

French India – Working Class

The Chronology of French Colonial Rule in Indian Sub-Continent:

In 1664 under the reign of Louis XIV and his minister Colbert, French East India Company was started. A French Governor reached Surat in 1667 and established the first trading post. Another factory was started at Machilipatnam (A.P.) in the year 1669. In 1673 Chadermagore near Calcutta was acquired. In the same year the French got Pondicherry from Sultan of Bijapur and established Pondicherry colony in the year of 1674. By 1741 the French acquired territories such as Yanam, Mahe, Karaikal. In the year 1769 the French Crown abolished French East India Company and took over the French colonies in India under its own rule.

In 1816, by the time of the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, the following territories were in its possession.

1) Pondicherry 2) Chandernagore 3) Karaikal 4) Mahe 5) Yanam 6). The lodges at Machilipatnam, Kozhikode and Surat.

Transfer of Territories :

Under the leadership of Communist Party of French India, the workers of various industries formed trade unions and agitated for their demands. All sections of people were organized and anti-colonial struggles launched. Fearing the French Indian colony may go into the hands of communists the French Government handed over the colony to Indian Government. The lodges at Machilipatnam, Kozhikode and Surat were handed over to Indian Government in October, 1947. Chandernagore was given on 2nd May 1950 and it became part of West Bengal on 2nd Oct. 1954. On the 1st of Nov, 1954 Pondicherry, Yanam, Mahe, Karaikal were given to India.

In 1962 India and French ratified a treaty confirming the transfer of territories to India, thus ending French Colonialism of 300 years in India.

Trade Union Struggles :

French colonialism in India faced stiff resistance from working class through trade unions led by Communists. Though the Governor of French colonies ruled with dictatorial powers, the heinous working conditions made the workers organize themselves.

Veteran Communist leader Varadarajulu Kailasa Subbaiah was instrumental in founding the trade unions in Pondicherry. He was the Secretary of Communist Party of French India.

The first trade union activities began in Mudaliarpet, Ariyankuppam and Oulgaret—the residential areas of textile workers of Pondicherry. These workers were facing horrible exploitation. They were forced to work for 12 to 14 hours a day at very low wages while the working hours in British India were not more than 10 hours a day.

The workers in the three large mills at Rodier, Savana, Gaebels were organized into departmental working groups.

On 4th February 1935, the workers of Savana Mill went on strike with the following demands:

- 1) Limit the working hours to 10 hours.
- 2) Double the wages from 3 to 6 anaas.
- 3) Ban the children below the age of 14 from employment.
- 4) Provide Monthly half paid maternity leave for women.
- 5) Stop night shifts to women.

The strike went on for 84 days and for all these days the factory was under lock down. The management at last called the leaders for negotiations on 29 April, 1935 and conceded three demands. The working hours were reduced to 10 hours a day, Salary was raised to 6 anaas and one month maternity leave with half wage was granted.

Following the success of Savana workers struggle, the first public meeting of textile workers was held in British India in the month of June 1935 in solidarity with the workers of the French India colony. The meeting put forward two demands before the French Government. i) Legalization of trade unions in French India. ii) Legislation on labour laws as per the conventions of ILO to which France was a signatory. With efforts at ILO, the French Govt accepted few of the ILO conventions but rejected unionization.

A decree was issued banning employment of children below 12 years, accepted one holiday per week, festival holidays, eight weeks of paid maternity leave for women; for boys below 15 and girls below 18 years working hours are restricted to 10 hrs a day and maintaining safety, hygienic conditions in factories.

Workers again started struggles in the month of July 1936 demanding trade union rights. Ely, Rodier, Savana mill workers started a stay-in strike demanding right to form trade unions. On 29, July Com. Varadarajulu Subbaiah secretly entered the Mill grounds and

addressed the striking workers. The next day the French Govt. ordered direct police action on workers. In the police firing 12 workers were shot dead. An arrest warrant for criminal conspiracy was issued against the trade union leader V. Subbaiah.

Aftermath of the Struggle-Achievements :

The firing incident was raised in the French Parliament by Communist Party of France. The matter was discussed in the Parliament. An envoy was sent to meet trade union leaders of British India. A meeting with Governor of French India was arranged on 19th August at Pondicherry. The Governor accepted five of the demands of workers. i) There would be no victimization of workers. ii) The terms offered would be enforced immediately iii) The French Indian labour union would be allowed to act as an intermediary between Government and employees iv) A labour commission would be constituted to look into the shooting incident v) ILO convention on Labour and the French Labour code would be ratified in French India after consultation.

