvement since the fifties.

THUS BY THE mid' sixties, not only an underdeveloped European country, such as Portugal, but even Hong Kong and Pakistan, had over-taken India in the quality of machinery and technology employed and subsequently in cost efficiency too.

A highly professional study of processing cost comparisons between the most efficient quartile of all mills in 11 countries showed that India lagged behind most of them in efficiency even 15 years ago, in spite of lower fibre and labour costs.

For instance, the Indian sample's spinning and weaving costs, depending on the fibre used and on the construction (composition of the fabric in yarn counts in warp and weft), were typically the highest of all the 11 countries, and twice as high as some of them. Spinning productivity (pounds of yarn per operative year) was the lowest, in some cases less than a miserable tenth of the leader.

Or to take another example, the cost of weaving, excluding the price of yarn, was 19 per cent higher in the top 25 per cent of Indian mills than their counterparts in Pakistan and 29 per cent higher than in Hong Kong.

Over the past 15 years the cost efficiency lag has expanded greatly, as the rest of the world has gone in for faster, more productive, cost-saving machinery while, barring a small minority, Indian mill-owners have failed to plough back profits and modernise their enterprises.

The millowners' argue that it was impossible for them to plough back profits since they were too low. This is specious. For one, low profitability has been a feature of the textile industry throughout the world. For another, to quote a World Bank report, (1975) "a significant part of the industry profit has been diverted to other industries".

Thus even in the 'good' years in the cycle of fluctuations, the industry has typically ploughed back much less than it could. A statistical analysis covering the 30 most profitable mills shows that their ploughback rates are among the lowest in Indian industry, while the ratio of dividends to post-tax profits is 18 per cent higher than the average for the biggest 280 companies studied.

Another aspect of the industry's profligacy is the irrational use to which a good deal of the investment in new machinery has been put. The Indian mills are thus reaping the harvest of slothfulness, complacency and inefficiency.

PERHAPS THE MOST shocking fact about the performance of the Indian textile industry is that its productivity has remained stagnant or even declined during the past one-and-a-half decades, a period which saw productivity levels spurt by between 200 and 300 per cent in some Third World countries, as well as in the industrially advanced countries of Europe.

To take a representative example from spinning, there has been an actual decrease in cotton yarn output per spindle in Indian mills from 61.3 kg in 1963, to 50 kg. in 1973. Subsequently, the ratio decreased to 47.4 in 1979 but

unsteadily rose to 48.1 in 1981, i.e. well before the textile strike in Bombay.

This decrease has occurred despite some improvement in the availability of coal and power, and in the face of the installation of 3.8 million, typically faster, new spindles between 1974 and 1981, which should have logically raised the yarn output by 30 per cent or more.

As an index of the Indian textile industry's gross inefficiency and poor management this is eloquent enough. But the World Bank report, quoted earlier, makes an even more scathing indictment of the Indian textile industry's managerial practices, ranging from the choice of raw materials, manning levels, suitability of machinery installed, "abysmally low technical performance" of machines due to poor state of repair, bad housekeeping and appalling operating conditions, to the "failure of the management to provide and maintain good working conditions and operative (worker) amenities"...

"The majority of mills with old equipment", says the report, "can only be described as industrial slums. By Western European standards of mill housekeeping, the machinery is operated in conditions of almost abominable squalour". "In all the bad mills (ie. 20 of the 22 cotton units visited by the Bank team) the general environment was bad - broken floors, poor lighting, dirty walls and all amenities in a dilapidated condition...."

"Particularly discouraging was the situation in a number of mills visited which had brought good modern machinery and merely installed it in the same squalid environment as the old machinery". Ring spindles "of the best modern type were fed from the same source of rowing". Hence they gave "a performance very little better than that of their decrepit neighbours".

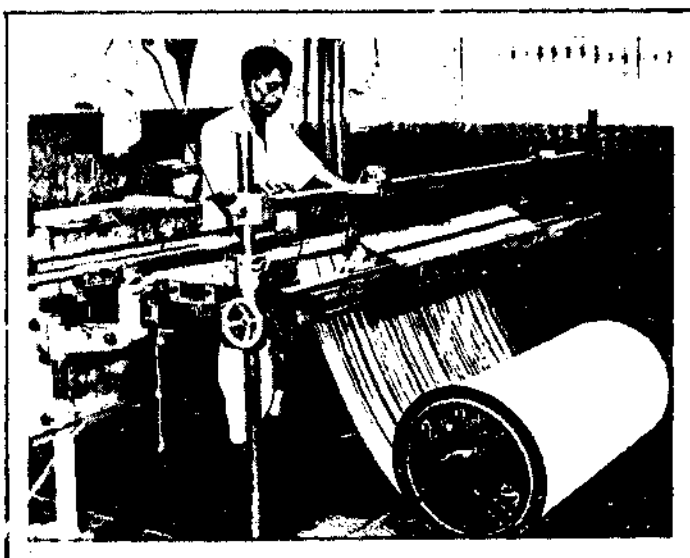
The report attributes this not to the lack of technologists but to "the failure of management". This has also attracted comment from a number of textile machinery manufacturers, both Indian and foreign. They appear to be unanimous in prescribing a complete restructuring of management and administration.

On this view, the inefficiency of the

industry can at least in part be traced back to obsolete, family-based and unprofessional management which even in the face of crises has not shaken off its complacency.

The poverty of management has been compounded in India by state policy. The government has never insisted on minimum performance improvement guarantees from the textile industry even while granting it doles, incentives, concessions and tax benefits. Even more serious is the error of commission: the government's protection to the so-called decentralised sector. Handlooms (on last count 39.4 lakhs) and powerlooms (5.3 lakhs) now account for almost 60 per cent of production of all cotton cloth. Thirty years ago the proportion was a little over 21 per cent. In respect of blended or fully man-made fabrics, their share is an even higher 73 per cent. Even though handlooms are grossly inefficient, the reasoning advanced for supporting them has some merit - generation or protection of employment in the rural areas at a low capital-output ratio and sustaining ethnic designs and skills in dispersed centres.

THERE IS NO merit whatsoever in the case for protecting powerlooms, which, typically, are usually rejected or secondhand looms from the organised mills. The powerlooms sector is usually 70 per cent less efficient than the mills industry. The quality of employment it generates is dubious. Besides, as everyone in the textile business knows, a very large number of powerlooms are owned by textile magnates themselves. Even when they are not, their owners are tied in a



monopolistic relationship to the big mills for their processing and marketing needs. What is more, the powerloom business is a major centre of excise duty evasion, a resource sink and a conduit into the black economy that is closely linked to the mill industry itself.

In spite of all this the Union commerce ministry has with sickening regularity allowed the powerlooms to mushroom and then legalised them year after year. Thus the number of "regularised" powerlooms has more than trebled in the last 15 years. The output from these machines matches that from the entire mill industry. The powerloom sector is so powerful that it could easily fill the cloth scarcity created by the Bombay textile strike.

Today, industry sources estimate, about 100 powerlooms are being installed every day in the country. Their metastatic growth has ensured both that the mill industry could not expand and that the more backward mills face a competition (thanks to the powerloom owners' advantage of excise evasion and sweated labour) resulting in lower profits for the organised sector. But besides the growth of the parasitical powerloom sector, what seems to have acted as a strong deterrent to the growth and development of the textile mill industry is the low and basically uniform level of wages prevalent in it for decades.

This may at first appear paradoxical. However, historically, rising wages have been the single most important stimulus towards technological improvement, higher efficiency and enhanced profitability in the textile industry throughout the world. To take one instance, in West Germany, wage increases of almost 800 per cent between 1955 and 1979 forced the textile industry to undertake rapid modernisation by eliminating certain processes, shortening others, reducing machine strain and maintenance time, and by the incorporation of sophisticated but cheap microprocessor-based controls into the production process. In less than two decades, there was a 284 per cent spurt in productivity and the problem-ridden industry became competitive.

Are any such options open to Indian mills? Can they undertake modernisation at a rapid enough pace and overcome the backlog, which itself has quadrupled in the last decade to

anything between Rs.2,000 crores and Rs.2,500 crores in ICMF's reckoning?

THE BOMBAY TEXTILE strike has given the concession-hungry mill owners an opportunity to pose these questions and argue for various forms of aid to be granted to them to revive the industry. The ICMF has revived its 1979 proposal for a modernisation reserve fund (MRF) to be created by setting aside 30 per cent of all the mills' pre-tax profits before depreciation. The amount thus funded would be eligible for tax rebates and mill companies appropriating it will qualify for investment allowance in the year of installation of machinery.

Despite its seemingly innocuous character, this proposal is a recipe for disaster. For it is likely to help the industry perpetuate its backwardness. There are three arguments against it. The first, a historical one, is that no blanket industry-wide scheme of concessional aid for textile mills has ever worked.

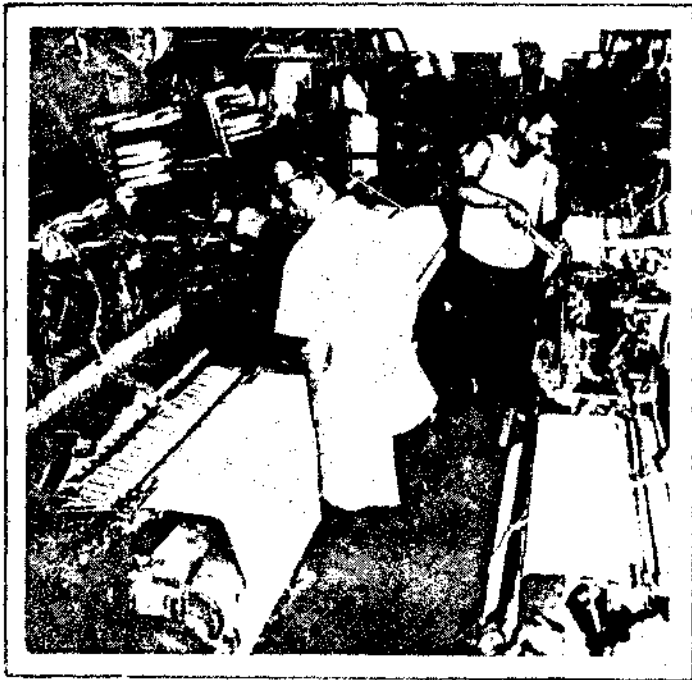
Under the soft loan scheme, for instance, the industry has so far drawn Rs.260 crores out of a total sanction of Rs.441 crores. This sum, disbursed over five years, represents no more than three-fourths of the capital needed each year to undertake the modest plan of replacing a fraction of the most obsolete of the existing machinery.

