

# The 1982 Historical Strike of Bombay Textile Workers and its Lessons!

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The 1982 strike of the Bombay textile mill workers that lasted for 18 months is the biggest and largest strike in the history of India. This strike was brutally defeated by the combine of rulers, ruling-classes, mill-owners, the government of the ruling-class party in power with the complicity of established central trade unions. Even the role of the established central left trade unions and their attitude towards the Bombay textile mills workers strike was in no way different from that of the INTUC, the central trade union affiliated to Congress(I), the ruling party in power both at the Centre and in Maharashtra state. This strike had a long lasting impact on the worker's movement in India and is significant for the working-class movement. Many lessons have to be drawn from this strike that would be helpful to transform the worker's movement in India in a real and needed sense.

Bombay textile mill-workers have a glorious past history of conducting militant and even political struggles. Bombay textile workers were once regarded as the vanguard of the Indian labor movement. Bombay's textile workers were the earliest and most militant forms of organised labor in India. The workers of Bombay textiles first rose in unison in 1908 to protest the conviction of Lokamanya Balagangadhar Tilak in a sedition case, for which he was sentenced for six years rigorous imprisonment. For six days all mills were shut. Lenin on hearing reports of this uprising had written: "The Indian proletariat has already matured sufficiently to wage a class-conscious and political mass struggle...."

From that time onwards, the workers of Bombay textile mills have been fighting for better working and living conditions and for their fundamental rights and just entitlements.

Even after the transfer of power in 1947, the living and working conditions have not improved and they were left with no option than resorting to strikes to realise not only their economic demands but also the demand for betterment of their working and living conditions which have been worsening day by day.

According to the 1975 report of the world bank, "the conditions in the mills were poor - with broken floors, poor-lighting, dirty walls and all amenities in a dilapidated condition. The majority of mills with old equipment can only be described as industrial slums...The mill house-keeping, the machinery operated in conditions of almost abdominal squalor."

The working conditions further deteriorated by 1982. Gradually the work-load is increased in the decade. The modernisation and mechanisation of the mills caused not only reduction of the number of workers by 16% in 20 years up to 1980 but also caused increase

of work-load of the workers due to the increase of the speed of the machines. Before modernisation of mills, the weavers used to operate four looms. But after modernisation the loom assignments increased to 16 or 22 looms per weaver. Such heavy increase of work-load led to tremendous increase in tension and fatigue leading to more work shop accidents besides deterioration of the health of workers. This also resulted in higher rates of absenteeism.

Even the wages were not commensurate with the hard work put in by the workers under strenuous and hazardous condition. Their wages were comparatively low, with those earned by workers in other industries in the area. The wages did not ensure any satisfactory standard of living for the workers.

Moreover out of 2.3 lakh workers of the mills more than one lakh workers were 'badli' workers most of whom normally got work for 5 to 10 days a month. Every day they go to the mills with a hope of work with no guarantee of actually getting it. 'Badlis' are not made permanent, but they were systematically given breaks in their service to ensure that they do not accumulate 240 days of continuous service and become eligible for a number of benefits.

The living conditions of the textile workers even in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century were deplorable. Most of the workers lived in dingy chawls where 15 to 30 men shared a room about 10'×10' in size. The beds are used in rotation by 60-80 workers on different shifts in a room. They live in dilapidated chawls, in filth covered lanes, using common latrines almost never have an adequate water supply. The passages outside their chawls are damp and depressing.

These acute conditions of living and working-conditions and their plight led them inevitably to the strike in 1982; which began in January, 1982. 2,30,000 workers belonging to 60 mills have joined and participated in the strike, under the banner of Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (M.G.K.U) under the leadership of Dr. Datta Samanta an erstwhile Congress(I) MLA, and the leader of INTUC trade unions in the engineering industry.

Till 1957 the Bombay textile workers through their valiant struggles have enjoyed better wages and entitlements than the workers in the industry. But the recognised union RMMS - an affiliate to INTUC, failed to deliver the goods to the workers. The leadership of the RMMS, betrayed the workers by joining hands with mill managements and signing many agreements with managements, detrimental and harmful to the interests of the textile workers. Added to this the Bombay Industrial Relations Act (BIR), which was promulgated in 1946 became a bane to the mill workers (other workers also), making impossible the workers to go on a legal strike. Even the bargaining agent representing workers was decided by the act, that facilitated RMMS to become the recognized union, with the help of ruling Congress party and its governments. The B.I.R act became a constant hurdle for the workers in their justified fight against mill managements to realize their legitimate demands. The BIR act became the instrument used to curb any workers organization which rises to challenge the RMMS.