In the year of 1936 the French working-class movement achieved trade union rights through an agreement. Through the July 1936 strike, the French India working class demanded the same rights. On 31st October, 1936 a new settlement was reached. i) Working hours are set at 8 hours a day without affecting wages. ii) Pension benefits of workers of 25 years or more service are set at 40 percent of current emoluments. iii) Women workers were entitled to maternity leave of five weeks with full wages and lactating mothers were given 30 minutes break during work. iv) Children of deceased workers are granted relief fund and employment rights. vi) Over time and night time wages were fixed at 150 and 200 percent of regular wages. vii) Accident compensation and free medical care was provided. viii) Weekly one holiday was granted. ix) Right to trade union was granted. The process of trade union formation was without registration fee and no need of approval from authorities. x) The collective contract of labour which existed only in France was granted. With that the representatives of labour and employers negotiate settlement across the table. There was a provision for conciliation before labour inspector and arbitration if the dispute could not be settled. Later these terms are reflected in the French labour code.

These achievements are remarkable as many of these are achieved for the first time in the history of labour movement in Asia.

With the inspiration of these achievements many other sections of society formed trade unions and marched towards Government to achieve their demands. The toddy tappers and fishermen who marched with a charter of demands including unemployment wages, compensation against accident, pension benefits. The handloom weavers formed a trade union to create demand for their export-oriented industry. The piece-goods merchants as well as shop assistants, stacking goods workers and cart pullers formed

trade unions. The teachers trade union demanded higher pay and equal conditions of work among Europeans and Indians in schools.

In Pondicherry, the trade union collectives had a union office, 64 cultural centres or reading rooms and social service centres.

Emergence of Communist Party :

The first peasant conference was held on the banks of Ariyankuppam in the year of 1937. The French India Kisan Sabha was formed in the conference and a president was elected. Thus, under the leadership of working-class, peasants and other communities were organized against French colonialism. Trained cultural squads travelled from village to village fostering political consciousness in the masses.

In the year of 1937, a political party by the name of Mahajana Sabha was formed with trade unionists as its leaders. The Mahajana Sabha attended to the problems of handloom industry which employed 50,000 workers. When the handloom industry faced a crisis in its exports to Malaysia, the Mahajana Sabha formed co-operative societies and created a local market for their products.

In the year of 1938 pro Nazi group gained upper hand in the administration of French India. They banned all public meetings, introduced press censorship, arrested trade union leaders and sent them to Vellore jail. A French army unit was placed at Pondicherry to crush any people's resistance.

Even then, when Second World War broke out in the year 1939 the working class launched anti-war campaign in French colonies. In 1942, trade union leader and architect of anti-French colonialism movement in French India, Comrade Varadarajulu Subbaiah, a branch of Communist Party of India was formed. For that Com. Subbaiah was expelled from French India in the year 1944.

In 1945, the expulsion on Com. Subbaiah was revoked. After the Second World War all the communist activities in Pondicherry were brought under one political party, the National Democratic Front. The NDF was instrumental in the liberation of French India.

Thus, working class played a leadership role in unifying students, women, peasants, fishermen, toddy tappers etc., against French colonial rule in French India. From the onset it was the trade union movement that articulated anti-colonial ideas in French India. Ultimately the working-class movement led to the formation of communist party and provided leadership from its ranks. It hastened the French Government to leave India giving liberation to its colony.

Direct Action against French by Communist Party :

In spite of severe repression, killing of activists by goons, banning of the party, expelling the leadership and arrests the Communist Party of French India continued its activities. Different sections of people are organized into mass organizations like Student Federation, Youth League. Elections were contested.

Preparations went ahead in the year 1954 calling for a direct action against French Government for the liberation of French colony in India. People are mobilized in protests. The refugees in India are called upon to come back to participate in liberation Struggle.

On 6th April 1954 'Tirubhuvanar' was liberated under the leadership of Communist Party. Along with French India Socialist Party and Congress a temporary Government was formed. The French Communist Party supported the action. This incident got international media attention and the New York Times warned the French Government that Pondicherry may fall into the hands of communists. With this, the French Government understood that it cannot continue the colony in India any more. That hastened it to leave India in the year of November, 1954 handing over its colony to the Indian Government.

Thus, the recorded history shows how the Communist Party in British India as well as in French India played a vital role in getting Independence to our country. The fear that India will go into the hands of Communists is the driving force for the British and French imperialists to compromise with the Congress party and give independence.