The backlog, in reality much bigger if the criterion of international competitiveness is applied, can never be overcome with such small sums of money over the deployment of which there is no control. There is also reason to believe that the money could be misused, as it was in the past.

Secondly, the ICMF proposal does not force the mills to make a bankable proposal for modernisation, linking their plans with clear cash flow projections and future viability. This is important, since sub-critical levels of machinery renewal, or improper deployment of the new equipment - something that dozens of mills have distinguished themselves by - yield no results and must be prevented. Thus, besides causing an estimated loss of Rs.100 to 150 crores a year in government revenue, the MRF could also prove to be a great resource drain.

Thirdly, and crucially, the proposal lumps together the good mills with the bad ones, the basically unviable ones with the potentially viable ones, the badly managed ones with those that are run by industrialists with a commitment to the industry.

This crucial distinction is precisely what a collective trade or industry association will naturally resist. Yet the brutal fact is that at least 30 per cent of all Indian mills are unviable and have no future. Their survival can only be a drag on the healthier mills. The logic of capitalist growth dictates that they must be allowed to liquidate themselves, close down and disappear.



THIS IS A hard choice. But then there are no soft options in an industry that has been turned gravely sick by decades of mismanagement. The closure of a third of the mills will certainly pose the problem of retrenchment on a scale without precedent in the country. This is indeed a thorny issue with many political overtones. This writer is opposed to mass retrenchment on both political and humanistic grounds. However, there are several options here. For instance, retraining of a large number of workers, a sliding scale of wages, working hours, the imposing of a levy of 10 to 20 paise a metre on all mill and powerloom cloth to generate a large fund through which workers who cannot find alternative jobs

can be paid 50 or 75 per cent of their wages for a long period of time on a graduated scale starting at 100 per cent.

All this requires the state to make basic decisions on a number of issues such as absolutely disallowing any growth of powerlooms, policing the sale of yarn, looms and cloth, eschewing a 'block' industry-wide approach and insisting on bankable and technically viable proposals as opposed to doles.

Only this can allow the healthier mills, whether in the public or private sector, to modernise themselves rapidly by taking full advantage of the present recession in the world textile machinery manufacturing industry, extracting deferred payment terms from it, importing high-technology equipment cheap (a second-hand Sulzer loom costs just Rs.2 lakhs) and using to the full all the hardware and software the local machinery manufacturers - typically not inefficient, but right now protected by a high 54 per cent effective tariff - have to offer.

What is of vital importance here is that the unions and militants in the textile industry formulate, through a broad-based debate, an interventionist strategy arguing for alternatives to the existing mis-management and malpractices prevalent in the mills. To leave the entire issue to the millowners or to the government would be to give up the opportunity to fight for a resolution of the industry's crisis on the workers' terms.

It is only through an aggressive intervention and the fight for alternatives that the workers can both protect their immediate interests and formulate a long term perspective of a new form of industrial and social organisation.

— Praful Bidwai
(Courtesy: The Times of India)

Fiddling With Figures

An honest accountant's nightmare

Even though most millowners today maintain that they are not in a position to pay higher wages because of low profitability, this article gives an indication of how millowners make profits without necessarily disclosing them.

On various occasions during this textile strike, the Millowners Association has claimed that several (nearly 15) mills have now suffered losses and subsequently will not be in a position to grant any wage increases to their workers. This contention has been based on the operating results and financial positions displayed in the audited accounts of the concerned mills. Dr. Samant, however, has rejected all proposals to use the audited accounts of the mills as a basis for gauging their profitability and assessing their ability to pay workers higher wages. The difference of opinion regarding the reliability of audited accounts is yet another problem-issue that has created an impasse in the 10-month-old textile strike.

Audited accounts form part of the various safeguards established in corporate legislation to protect the investor. However, in most developed countries other interest groups such as employers, taxation authorities and economists, are also aided by correct and proper disclosure.

In India today, whatever corporate legislation that exists has been very recently introduced. Since most of the textile mills have been working for 50 years or longer, the period of unregulated reporting has been very long.

Indian corporate legislation, as encapsulated in the Companies Act, exhibits a clear tightening of controls from February 1, 1973 when the Companies (Amendment) Act, 1974, was made effective. Prior to this the law contained several weaknesses which were used by most textile mill managements to siphon off large sums of money from public enterprises. Considering that the changes made are only eight years old, the history of regulation is fairly short. A recounting of the situation that prevailed earlier shows the enormous extent of "freedom" in accountability that existed.

Prior to the amendment act of 1974,

private companies, 25% or more of whose paid-up capital was held by a body corporate, were deemed to be public companies. By reducing the share held by a public limited corporation in a private company to below 25% of the paid-up capital, the private company's profit and loss account could be kept secret. Since only public companies are obliged to publish their balance sheets and profit and loss accounts, the subsidiary private company could be used to hide the real basis of all financial transactions. In such a situation the question of using audited accounts for wage negotiations did not arise. The finances of such a company were secret even though public money was involved.

Subsequently, two further criteria were introduced. These were:

a) *The Turnover criterion:*

If the turnover of a company is over Rs.1 crore continuously for three financial years the company is deemed to be a public company.

b) *Reverse investment criterion:*

If the private company holds 25% of the paid-up capital of a public company it is deemed to be a public company. This amendment has brought several corporate entities into the category of those deemed to be public companies.

However, the secrecy of accounts of a deemed public company can still be continued, if the government feels that it would be in the public interest to do so. The only important difference that the amendment has made is that the creation of sinecures has now become difficult since the appointment of various managerial personnel in a deemed public company has to be approved by the Centre.

THE AMENDMENT ACT of 1974 also gave power to the Registrar of Companies or an authorised officer of the government to inspect the books of account maintained by the company during business hours and without prior notice. This power prior to the amendment was restricted only to directors. Even now, no law provides for accounts of public companies to be open for inspection by employees.

One of the principal means employed by millowners prior to the February 1975 amendment to siphon off money from a company was the appointment of relatives or connected concerns to an office or place of profit with the company. A firm with which the directors were connected could be appointed to the office of, say, marketing consultants for a maximum term of five years. A reappointment could also be made after the expiry of the term for another five years without any restrictions. Large amounts of money could be paid to such firms by way of remuneration. It is well-known that crores of rupees were siphoned out of mills each year as remuneration for basically fictitious or totally inactive firms of "consultants".

Now, however, relatives of directors or firms in which the relatives are partners cannot be appointed to an office of profit under the company, without the approval of the company by a 75% majority if the remuneration is Rs.500 per month or more, and the approval of the Central government where the remuneration is Rs.3,000 per month or more.

The legislation is, however, still not very effective. The definition of the term "relative" still does not include any in-law or first cousin. Hence, relatives can still be appointed to places of profit.

Also, even now there is no provision for obtaining approval from the employees for the appointments. Thus, this means of siphoning off funds continues to be useful to millowners even today.

THE APPOINTMENT of sole purchasing or selling agents remains one of the most effective methods of fiddling accounts and siphoning funds. This practice was prevalent in a large number of textile mills and could be used effectively to divert large sums of money (upto 5% of the turnover or of profits). In the 1960 amendment the government decided to regulate the appointment of sole selling agents.

Since then, where the company has a sole selling agent for any area the government may, where the terms of his appointment are prejudicial to the company, modify the terms. However, the government has to be

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satisfied that the company has a "sole selling agent for an area" - a term which has not been defined in the act - and that the terms of his appointment are not "prejudicial to the company" - a phrase which is open to interpretation.

Due to the above loopholes the practice continues to flourish. As was evidenced by the Kohinoor Mills case - one of the biggest corporate frauds in the country - tens of crores of rupees, or over one-half of all profits could be diverted through the agency channels.

This is true, with a vengeance, of purchasing agents who levy a commission on all purchases made by the mill company. Cotton, the major purchase, offers opportunities for this form of manipulation since its price varies day after day. To take an instance, cotton actually purchased for, say Rs.3,500 a bale on day one can be shown in the books as having cost Rs.3,800 - the price on day two. Thus the mill company's costs are jacked up, and profits lowered while the purchasing agents - in reality a relative or surrogate of the millowner - makes not only a larger commission on a higher price, but also another clean Rs.300!

The millowners, any accountant will confirm, are adept at this game. Almost without exception, they maintain two entirely separate books of accounts and employ sophisticated networks to rig and doctor prices and costs. In fact, elaborate computer programmes have been developed by data processing specialists that enable the millowners to make huge trading profits on cotton purchase and at the same time ensure that these do not appear in the official books of accounts. These programmes - and there are no fewer than seven on the market - are hot sellers. With their aid, the costs of manufacture can be artificially jacked up by crores of rupees a month (or 10 to 15 per cent of the total expenditure of a typical large mill) while profits are depressed by an even larger proportion. Needless to say, the directed funds constitute a flow of unaccounted income, or more simply, black money.

Purchases are not the only source of black money for the mills. Most mills generate large quantities through their dealers by

levying a special "No.2" charge on fast-moving products. For instance, for at least five of the fast-moving popular varieties of cloth manufactured by a well-known textile mill of Bombay - incidentally, one which makes 100 per cent cotton cloth - dealers have to pay between Re0.50 and Rs. Rs.2.00 in cash before taking delivery.

The annual sales of these varieties of cloth are of the order of 50 million metres!

The various official committees that have attempted to estimate the volume of black money in circulation have identified the textile industry as a major locus of unaccounted funds. The volume generated in this industry managed by expert manipulators and fiddlers could be as high as Rs.500 crores.

But if fiddling with income and profit is a source of diversion of funds, manipulating assets is an even richer one. Millowners have devised several ingenious ways of hoodwinking auditors scrutinising their asset calculations.

(1) The Manufacturing and Other Companies (Auditors Report) Order 1975, promulgated in February 1975, requires the auditor to report on several points which used to go unreported earlier.

The first point of these relates to whether the company has maintained a register of all fixed assets and whether it verified them during the year being reported on.

This order is meant to safeguard against unreported selling of assets by managements. Several instances of concealed sales of assets have come to light recently during investigations launched by the government and by banks which had lent funds to mills. To take one example, the management of Sitaram Mills sold their stocks of cloth, but in a statement to the bankers, United Commercial Bank, showed them as an existing asset with a value of Rs.30 lakhs. The same worthy management, now in the process of closing the mill on account of "huge losses", had also sold a large plot of land at the same time at a grossly undervalued price - having presumably collected the rest in cash, an

element that contributes handsomely to its "huge losses".