On the other hand the left trade unions (established Central unions) like AITUC and CITU, have not taken up any initiative to come to the rescue of Bombay mill workers who have been desiring to save them from the atrocities of RMMS and take up their cause. By that time they had already become 'responsible' trade unions as were being considered by the managements, because they were following the legal machinery.

Besides their deplorable working and living conditions, the total disenchantment of the workers with the legal machinery was an important factor that heightened the militant mood of mill workers to choose the path of struggle - an indefinite strike from 18<sup>th</sup> January 1982.

The government had unleashed severe police repression on the striking workers. Sections 144 and 30 were imposed. Many activists were arrested. Mill workers were brutally lathi-charged. Many workers were implicated in false cases. The leaders of the strike were arrested and jailed under ESMA. Police raided the meeting places of striking workers. Many families of the workers were besieged and harassed by police. Just as happened in the instance of the All India railway strike in 1974, the police went door to door ordering workers to return to work. Strike activists were arrested under NSA. The strike was treated as a law and order problem.

The mill-owners have adopted an adamant stand against the strike. They felt the closure of the mills suited their purpose. They diverted their production to the power loom sector. According to the World Bank report-1975, a significant part of the textile industry profit has been diverted to other industries. At the time of the strike a large number of power-looms were either owned or patronised by the owners of the composite mills in Bombay. More over the mill-owners were advised by the Central government to maintain a firm stand. Added to this the union government had specifically and emphatically directed the mill owners not to negotiate with Datta Samant the leader of the strike. The mill-owners were confident that, with this strike the government would allow them to close down the mills, sell the land and move out of the city to set up modern units in areas where the cost of labour, power, water and other basic-infrastructure would be much lower. In political circles there was the rumour that the Congress(I) had taken over Rs. 50 crores from the real estate kings of Bombay as bribes for the eventual sale of the surplus land of mills taken over by the government. The prospect of real-estate business of selling the lands of the mills too played an important role in the adamant stance of mill-owners in not attempting to settle the strike by negotiating with the striking workers. For example: On September, 14<sup>th</sup> of this year- very recently - The Bombay Dyeing Co-Ltd., approved to sell a land parcel of about 22 acres in Worli, Mumbai to Goisu Realty Pvt Ltd for a total consideration of about Rs. 5,200 crores. This explains the greater prospects of gaining abnormal income, and its magnitude by selling the lands of the mills for real estate purpose than running the mills at that time with outmoded machinery and labour intensive manufacturing.

Even the judiciary played a part in strengthening the hands of mill-owners and the government in maintaining their adamant attitude towards the strike and the police

oppression. The Courts have prohibited the striking workers picketing in front of mills - disallowing strike-breakers to enter the mills. They have not mandated the government and the mill-owners to settle with the striking workers. They proved to be the instruments of ruling-classes and rulers in protecting their interests.

A loan of Rs. 5000 crores taken by the government from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), also played a role for the government to take a tough stand against the textile workers, the government obliging the conditions of the IMF, to show that it would not tolerate 'troublesome workers' - the striking textile mill workers.

The media - the national English daily newspapers like 'Indian Express' and its vernacular Marathi daily newspaper 'Loksatta' played their role in opposing the textile workers, with distorted news items, editorials, Comments, etc., blaming that Samant the leader of the strike misled the workers echoing the opinions of the mill owners and of the government. They even entertained page long advertisements of mill managements opposing the strike.