The auditor is usually helpless in the face of such tricks. Being a non-technical accounting professional, he is normally not competent to identify assets like plant and machinery. Hence a statement by the management that the assets have been verified is easily accepted by most auditors. A similar compromise is made by auditors in case of assets like stocks of finished goods, stores, spares and raw materials on which the third clause of the order requires them to report.

Another clause in the 1975 order expects auditors to opine on whether the purchase from companies in which directors are interested are made at reasonable prices. The reasonability has to be decided in a prudent manner and management are easily able to show intangible benefits which are claimed to be sufficient for continued purchases from such firms even at higher prices. The auditor is in no position to inquire into market prices of such commodities.

Prior to the order several cases had occurred where managements had squandered away or simply stolen employees' provident fund dues. This prompted the insertion of clause 13 of the order, directing auditors to enquire whether all PF dues had been deposited with appropriate authorities within the 15 days limit set by the Act. It is well-known however, that millowners have no hesitation in dipping into the PF till. The vast majority of the mills that fell sick and were taken over by the NTC - and they account for a third of all textile mills in India - were characterised by this form of outright swindling. The list of swindlers, past and present, is long, even going by the proceedings instituted by the Provident Fund Commissioner: India United, Apollo, Prakash Cotton, Sholapur, Dhanraj, Seksaria...

Some of them were distinguished by calculated attempts by their owners to burn the entire property and collect insurance money!

In an industry marked by such high levels of business surplus, corporate kickbacks are the small change of regular operating practices. The managing owner is in a very

important position in a corporate organisation. He holds the power of day-to-day decisions and directs the general course of the company. The amount of money invested by him in the business is not necessarily, and usually not, commensurate with the amount of power vested in him.

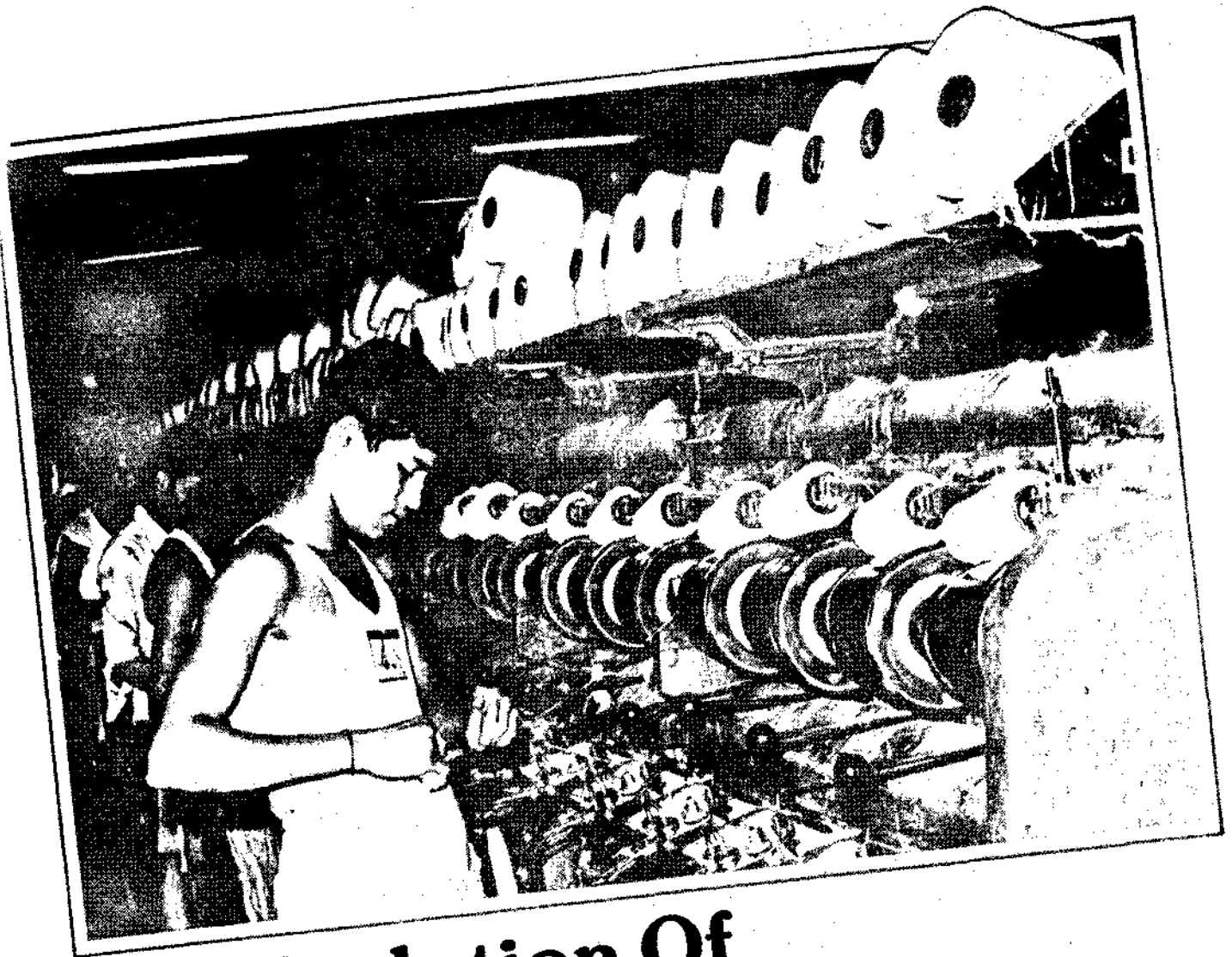
Several managing owners have in the past misused their positions to amass personal fortunes through corporate kickbacks.

In the period prior to 1976-77 the textile industry went through several extremely profitable booms. During this time several managements resorted to underinvoicing in a big way. The difference was collected in cash by the dealers and distributors, with appropriate cuts along the way and a portion was kicked finally back to the managing owner himself. Underinvoicing acquires serious proportions in the textile export business.

A large amount of profit continues to be channelised into a parallel economy. To evade detection it must be spent in non-durable consumer expenditure at home and abroad. However, experience shows that the income tax department is not really interested in conducting door-to-door surveys to unearth over-expenditure. Emboldened by this the owners started purchasing smuggled consumer durables and even high cost investments like estate and jewellery. Equally significant is their opening of numbered accounts in foreign, particularly Swiss banks. Enquiries with Reserve Bank and Enforcement Directorate Officials reveal that the volume of funds being siphoned off the mills, into luxury consumption and out into foreign accounts is extremely high - perhaps 10 per cent of the official value of textile exports each year.

Although it is difficult to document, underinvoicing is a widely prevalent practice in the export trade. And unsurprisingly, textile magnates were the main Indian architects and innovators of various elaborate systems of underinvoicing and kickbacks. After all, they continue to remain past masters at the art of the fiddle - and the honest auditors' nightmare.

— By a Special Correspondent



The Evolution Of The Textile Industry

A brief overview

The history of cotton and cotton textile production in India can be broadly divided into three phases, including the present one, each characterised by specific socio-cultural, economic and political situations.

The first phase goes far back into ancient and medieval India and ends with the entry of the East India Company. During this period the spinners and weavers of India attained the summit of specialisation in their craft and achieved wide fame for the fabrics they produced, both for the

pleasure loving ruling classes of the world as well as the Indian population. Spinning and weaving were essentially a cottage enterprise in the country side, while in the urban areas, cloth was produced in *karkhanas* or workshops, especially in the capitals of kings and governors. The rural artisans thus relying on a self-sufficient village economy remained not only isolated, but nursed a fatal weakness in their structure by neglecting to organise themselves into corporate bodies like the guilds in Europe.

The East India Company exploited precisely this weakness of the Indian textile trade

and its first Charter in 1600, ushered in the second phase of the history of cotton textile production in India. The governing objective was not the hunt for a market for British manufactures but an endeavour to secure a supply of Indian products especially those which found a ready market in England and Europe, and could thus yield a rich profit on every successful expedition that could return with a fresh supply. The original adventures combined trade with piracy; the merchant, favourably placed in relation to the individual weavers was able to secure a bargain which shed all pretence of equal exchange. It was this exploitation that laid the basis for large scale accumulation of merchant capital in England which was instrumental in ushering in the Industrial Revolution.

But this necessitated a revolution in the economic system from the principle of mercantile capitalism to free trade capitalism. The rising English manufacturing interests and the powerful traders demanded free entry into India as a market. The corrupt monopolist administration of the East India Company was ended with its final merger with the Crown in 1858 and thus began the third phase in the textile industry. India was transformed from being a country of combined agriculture and manufacturing into an agricultural colony of British manufacturing capitalism.

It was on the basis of technical superiority of machine industry, direct state assistance of one-way free trade and prevention of direct trade between India and European or other foreign countries by the operation of the Navigation Act, that the predominance of British manufactures was built up in the Indian market and the Indian manufacturing industry was destroyed.

The tariff discrimination against Indian manufacturers to build up the British textile industry was carried on in the first half of the 19th century.

This trend continued through the 19th century into the twentieth century. Between 1814 and 1835, British cotton manufactures exported to India rose from less than 1 million yards to over 51 million yards. In the same period Indian cotton piece goods imported into Britain fell from one and a quarter million pieces to 306,000 pieces.

The 1911 Census Report revealed the same process to be continuing. In textiles, the

report recorded a decrease in the number of textile workers by 6% in the preceding 10 years, despite extension of textile manufacturing in India. This decrease is attributed to "the almost complete extinction of cotton spinning by hand".

It was in this situation (during the third phase), when the local industry had been all but destroyed, that in July 1854, the pioneering efforts of C.N. Davar in Bombay led to the development of modern industry. Mill production began in February 1856 and encouraged Davar to project a second enterprise in 1857, which went into operation in 1859.

However, India possessed only the raw materials and markets for yarn and cloth. The plans of production and machinery had to be imported. Skilled experts to guide the erection of the mill and handle the equipment had to come from England. Coal and wood for fuel was transported to Bombay by sea. The finance was provided by more than 50 Bombay merchants who formed a joint stock company.

The logic of cotton manufacture by modern technology impressed more than one group of entrepreneurs at the same time. The Oriental Spinning and Weaving company floated in 1855 was designed as a composite mill. By 1862 there were at least four mills with 94,000 spindles, 2,150 looms and six more mills were under construction. Following this there was a momentary halt to the construction of cotton mills in Bombay because of the American Civil War boom and its financial aftermath but by 1870 progress had resumed. The post-1870 period was one of extensive growth and saw the rapid entry of new firms and concentration on yarn production. There is no statistical data bearing evidence of the industry's prosperity and profitability. But barring a few minor crises, the industry enjoyed a great deal of prosperity.

The years 1891-1922 were a complex period, marked by a slow rate of entries of new units, expansion of old units, increasing emphasis on weaving units and a shift to finer-count production.

A number of factories had begun to threaten the Bombay mills. The silver

crises of 1893, the bubonic plague and famines in the country were some of the immediate factors. The growth of textile factories in Japan and China undermined the stability of Bombay yarn markets in S.E. Asia. Domestically, the Bombay producers began to face competition from up-country mills. Between 1905-14, the gross profit on paid up capital was on average 27.1%. After World War I and the curb of cloth and yarn imports from Britain, profits rose. In the six years, 1917-22, while paid up capital was inflated, gross profits averaged 75.6% and touched 102.7% in 1920.

1923-47

The boom came to an end in 1922 and the third phase was ridden with problems.

The increasing competition from Japanese producers and mills elsewhere in India, forced readjustment and adjustment during the next decade-and-a-half. Basic technological and organizational changes were the need of the hour. The industry was handicapped because it came out of the boom with the capital value of virtually unmodified plant largely inflated. In addition to the burden of high fixed costs, labour unrest made the adaptation process difficult. Global recession exacerbated the crisis in industry.

It was not till World War II that the situation improved. The curb on foreign competition gave a fillip to the Bombay mills. Military needs increased demand for cotton products and countries once dependent on other suppliers turned to India for cotton textiles.

The first textile mills which sprang up in Bombay between 1850 - 1864 were planned with care and used fairly up-to-date equipment. After 1870, however, the tendency to make a fast buck, and rampant speculation, led to the hasty establishment of a number of mills which were technically deficient. While this trend was not so true to Bombay, it was in effect a general phenomenon which stretched across the country. The vast diversity in type, efficiency of equipment and layout among individual mills in the industry, resulted in the piling-up of problems which, in the final analysis, were unburdened on the worker.

In contrast to the situation in England, Bombay mills purchased foreign equipment, depressed the wage levels and substituted labour for capital wherever possible. Historically, this showed itself in the slow introduction of labour-saving innovations; the mixing, winding and reeling departments were mechanised only after World War I. In the weaving department, there was a tendency to utilise labour-intensive rather than labour-saving equipment. Low wages encouraged the use of short-staple cotton, high-speed machines and the production of a variety of products in a mill.

There is too little data pertaining to labour costs vis-a-vis total costs in the industry. Information received by the Indian Tariff Board suggests that, in the 1920s, labour costs were a small proportion of the total costs, not beyond 15 to 20%. It is very likely that they were lower in the preceding decades.

For a long period, particularly during the 1920s, the Bombay textile industry was bled of its profits by the managing agency system. Though the system was earlier financed Indian enterprises under scant capital conditions, it introduced general slackness, corruption and a speculative fever into the industry. Not quite evident then, the repercussions on labour were to prove themselves to be far-reaching and chronic.

For the managing agents, cotton textiles were merely a profit-making venture which could finance interests in other fields. A common practice for achieving this was that controlling interest acquired at the time of the setting up of a particular mill was progressively cut down to a minor shareholding. Before the reduction of propriety stakes, however, the managing agents exercised a stronghold over the mill, often in perpetuity, in the form of a right to sell the agency without any liability to other shareholders.

The stripping of the textile mills was therefore, irreversible. In 1886, for instance, all managing agents were paid a commission on mill output regardless of the profitability of its operations. Additionally, by contractual right, they set themselves up as suppliers of raw material and services to the mills they ran.

In some firms, the efficient management of the mills helped to maximise profits for the managing agents. Such cases were, however, rare. By and large, a maximisation of profits for the controlling interests of the mills did not necessarily mean a simultaneous maximisation of the profits of the mills themselves. This trend of 'economic bleeding' established a certain

While the dictates of the overall policy were set by the managing agents, the implementation was solely in the hands of the managers, and the working of specific departments were under carding, spinning and weaving master assistants. Further down, the jobbers supervised the workers in each department. It would seem here that such a 'pyramid of authority' kept the ball rolling down to the last man.

This 'pyramid of authority', in fact, did not exist. If it did, in the earlier stages of the textile industry, it was effectively sabotaged by the managing agents who refused to sub-let power to the manager. The turnover of managers was consequently high. In a tussle for the loyalty of the workers, the managing agents would eventually win; and the consequences of the hierarchical administration of the mills were severe.

Top-level quibbling led to the endowment of a massive dose of power and responsibility for the jobber. In the absence of a solid middle-management cadre, the jobber became the key figure in labour recruitment and discipline. Thereafter, managing agents balked at the idea of investing in more expensive middle-management supervisory staff. There was, in fact, no vertical link between the workers and the management, a problem which has been compounded over the years by the maintenance of this practice and has led directly to the present confrontation.

Even the Bombay Mill Owners' Association (BMOA) has rarely exercised its capacity as a representative body of the industry so far as the technical organisation of the industry and the administration of the labour force is concerned.

The association itself had come into existence in 1875 as an instrument of

self-protection against unfavourable tariff legislation. It functioned fairly well as a watchdog against outside pressure, but within the industry itself its record is marred by injustices and outright failures in enforcing its decisions upon individual members.

Therefore, while perusing a history of the development of the labour force in the Bombay cotton textile industry, it would be wise to avoid reading too much into the association's formal resolutions and its official records and programmes. All its policies must be tested in the light of the dismal results that emerged.

The post Independence phase saw the Indian government embark on a massive industrialization programme. In order to lay the infrastructural foundations for industrialization, the government began investing in the basic, petrochemical and engineering industry, to the relative neglect of the consumer goods industry, including the textile industry.

With the advent of mechanization, mill spun yarn was used in spinning and handloom weaving which burgeoned into a cottage industry. This was the genesis of the handloom sector, whose size can be gauged from the 400 - odd spinning mills, only making yarn for this sector.

In the second quarter of this century, a third sector, the decentralized powerloom sector came into existence (midway between handlooms and organized weaving mills). This sector reaped the boon of mechanization and decentralization.

The 5 lakh powerlooms, 30 lakh handlooms and 2 lakh looms in the 300 organized composite spinning and weaving mills that feed the powerlooms and handlooms, together make up the picture of the textile industry. They produce 10,000 million metres of cloth every year with 40% of it coming from organized mills and the rest shared between handlooms and powerlooms.

The government has resorted to a deliberate policy of curbing the growth of the mill sector and encouraging the growth of the handloom and the decentralized powerloom sector. The rationale for this was that

a labour-saving technology should be encouraged. However, as pointed out earlier, this was an era in which priority was accorded to basic infrastructural industry. The consumer industry was neglected and its modernization was postponed. The handloom and decentralized powerloom sector was to cater to the internal market which was considered large enough. The growth of the textile industry was possible without an export orientation. This was a further reason not to modernize these sectors. The government however wanted to modernize the mill sector for profit margins and foreign exchange earnings. The textile industry has traditionally been export oriented and the mill sector was to cater to the international markets. The government's discrimination against the mill sector takes a number of forms.

Firstly, the government subsidizes the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, which organizes the production and sale of handspun and handwoven cloth. The government also buys khadi (handspun cloth) for the uniforms of its employees.

Secondly, the government banned the installation of new looms by mills in 1956. Since then mills have been allowed to purchase looms only for replacement or for export production.

Thirdly, the government charges excise duties on the mills' output of yarn and cloth. The ban on new looms in mills and the differential excise duties largely benefited powerlooms set up outside mills to the detriment of handlooms. Therefore, since 1976 excise duties have been levied on the processed output of powerlooms as well though not at such high rates as those on the mills' output. But powerlooms evade duties to a considerable extent.

Fourthly, the government required, from 1965 till 1978, that a certain proportion of the mill output should consist of coarse cloth and must be sold below a controlled maximum price. The idea was to subsidize poor buyers at the expense of the rich. However, apart from the losses this scheme imposed on weaker weaving mills, neither handlooms nor mills taken over by the government could face the resulting competition in the market for coarse cloth.

The government now uses the mills which went bankrupt and were nationalized to make the bulk of cheap cloth for sale, and supplements its supply by purchasing a small quantity of coarse yarn on tender from mills.

Finally, the government has used the industrial licencing mechanism to encourage cooperative spinning mills which are expected to sell their yarn to member weavers.

Except for a very small amount of cotton that is handspun, all yarn is made in large-scale textile mills in India. There are two types of mills - those that only spin yarn (the spinning mills), and those that weave it as well (the composite mills). The latter as a group produce more yarn than they need for their own cloth manufacture, and sell the rest in the market. The yarn supplied by spinning and composite mills is bought by handloom and powerloom weavers through traders or through their own cooperatives.

It has been a standing complaint of the small-scale sector that composite mills first meet their own yarn requirements and sell only the surplus. If this were so, the proportion of yarn sold to the small scale sector should have fallen whenever there was a yarn shortage. In fact, it rose sharply in 1964-67 and 1974-77 when yarn out-put fell. According to our reading, given the differential excise duties, the wage differentials and the restrictions in technological change in weaving by mills, the small-scale powerloom sector has enjoyed a competitive edge over the mills, spinning yarn for sale is more profitable than weaving even for composite mills, and hence the small-scale sector's complaints of yarn shortage are only a reflection of the powerlooms' profitability.

Nevertheless, these complaints have evoked a policy response. In contrast to its freeze on mills' weaving capacity, the government liberally sanctioned the expansion of spinning capacity. In sanctioning such capacity it gave preference to spinning mills, and especially to spinning mills started by loom cooperatives, of which there were 54

by 1978, and another 10 under construction (committee on controls and subsidies 1979:185) The expansion in spindleage was therefore accompanied by an increase in the number of mills; the average size of a spinning mill changed little between 1950 and 1979

This expansion led to competition between three sets of mills: old spinning mills, composite mills, and new mills. The new mills installed ring frames of postwar design, which were appreciably faster than the power models in old spinning and composite mills.

The old mills met the competition in two ways. They increased the multiple shift working; the proportion of spindles in the second-shift operation rose from 76% in 1955 to 87% in 1965, while the proportion in the third shift operation went up even more sharply from 25 to 65%. Thus by 1965 virtually the entire spinning industry was working two shifts, and three-quarters of it was working three shifts.

This high level of capacity utilization was not maintained after 1965, for cotton supply could no longer keep pace with the growth of spindles. Further, the new mills also came to achieve equally high levels of capacity utilization. In the ensuing competition, a number of spinning mills closed down or were taken over by the government. There was, however, no fall in multiple shift operation.

Secondly, the expansion of spindleage was accompanied by investment in cotton preparation - in blowroom machinery, carding engines, draw frames, speed frames and doubling frames. Whilst much of it went into new spinning mills, old ones also improved their processes in two ways. For one thing, they installed new carding engines, including newer and larger models, to improve the quality of slivers. Further, they installed high draft conversion attachments designed to increase the speed of draw frames and ring frames, which raised their capacity by 10-20%.

There was, however, one change that did not occur. Till 1966 India grew very little long staple cotton; what little was used was imported. After 1966 new local hybrids went into cultivation, and their output rose so rapidly that they replaced imports

and supplied nearly a quarter of the cotton by 1978. With this change in the staple pattern of cotton supply, one would have expected a corresponding change in the count composition of yarns. The yarn output pattern did move towards higher counts, but not nearly so much as the shift in the staple composition would have permitted.

Evidently, the new supplies of long staple cotton were being used to produce medium counts. The reason for this was clearly related to the demand pattern for cloth.

Apart from its implications for capital utilization, multiple shift operations enabled mills to improve labour productivity in two ways; some of the surplus workers could be transferred to the second and third shifts, and since workers were not so easily available for the night shift, lower manning levels were accepted for it.

WEAVING

According to the last figures published by the Textile Commissioner, the number of handlooms covered by cooperatives was 1.4 million in 1969 (Textile Commissioner 1972: 57, 75). Their capacity (reckoned at 5 metres a day for 300 days a year) should be 2100 million metres, or nearly 60% of the small-scale sectors' output in that year. But their capacity utilization is poor. Their capital costs are low, and so are the wages of handloom weavers. So when alternative employment offers better wages, weavers take up outside work. It is doubtful if more than 10% of small scale production is woven on handlooms.

The competing groups that matter are therefore composite mills and powerlooms in the small-scale sector. This competition has been regulated by the government by means of differential excise duties.

Powerlooms were untaxed till 1955, when a duty was introduced at rates of Rs.25,75 & 150 per loom on units with 5-24 & 24-49, and over 50 looms respectively. But in practice, large units evaded duty by dispersing looms in a number of sites until the exemption given to units with 1-4 looms was removed in 1965 (MOA 1966: 22B-229). In 1976 this loom duty was replaced by duties on processed cloth and powerlooms which were 30 and 70% respectively of the duties paid by mills; handloom cooperatives however, continued to be exempt (MOA 1979: 431).

Growth Of The Indian Cotton Mill Industry
(As at commencement of the year)

Year	Number of mills			Installed spindles (Million)			Installed looms ('000)		
	Spinning	Composite	Total	Spinning	Composite	Total	Ordinary	Automatic	Total
1951	103	275	378	1.84	9.16	11.00	N.A.	N.A.	195
1956	121	291	412	1.86	10.19	12.05	191	12	203
1961	192	287	479	3.05	10.61	13.66	183	16	199
1962	196	285	481	3.19	10.64	13.83	181	18	199
1963	211	287	498	3.39	10.72	14.11	180	20	200
1964	223	291	514	3.55	11.11	14.66	179	24	203
1965	253	290	543	3.94	11.49	15.43	178	28	206
1966	283	292	575	4.36	11.76	16.12	179	30	209
1967	317	292	609	4.68	11.99	16.67	172	35	207
1968	346	289	635	5.05	12.04	17.09	173	34	207
1969	358	289	647	5.31	12.12	17.43	172	36	208
1970	366	290	656	5.46	12.21	17.67	171	37	208
1971	373	291	664	5.67	12.21	17.88	170	38	208
1972	379	291	670	5.85	12.26	18.11	170	38	208
1973*	309	291	600	5.82	12.16	17.98	169	38	207
1974	326	289	615	5.95	12.19	18.14	166	40	206
1975	330	287	617	6.32	12.18	18.50	165	42	207
1976	330	288	618	7.04	12.32	19.36	165	42	207
1977	338	289	627	7.41	12.48	19.89	164	44	208
1978	347	290	637	7.40	12.30	19.70	162	44	206
1979	357	291	648	7.68	12.40	20.08	161	46	207
1980	370	291	661	8.16	12.52	20.68	158	48	308
1981	400	291	691	8.47	12.61	21.08	159	49	208
1982	442	281+	723	9.35	12.43	21.78	158	52	210

N.A. Not available

*From 1973 onwards figures are exclusive of those for waste-spinning units.

+The reduction in the number of composite mills is due to reclassification of ten composite mills into spinning mills.

(Source: Handbook of Statistics on Cotton Textile Industry published by The Indian Cotton Mills' Federation, Bombay, Sept.1982)

Mill production was almost free of excise till 1949; there was only a 25% duty on superfine cloth. In 1949 small revenue duties were imposed on all cloth, which increased with its fineness.

The revenue duties began to rise in 1956, when the government's budgetary demands started increasing for the finance of the second Five Year Plan. In 1958 was introduced a system which lasted till 1977, under which the rates increased with the fineness as well as the degree of processing. In 1977 this system was replaced by one where the duty increased progressively with the price of the cloth, except that fine and superfine cloth bore the highest duty whatever its price.

This differential taxation had two effects. First, it discouraged the production of finer cloth. Fiscal discrimination explains the fact, noticed in the earlier section that the pattern of yarn output did not move towards finer counts nearly as much as the pattern of cotton consumption moved towards long staple fibres. In the seventies, spinning mills were producing coarser yarn than they could have with the available cotton because at the relative post-duty cloth prices there was not enough demand for fine cloth.

An incidental effect of this shift in the output pattern was that less cloth was produced. For while a kilogram of yarn (of the appropriate count) produces about the same length of superior medium and fine cloth, it produces 50-60% more superfine cloth. Thus the use of cotton which could have produced superfine cloth to make less fine cloth caused a commensurate loss of output. If the long-staple fibre, constituting roughly a quarter of the total consumption by the late seventies, had been used to make superfine cloth, it would have added 12-15% to the aggregate cloth production.

Secondly, the duties diverted production to powerlooms, and the diversion was greater in the case of fine fabrics which were more heavily taxed. It has been commonly believed that fine cloth was a preserve of the mill industry, and that the small-scale sector concentrated on coarse cloth. It is true that as a whole, the small-scale sector produces a larger proportion of coarse cloth. This is particularly the case with handlooms.

The loom-time per metre increases with the fineness of the cloth, and therefore so does the weaving cost per metre. Since handlooms are much slower than powerlooms, the cost difference between fine and coarse handloom cloth is greater than is the case with powerloom cloth. Since fine cloth takes longer to weave on a handloom, inventory costs are also higher. Whilst, therefore, handlooms specialize in coarse cloth (and fabric of complicated weaving patterns requiring longer loom set-up times), there is no reason for powerlooms to do so. They are plain looms, but they are no less efficient than plain looms in the mills; if anything, they are newer on the average, for whilst mills have not been allowed to increase their loomage after 1956 and have largely been operating with pre-war looms, the powerlooms of the small-scale sector were mainly acquired in the fifties and sixties. Mills have been allowed to acquire some automatic looms or to replace plain looms with automatic ones, but such acquisitions have been allowed only for exports and are confined to a small number of mills, and the overall proportion of automatic looms remains small. Whilst concentrating on coarse dhoties and saris, powerlooms have increasingly ventured into the production of fine cloth.

Weaving mills countered the competition of powerlooms in three ways. Firstly, they increased the capacity utilization of looms by increasing third shift operation (as mentioned earlier). Whilst the rise in capacity utilization was not so spectacular as in spinning, virtually all looms were working two shifts and two-thirds of them three shifts by 1979.

Secondly, the mills increased the number of picks per metre of cloth, and wove more closely. They thus wove stronger and more durable cloth. The metreage woven per kilogram went down throughout the sixties, more for fine cloth. The impact was to be seen in the fall in per capita cloth consumption in the early seventies.

Thirdly, the mills began to process an increasing proportion of their cloth. Pre-shrinking processes, which were virtually unknown in the fifties, were applied to over half of the output by 1979. An increasing proportion of the cloth was dyed or printed. Printing used to be and to a considerable extent still is a manual

process in India, geared to short production runs and often custom-made. Mills began to compete with hand-printers; in this they were helped by the advent of new dyes in attractive colours and by rotary screen printing machines which brought flexibility into printing.

Not all cloth mills adopted these innovations. Those which lagged behind were driven into bankruptcy. A hundred and eleven mills, mostly composite ones, went to the wall in the late sixties and early seventies and were nationalised. Those that did improve their technology emerged with a product that was clearly differentiated from that of powerlooms in durability, quality and finish and which could therefore bear the higher duties. Many of them started or expanded their own retail shop networks, advertised their textiles and built up a brand image. But weaving mills as a group continued to lose ground. Even the sharp increase in the supply of synthetic fibres after 1975, in whose blending and utilization composite mills had a certain lead, did not reverse the continuing fall in their market share.

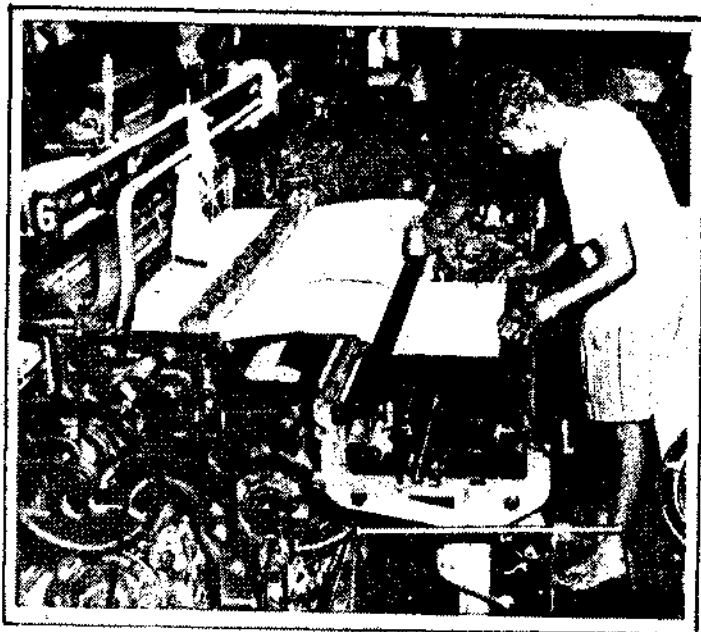
TEXTILE MACHINERY AND TECHNOLOGY

Textile technology at an international level has made rapid advances since World War II. All processes have been speeded up with a consequent saving in labour and space.

This rapid technological change has been engineered by a textile machinery industry which has its centre in Continental Europe. The machinery manufacturers clearly draw not only on their own technological skills or even those within their industry, but on a much wider set of skills available in their economies.

Nothing like this fund of scientific skills existed in India, or exists even now. The origins of the Indian textile machinery industry are to be found in three types of firms - a) repair and service specialists; b) stores importers and manufacturers; and c) confederates of foreign manufacturers. All confederates began business after blanket import substitution started in 1957.

In the years following World War II a large number of textile machines and accessories



were being made in India by the first two types of firms. Firms, like Texmaco, CIMMCO and National Machinery Manufacturers even made ring frames and looms. But they were making what were essentially pre-war British models, and the orders they got were mainly small replacement orders. New mills and mills taking up major re-equipment programmes still placed their big orders abroad. They did so basically because they trusted foreign brand names better and the assumption behind this preference, that they would get a more standardised, more reliable machine than at home, was, perhaps, not without substance. However export was not a compulsion and this level of technology would more than suffice for the home market.

The situation changed after 1956. The sudden rise in imports wiped out the sterling reserves built up during the war and led the government to impose stringent quantitative restrictions on imports. The principle of these restrictions was that if an item was being produced in India, it could not be imported unless its Indian manufacturer said he could not supply it.

The import restrictions gave Indian manufacturers control of the entire Indian market if only they could supply it. Supplying it did not require much manufacture in the early stages since liberal imports of components were initially allowed, to be phased down in later years. But there was a boom in the textile industry, and the market for textile machinery was growing. To exploit it, a manufacturer had to be able to increase his supply rapidly. It also helped

State-wise Installed Capacity As On January 1, 1982

State/Zone	Number of mills			Installed spindles (In thousands)			Installed Looms
	Spinning	Composite	Total	Spinning	Composite	Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Andhra Pradesh	31	2	33	732	77	809	1,246
Assam	2	-	2	37	-	37	-
Bihar	4	2	6	73	25	98	596
Gujarat	24	90	114	476	3,594	4,070	64,342
(a) Ahmedabad City	4	63	67	51	2,641	2,692	48,280
(b) Rest of Gujarat	20	27	47	425	953	1,378	16,062
Haryana	11	2	13	210	58	268	978
Jammu and Kashmir	1	-	1	28	-	28	-
Karnataka	21	11	32	387	456	843	6,413
Kerala	22	5	27	513	90	603	1,168
Madhya Pradesh	7	17	24	149	617	766	12,992
Tamil Nadu	213	24	237	4,301	1,257	5,558	10,430
(a) Coimbatore	99	15	114	1,988	649	2,637	4,290
(b) Rest of Tamil Nadu	114	9	123	2,313	608	2,921	6,140
Maharashtra	27	78	105	700	4,270	4,970	77,511
(a) Bombay	1	53	54	56	3,393	3,449	61,924
(b) Rest of Maharashtra	26	25	51	644	877	1,521	15,587
Orissa	4	1	5	77	51	128	1,014
Punjab	9	2	11	254	74	328	1,240
Rajasthan	14	7	21	299	219	518	2,939
Uttar Pradesh	26	15	41	561	773	1,334	13,273
(a) Kanpur	-	10	10	-	510	510	11,043
(b) Rest of U.P.	26	5	31	561	263	824	2,230
West Bengal	23	18	41	469	587	1,056	9,490
Delhi	-	4	4	-	175	175	3,370
Pondicherry	2	3	5	59	105	164	2,679
Goa	1	-	1	26	-	26	-
Total	442	281	723	9,351	12,428	21,779	2,09,681

(Source: Handbook of Statistics on Cotton Textile Industry published by The Indian Cotton Mills' Federation, Bombay, Sept. 1982)

if he could cater to the buyer's preference for a foreign brand name. The result was an enormous increase in the number of technology - import agreements (Textile Machinery Manufacturer's Association, 1961).

It should be noted that the machinery manufacturers imported technology not because they had none, as was the case in a number of other industries, but because they could not otherwise have raised production fast enough or supplied as good machinery. There was considerable repetitive import of technology. Not only was technology imported to produce machinery that was already being produced within the country, but manufacturers imported technology for goods they were already manufacturing and in each case they imported technology not to acquire a foreign name but to improve their own technology. Thus the late fifties saw a radical updating of textile technology, and in 1965 the gap between Indian and foreign technology was narrower than ever before or after.

Most of the early technology import agreements were with firms in West Germany and Japan. It may be argued however that there is little demand for advanced technology in India. This is true to some extent. For instant the considerable advances in synthetic technology made in the last 20 years found a limited market in India. But Indian manufacturers have generally been quite alive to major innovations abroad and quick to take licences. Textiles not being a priority industry, equipment imports continue to be restricted on the basis of domestic capacity.

In 1955-65 the risk of going into production was less, for the textile industry was expanding and at least in the initial stages a manufacturer got such liberal import licences that he had to manufacture very little.

The business was akin to assembly of imported components, and not too different from direct import. A number of manufacturers held import agencies for some products and licences to produce others, and converted one into the other if the market seemed to expand steadily.

But in the sixties, as India's foreign exchange resources fell even shorter of industry's requirements, import licences

were cut, more and more components had to be produced within the country, production and procurement became increasingly difficult, and equipment prices were progressively raised to maintain profit margins. This cost and price escalation continued till 1965. In that year, the cotton crop was poor, cotton prices rose sharply, a drought reduced rural demand for textiles, and the textile industry went into a slump. Despite liberal credits given by the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) for machinery purposes, the sales of textile equipment fell drastically. There is some evidence to show that the recession affected those producers and equipment more whose technology was old.

The firms which withstood the depression best were those which had specialized in high-wear items like bearings, top arms, spindle inserts and fluted rollers. The reason for their good performance was not simply steady demand for consumables; installation of high-draft attachments increased the speed of draw frames and ring frames and consequently the rate of depreciation of parts subjected to friction.

The promotion of small-scale production has been and continues to be an important element in Indian ideology and government policy. The means adopted to promote it in the textile industry consisted of discrimination in taxation and licensing against large mills and subsidies to small industry through the Khadi and Village Industries Commission as well as co-operatives.

If we look at the country's cloth production as a whole, these policies have had little success in changing the technology mix. But they have had a strong influence, quite unrelated to policy objectives, on the firms' size composition. They have prevented the growth of composite mills and have led to the installation of most of the new looms in extremely small enterprises.

Further they have had a number of unintended and indeed little noticed effects. Under pressures created by them, the mill industry has improved its capital utilization and quality of its product and endeavoured to meet the competition of the favoured powerlooms by means of product differentiation. It has met the competition of new enterprises with new and better equipment by means of small improvements in

technology and products which have cumulatively added up to a substantial change in the nature of the industry. At the same time, however, it has produced less fine yarn than cotton supply permitted and thereby reduced national cloth output below the potential.

The developments in the textile industry have dictated the shape of the textile machinery industry. The small new spinning mills and even smaller weaving sheds have created a demand for cheap, simple and sturdy spinning and weaving equipment. The small improvements in the mills have required ancilliary equipment such as high draft systems carding engines and finishing machines and the increase in frame speeds has raised the demand for high-ware goods like bearings. Hence the textile machinery industry has made a mainstay out of ancillaries and wearing items. While well aware of innovations abroad, the industry having burnt its fingers on automatic looms in the 1960's, has tended to specialise in old and tested equipment, putting off bringing in new technology till the domestic market is really ready for it. (A case study of the Indian Textile Industry NCAER : Jan.1981)

The reasons for the present strike can also be found in the increasing ingress of modern equipment which a) lays open the ground for retrenchment and b) increases work-loads. These two twin processes have to be understood in the context of basic changes in the industry within the last 20 years, changes which have had a direct bearing on the nature of labour consciousness and organization.

The overall trends in the Indian industry are particularly and initially reflected in Bombay's textile mills. The emergence of the modern Indian sector is primarily a reflection of changes in the textile industry since the early sixties in Bombay. Such modernization had led to differentiation in the Bombay mills, giving rise to two main sectors which have become visible.

A more modern and expanding competitive sector with automated machines and newer forms of work organization have given this sector a dominance over the entire industry. This sector has modernized with accompanying labour retrenchment compensation and job abolition.

The other sector is the backward sector plagued by periodic sickness. Perpetually short of running capital it has had to reduce the labour complement with hardly any automation. The single most significant cause of the sickness in these kind of mills is the transfer of capital to the other more profitable activities.

Earlier, several of the sick mills used to be taken away by the National Textile Corporation (NTC) and the Maharashtra State Textile Corporation (MSTC). But this process began slowing down after the mid-seventies and many sick units have since had to be taken over by private companies. This process was helped by the increased profits of some companies which were already ahead in modernization and could compete in the domestic and international market. These companies have launched rapid automation in the last three years aided by government policy of giving soft loans on low interest through long-term financing institutions. Companies like Mafatlal, Piramal, Bombay Dyeing fall into this category.

The shift to finer counts, the increase in automatic looms by 44% between 1977-80, combination of jobs and abolition of certain job categories have all resulted in a reduction of the labour employed in all shifts by 16.3% between 1960-80 i.e. 25,000 workers. Within this differentiated mill sector, there has emerged an increased workload, productivity sales and profits which millowners have obtained through marginal increases in wages. While these changes have increased the savings of millowners there have been few changes in the working conditions and wages of workers in the last 30 to 40 years.

A general conclusion, however, is that the industry is in a position to pay workers more, provided they accept increased workloads. Therefore, there is no lack of markets and unemployment due to automation and modernization. With the increase in prices of its products the industry can grant wage increases to a smaller number of workers who remain employed - the accent, however, is on increased productivity with a subsequent increase in discipline.

Textiles In The Sixth Plan (1980-85)
(Targets as per Sixth Plan Document)
CLOTH PRODUCTION BY 1984-85

(In million metres)

Sector	Cotton	Non-cotton	Blends	Total
Mill	3500	400	1000	4900
Powerloom	2600	1200	500	4300
Handloom	3150	200	750	4100
Total	9250	1800	2250	13300

(Source: Handbook of Statistics on Cotton Textile Industry published by The Indian Cotton Mills' Federation, Bombay, Sept. 1982)

WAGES IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

The concept of a minimum wage was first introduced in the cotton textile industry through an award of an industrial court in 1947. Following the Second World War, in fact, wages and benefits in the cotton textile industry catalysed similar reforms in other industries in the country. With the pre-war price level taken as the base, the minimum basic wage was fixed at Rs.30 p.m. This figure, unfortunately, was scaled down for some industries outside Bombay, and it took years for it to be pegged up again.

The first price-linked, automatically-indexed dearness allowance was also introduced in the textile industry first through this award. In addition, a specific rate of neutralisation of the rise in the cost of living through the availability of D.A. and a clearcut D.A. formula, were laid down. The arrangement was then copied by other industries.

For over 25 years now, however, the textile workers, under the by and large uninspired leadership of the RMMS, have been saddled with two wage boards and a stagnant D.A. formula. The wage increases have been meagre.

Some lost ground was made up in 1973

and 1978; on both these occasions, agitations for wage increases were launched and sustained by non-recognised unions, although in 1973, when the ministry had to intervene to end prolonged work stoppages, the RMMS signed on the workers' behalf.

Although statistics indicate a rise in wages since 1974, this rise is due to the D.A., which has been fixed in relation to a rising consumer price index, and not due to any major revision of the basic wage scales. The 'revised' basic wage consisted of a merger of a fixed D.A. of Rs.221.60 at consumer price index 200 with the first wage board increase of Rs.10, and the total of the two was raised by 8% (thus: Rs.30 basic wage + Rs.221.60 D.A. + Rs.10 = Rs.261.60. With an 8% increase, the figure came to Rs.282.52. This was the 'revised' basic wage.).

A two-slab system was used for calculating the D.A.(payable), which made a distinction between those workers earning less than Rs.400 p.m. as basic wage and those earning above Rs.400 p.m. The maximum D.A. payable was Rs.700. The variable D.A. was calculated as 0.444% of the 'revised' basic wage for workers earning less than Rs.400 p.m., and 0.144% of the 'revised' basic wage for those earning over Rs.400 p.m.

With the 1973 agreement, a large number of workers were placed in the second of the two categories mentioned above. It is significant that while the wages of the lowest paid workers (a majority of the first category) are protected against the rise in the cost of living, the wages of those earning a little more than Rs.400 p.m. are not sufficiently neutralised against the hike in prices. A progressive erosion in purchasing power is inevitable under the circumstances.

Even the basic wage formula itself is not quite satisfactory so far as the workers in the weaving and winding departments are concerned. The management of the mills has laid the responsibility for production on the weaver, but over the years it has become increasingly noticeable that a minimum quota prescribed by the management is difficult to obtain with bad yarn and badly maintained machines. Since the wages of other workers in the autoloom section are calculated on the basis of the weavers' output, the brunt of a fall in production has to be borne by the entire section.

Further, there is no system for raising the scale of annual increments. In 1970, an agreement was signed with the second wage board, under which workers who had fulfilled 240 days of work in an year could be given 1% of the 'revised' basic wage as annual increment. Largely due to health problems and general fatigue, few workers could satisfy the requirements.

INDUSTRY-WISE STANDARDISATION

Following a 'vociferous demand by workers' unions, a standardisation of wages in the textile industry was carried out 35 years ago when it was possible because of the relative technological similarities in all the mills. 'Certain sly' departures from the standard wage rates were made over the years, and at the moment the wage differentials of Rs.1.69, Rs. 2.50 and Rs.4.12 p.m. over the minimum for certain jobs, exist only as anachronisms in the context of the size of the present pay packet.

Following a revision of the wage structure—a demand that has yet to be forwarded in a concrete, imperative form — wage differentials, according to the technological levels

of various mills, will have to be made more realistic. Dr.Samant's charter of demands does not seem to have included an understanding of the nuances of the economics of the working class and its rights; it is yet to be seen if he can make a case for a revision of the wage structure which will fulfill the needs of the workers of the most technologically backward mills in the city.

INTENSITY OF WORK

The textile industry in Bombay has forced a steady increase of workload on the workers. Over the years the pressure has increased with high-speed machines which tend to cut out the rest period per worker. At the moment, work strain is high enough to maim and even to kill.

Although the shift to four looms per weaver meant a 50% increase in production, the worker managed to retain some control over his pace of work and his rest period. With loom assignments progressively increasing to 16, 22 or even 34 per weaver, the weaver's pace is determined totally by the



speed of the machine. There is a yarn break on at least one loom every second, which allows no breathing space at all. The maximum number of operations a four-loom weaver can handle without collapsing has been found to be 84, but loom operations often go upto 100. Since the millowners in certain mills recognised the danger of a cutback in efficiency, the workload of ancillary workers was increased to keep pace with that of the weaver. A battery filler who was supposed to carry and load up to 3,500 pirns per day has now to work in cooperation with the weaver. He takes up part of the responsibility of a weaver without the attendant rise in wages.

Instead of taking increased workload up as an issue, the RMMS signed agreements to reinforce the situation. According to such agreements, weavers who ran the automatic looms continuously and took their recess by rotation were to get an allowance of 3% of their wage. This would mean around Rs.12.76 for a weaver on 16 looms, earning a basic salary of Rs.175 plus Rs.245.26 DA. This is obviously no compensation.

Given these conditions of overload, it is hardly surprising that textile workers have a high rate of absenteeism (hitting a peak of 20% in December 1978). A study by the National Productivity Council significantly notes that the loss of production due to absenteeism was about 5%, while that due to strikes was 1%. Very little absenteeism can, in fact be blamed on workers who bunk to look after their 'landholdings' in rural areas.

While a high proportion of workers do own land, it is only one to two acres. The wages of the male workers in the city were found to be the primary means of subsistence of the workers' families. Sixty nine per cent of the regular workers live with their families in Bombay.

The highest rate of absenteeism has been clocked in the Ring Spinning department (which, incidentally, also has the greatest number of accidents). Almost 50.6% of the workers who had a high rate of absenteeism suffered from work fatigue. The overload of workers was visible even to a government report, which would normally have been screened.

Exposure to high noise levels, debilitating temperature, cotton dust and various chemicals tends to squeeze the workers of their work capacity over the years. Studies indicate that five years of industrial exposure would result in a 2.6% hearing loss, which would increase to 6.5% in 25 years in the carding, picking, winding, drawing and roving sections. The average noise level in these sections is 85 decibels, going up to 95 db in the high-speed spinning and draw-twisting sections and 105 db in the shuttle-loom weaving shed. The loss of hearing is not often recognised because it is between the range of 3,000 to 6,000 cycles per second.

Cotton dust inhalation leads to bysinosis and various other bronchial problems. An ESI study shows that one out of four textile workers in India suffers from bronchitis and bysinosis. A dust content of over 100 mg/100 cum necessitates immediate control measures and medical checks, but in most mills the dust content has regularly averaged over 200 mg/100 cum. High temperature and humidity leads not only to bronchial problems but to thermal stress and rheumatism. The use of chlorine, formaldehyde, hydrochloric, sulphuric and acetic acids, caustic soda and a number of chemicals - the spilling of which is unavoidable under the existing conditions - has been known to cause a plethora of medical complications. In addition, workers in the mixing and sizing departments expend 61% energy in excess because they are on their feet during work.

Further, the textile industry not only has a high rate of industrial accidents, it also shows a very high rate in the increase of accidents. Between 1974-75 and 1978-79, the number of textile accidents increased by over 77%, and about 54% of these accidents were caused by unsafe working conditions in the mills. Of the finance ploughed back into the working of the mills, in fact, less than 1% is reinvested for the improvement of working conditions.

BADLI WORKERS

The textile badli worker has long been one of the props of the industry, but there has been no attempt to improve his condition. In 1964, for instance, the average monthly salary of a badli worker was

Total Production Of Cotton Cloth

Calendar Year	Mill cloth (Million metres)	Percentage to total cloth production	Handloom and powerloom cloth (Million metres)	Percentage to total cloth production	Total Cloth production (Million metres)
1	2	3	4	5	6
1951	3,727	78.6	1,013	21.4	4,740
1956	4,852	74.5	1,663	25.5	6,515
1961	4,701	66.4	2,372	33.6	7,073
1966	4,239	57.8	3,097	42.2	7,336
1967	4,097	56.3	3,179	43.7	7,276
1968	4,366	55.3	3,530	44.7	7,896
1969	4,168	54.1	3,538	45.9	7,706
1970	4,157	53.0	3,692	47.0	7,849
1971	3,957	53.8	3,399	46.2	7,356
1972	4,245	52.9	3,777	47.1	8,022
1973	4,169	54.1	3,602	45.9	7,771
1974	4,316	52.1	3,968	47.9	8,284
1975	4,032	50.2	4,002	49.8	8,034
1976	3,881	48.9	4,064	51.1	7,945
1977	3,223	46.7	3,678	53.3	6,901
1978	3,251	44.0	4,074	56.0	7,325
1979	3,206	42.5	4,334	57.5	7,540
1980	3,476	41.8	4,838	58.2	8,314
1981	3,147	38.8	4,973	61.2	8,120

*Source: Handbook of Statistics on Cotton Textile Industry published
by The Indian Cotton Mills' Federation, Bombay, Sept 1982*

less than Rs.125 per month, and only 18% of these workers could look forward to work for 20 days per month.

Official estimates put the badli labour force at 25% of the total textile labour force. But one random sample showed that 41% of the labour force was made up of badli workers, and 45% of them have been working for over two years without being made permanent. A long wait at the mill gates was virtually mandatory for a day's work.

Wages do not cover the basic needs of a worker's family and they have very little relation, if at all, to changes in productivity. The seven-day week in 1973 led to a production increase of 16.67%, or Rs.50 crores, without any extra cost in machinery or floorspace. By keeping the machine running continuously, overhead costs can be spread thin, resulting in substantial savings for millowners. Over 20 mills in Bombay shifted to the seven-day week and millowners harangue workers with the benefits of overwork. They gave a wage rise of 4% and promised additions

employment. An investigation however, revealed that the 'benefits' to the working class were a well-cloaked farce.

When the number of sealed holidays, weekly off-days and paid holidays were taken into account, the effective rise in wages was seen to be 1.75%. Moreover, although the overall increase in employment due to the seven-day week was 16%, only certain occupations would benefit. The majority of new employees were supervisors and clerks (18% and 22% respectively), while the increase in workers was only 11%.

More supervisors were brought in by the millowners to effect a tighter control over workers. The seven-day week was also the first step in the reduction of labour costs; most mills were to go further and abolish certain job categories altogether.

As the number of loom assignments went up, the amount spent on wages as a proportion of sales revenue dropped from 9.1% on the four-loom weaver to 2.8% in the 22-loom weaver. The total amount spent on wages thus falls with an increase of workload and mechanisation. Apart from an agreement on revising the wages of winders on the Barbar Coleman spooler and the autopirn winding machines, there has been no industry-level revision of wages vis-a-vis greater mechanisation and heavy workload.

There have been cases of plant-level wage agreements, but the terms and conditions are so closely guarded that workers from other mills have no access to the information. As a result, there are differences in mills in close proximity: a weaver working eight looms in one mill is paid Rs.143 per month, while a worker doing the same job is paid Rs.161 per month in an adjoining mill.

LABOUR ORGANISATION

The most obvious consequence of the modern capitalist factory system is long and arduous working hours uncompensated by requisite pay. The other consequences have been the employment of women and children, the deliberate withholding of education, high mortality rates and high corporate profiteering by not providing workers adequate housing, medical benefits, etc.

In 1875, a few social reformers and philanthropists under the leadership of Mr.S.S. Bengalee agitated in Bombay against the appalling conditions of factory workers. The first factory commission was appointed in Bombay the same year and the first Factories Act was passed in 1881. It was insipid.

Then the founder of the organised labour movement in India, Mr.N.M.Lokhande, called for a workers' conference in Bombay to make representations to another factory commission appointed in 1884. When no redress was made by the government, Lokhande convened a mass meeting of about 1,000 workers in 1890, and drew up a memorandum with demands for the limitation of working hours, weekly rest-days, mid-day recess and compensation for injuries. The millowners of the city conceded a weekly holiday and a new Factory Act was passed in 1891. Lokhande went ahead and organised the Bombay Mill Hands Association.

Perhaps the most notable feature of this period was the absence of strikes. There was no organised union, and employers were, as usual, hostile to unionism. That philanthropy prompted employers to concede to various demands is a debatable point. In all likelihood, the possibility of burgeoning unionism was enough of a threat to employers to make them grant demands, which, in the context of the decades to follow, were not 'demands' at all, but the basic non-retractable rights of organised and unorganised labour.

The close of World War I saw the beginnings of the labour movement in the truly modern sense of that term, when strikes were called not merely for economic, but also for political, reasons. Significantly, the first strike by the textile workers of Bombay and Sholapur in 1908 was a protest against the imprisonment of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. This was not a 'unionised' strike.

Although there is a record of the workers in the Ahmedabad cotton mills having formed a union in 1917 under the aegis of Srimati Anusuyaben, the credit for putting together the first industrial union goes to Mr. B.P. Wadia, an associate of the Theosophist, Mrs. Annie Besant. In Ahmedabad, under the inspiration of Gandhi, spinners'

and weavers' unions were established, which federated into the unit known as the Textile Labour Association of Ahmedabad.

The years 1918-20 saw a flurry of strikes against the notorious Rowlatt Act - the prototype of the Defence of India Act, the MISA and several other equally damning acts introduced by the erstwhile Janata and the present Congress governments.

The post-war 'new awakening' of the workers was circumstantial and but for the war it could not have been established. The prices of essential commodities shot up and employers raked in fortunes supplying fatigues to armies the world over. But there was no corresponding increase in workers' wages. Simultaneously, the Home Rule movement and martial law in Punjab sent a wave of political feeling rippling through the country. The cardinal reason for workers' joining the nationalist movement was not, in the true sense of the word, 'conscientisation', but the event of those years were certainly a prelude to a weak politicisation that went, at times, beyond the narrow confines of nationalism itself.

The Russian revolution held out some hope for a new social order and the setting up of the International Labour Organisation in 1919 helped to concretise the idea of trade unionism in the country. Although the AITUC was formed in 1920 primarily for the purpose of sending delegates to the ILO conferences and sessions, it gave a formal status to the labour movement and provided a platform for the discussion of labour problems and issues.

The left wing in the consolidation of the union movement in India came to the fore in 1924. Communists were the vanguard of the movement and led some of the most militant strikes in the country. Following the three-month strike in 1925, the British introduced the Trade Union Act a year later, to supervise and regulate trade unions. But strikes - one of which was a six-month strike in 1928 led by S.A. Dange to oppose wage cuts and rationalisation plans - went on.

The Girni Kamgar Union and the mill committees were formed as a result of the general strikes of 1924-25 and the six-month

struggle in 1929. The strikes represented the coalescence of two tendencies - an anti-Brahmin, xenophobic, pro-workers'-control feeling strengthened by the influence of communists, who became closely involved with the struggles of the textile workers after 1924. Based on the mill committees, which had representatives from each department of the mills, the GKU had a decentralised structure with the mill committees exercising a great deal of autonomy. But this shop-floor unionism was to die out after the 1934 strike.

The British rulers reacted swiftly to the 1928 six-month strike and, in March 1929, arrested 32 activists and charged them in the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case. Seven of the activists were GKU office-bearers.

The world recession of 1930 led to immediate wage cuts and the retrenchment of over 10,000 workers in the Bombay mills. The militant 1934 strike was characterised by mass meetings, the active involvement of women workers, the formation of chawl committees and a joint action committee of all unions in Bombay, Nagpur and Sholapur. Militant activity declined following the breaking of this strike and the government banned the communist party, clamped down on union leaders and launched the series of conspiracy cases.

In November 1938, over 60,000 workers, mainly textile workers, went on a protest strike against the Industrial Relations Bill, which had been instigated by the British and introduced by the puppet Congress ministry of Bombay, itself elected on a restricted franchise. The Congress party replaced the bill after 1947 by the avidly hated BIR Act, which textile workers are opposing today.

Thereafter, matters went steadily downhill. Conflicts within the GKU, the arrests of the communists and the support given to the World War II by them left the ground virtually free for the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh to make a grand entry. The RMMS became the sole negotiating agent for the textile industry in Bombay.

The unions of five parties - the CPI, PSP, RWP, and the LNP - filed a joint application for the recognition of the GKU. The first hearing in court was in favour of

Employment Of Workers In Cotton Mills

Year	Total number of workers on list	Average number of workers actually employed in				Total
		First shift	Second shift	Third shift		
1	2	3	4	5	6	
1961	9,18	4,17	2,66	1,10	7,93	
1962	9,29	4,17	2,65	1,16	7,98	
1963	9,38	4,18	2,63	1,23	8,04	
1964	9,70	4,22	2,71	1,38	8,31	
1965	9,67	4,18	2,67	1,37	8,22	
1966	9,31	4,04	2,54	1,30	7,88	
1967	9,28	4,00	2,54	1,35	7,89	
1968	9,08	3,83	2,43	1,34	7,60	
1969	8,99	3,70	2,34	1,36	7,40	
1970	9,27	3,73	2,35	1,41	7,49	
1971	9,41	3,61	2,24	1,34	7,19	
1972	9,72	3,78	2,35	1,49	7,62	
1973	10,02	3,87	2,37	1,60	7,84	
1974	10,23	3,85	2,36	1,66	7,87	
1975	10,27	3,80	2,36	1,63	7,79	
1976	10,30	3,70	2,30	1,60	7,60	
1977	10,61	4,00	2,45	1,72	8,17	
1978	10,97	4,10	2,51	1,81	8,42	
1979	11,48	4,18	2,54	1,95	8,67	
1980	11,69	4,21	2,58	1,97	8,76	
1981	11,89	4,23	2,59	1,99	8,81	

(Source: Handbook of Statistics on Cotton Textile Industry
published by The Indian Cotton Mills' Federation,
Bombay, Sept. 1982)

the GKU but the RMMS deposited the issue in the 'Industrial Court' where it lay mouldy for years. The final verdict awarded by the Industrial court was that the GKU general secretary had not been elected within the framework of the BIR Act, and was therefore officially invalid. The GKU had lost its claim.

Dr. Datta Samant's position in the history of the working class of Bombay is assured, largely because he is the country's first union leader who introduced sustained militancy into a long-drawn struggle for working rights. He has also ignored the usual legal procedures like negotiations across the glass-top and the easy statistics of balance sheets.

Samant had no ideological perspective when he entered the struggle, and he has little of it now; the loosely-structured 'organisation' that he has, has not yet tried to politicise the issue, and any genuine conscientisation of the workers has been purely experiential. He belongs, as it were, within a capitalist system, at a stage when militant working class activity, if left uninfluenced by ideological sources, can lead eventually to the consolidation of the system itself.

Samant is obviously a phenomenon of circumstance - the struggle that he leads can have taken place only in the post-emergency period. The emergency was tailored primarily to promote and consolidate the hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie, and the working class and all other sections of the bourgeoisie threatening the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie were suppressed. The emergency itself was characterised by heavily increased working hours, work load and work speed, tight supervision of workers at the shop floor level, wage freezes and a consequent erosion of real wages due to inflation, retrenchments and various forms of victimisation.

IN THE ABSENCE of any political initiative, but hotheadedly aware of their working rights, the workers' choice of Dr. Samant as a leader was hardly surprising. On the eve of the textile strike, he had been a loner, with no organisa-

tional base among the textile workers and scant knowledge of the devious workings of the industry. Within a short time, however, he had mastered the implications of the strike: his charter of demands is comprehensive and a long step ahead of any demands made of any industry in the country. From the initial important demands of lumpsum increase in wages from Rs.250 p.m. to Rs.400 p.m., and the permanency of badli workers, a process of evaluation has brought the imperative around to the scrapping of the BIR Act and the de-recognition of the RMMS as the official union. Samant has consistently soft-pedalled demands like leave allowance and house rent allowance and has not raised issues like bonus payments and increased work loads, which are bound to emerge due to modernisation.

It would be a little too late for both the state government and the Centre to deny that resolving the strike is absolutely necessary. Dr. Samant's inroads into rural Maharashtra are well-known by now. His snubbing of Sharad Joshi during a tour of Satara district in the early months of the strike, and his speeches to small farmers, was a sign of the possibility of an urban-rural workers' link-up.

The success of Samant's tour prompted a sharper division in the ruling party's various analyses of the strike: one faction believes that settling the workers' demands would only boost Samant's militancy to an uncontrollable intensity; another holds that any further delay to a solution could lead to massive losses to the industry and a loss of valuable votes to the ruling party; a third group has been pushing hard for a settlement to the strike on the argument that Samant has at least kept the left unions out of the fray. There is an increasing possibility that Samant will have his way, sooner rather than later.

Once the demands of the workers are conceded, Samant will have to cope with the inevitable modernisation of the textile industry. Modernisation is likely to be a medium-term process, but it can be regulated by workers only through their genuine politicalisation, which in turn is expected to take longer.

— Jean D'cunha

Factsheet aims at providing information on issues which are socially relevant. The need for such a venture is emphasised by the biased reportage of a large section of the media whose coverage on several subjects is either non-existent or one-sided. Factsheet is a collective venture, sponsored by the Centre for Education and Documentation. It seeks to enlist the help of journalists, lawyers, students, activists and professionals who feel concerned about this situation and want to contribute towards changing it.

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FACTSHEET COLLECTIVE,
C/o. Centre for Education and Documentation,
3, Suleman Chambers,
4, Battery Street,
Bombay -- 400039.