The Central established trade unions including the central trade union centres played an antagonistic and hostile role against the strike. The left trade unions which are supposed to promote and develop the workers struggles and mass struggles against capitalists ruling-classes and the establishment that have been ruthlessly exploiting and oppressing the workers and toiling masses refused to understand that the strike of the textile workers was a determined expression and will of workers to fight against the oppressors and the system that supports the exploiters and oppressors. With their narrow views of union rivalry and of the antagonism against Samant as their competitor for grabbing trade union leadership, the left trade unions willingly failed to use the opportunity of the massive strike, to inculcate higher class-consciousness among the striking workers. They intentionally avoided to work among striking mill workers to raise their class-consciousness and militancy and spreading the strike widely among the workers of other sectors. Their legalism disallowed them to evolve any plan or action for the success of the strike. They intentionally ignored that "the strike was an inevitable outcome of the objective conditions existing in the industry time and the series of historical developments that had taken place in the previous years in the textile industry".

The splitting of Central trade unions and their fragmentation too had an adverse impact on the workers and their struggles. After independence almost every political party established its own trade unions wing. The Congress set up INTUC. The socialists formed HHMP which merged with HMS. Dissatisfied socialists set-up UTUC and affiliated to the revolutionary socialist party. The split in CPI divided the AITUC and created CITU. The BJP formed BMS. The regional parties like Shivsena, DMK, AIDMK and TDP have set up their own pocket trade unions. Due to this fragmentation the workers started seeking their involvement with any union on a contractual basis than ideological or philosophical. Labour movement remained to be a movement conveying mere trade union objectives than presuming a higher degree of consciousness among workers. The Central trade unions failed to evolve a new strategy that would go beyond economism of struggle for higher wages, opportunistic deals with

managements or governments to maintain their positions. Their leadership became bureaucratic disallowing trade union democracy.

On the other hand Sarva Shramik Sangh affiliated to Lal Nishan Party and its activists supported the strike. A daily newspaper Shramik Vichar actively supported the strike. Some activists from other established unions voluntarily on their own supported the strike and worked among the strikers. Unions in other industries and even among white-collar employees like LIC began raising funds to help the textile workers. The mill workers who went back to their villages organised the support of rural masses particularly the poor and middle peasants. They collected grains from peasants and strengthened solidarity among the rural workers in the rural areas. Major unions including the LIC workers, Western Railway workers, Glaxo, RCF etc. contributed cash and grains to the strike efforts. 85,000 workers in other units contributed one day's salary to support strike effort. The activists of Nawjavan Bharat Sabha (NBS) had actively assisted the striking workers in fighting police cases and countering other form of oppression. Though all the left trade unions publicly adopted a supportive position, in actuality they did nothing to take forward the strike to a success. The national campaign committee of Central Trade unions organised its first and only public action in support of the strike - a one day general strike of textile mills all over the Country. Democratic workers in AP, formed into a solidarity committee and widely propagated for solidarity to striking textile workers, through leaflets, gate meeting and a seminar at Vijayawada, justifying the strike and condemning the brutal stance of the government and adamant attitude of mill-owners in settling with striking workers. They asked the workers throughout the country to show unity with the striking workers and strengthen the unity among the workers of the country. They explained the workers in the state about the importance and significance of the Bombay textile mill workers' strike in the workers movement and the importance of unity among workers of all industries and sectors.

Datta Samant, under his leadership had organised many pen agitations like Utpadan rokos, Bandhs, Jail Bharos, long marches/ morchas etc on massive scale to sustain the strike and to boost morale in the striking workers. He even attempted to use elections through "Kamgar Agadhi" announced at the Jan 18 anniversary rally to start a process of revitalising the demoralised workers.

But however all these solidarity efforts and strike sustaining efforts could not match to the brutal and adamant stance of the combine of mill-owners and the state. The highly personalised style of functioning of Samant nor his militant economism nor his policy of peaceful 'stay at home' strike avoiding violent confrontation with the state could withstand the onslaught of state, ruling-classes and mill-owners combine. By June 1983 the land mark struggle between the government - mill owner combine and workers under the leadership of an independent 'bourgeois reformist' unionist- Samant- had fizzled out.

The disastrous effect of the defeat of the strike fell on the workers participated in the strike. Apart from the 2.3 lakh workers, at least four times that number of people were directly affected by the strike. During the strike many workers were retrenched. The mill

managements obtained signed undertaking and pledge, unquestioning obedience to the management and assurance never to go on strike from the workers returned to work. They were addressed in humiliating manner by the supervisors. Many permanent workers were taken back as 'badles' and some were given half the earlier wages. Thousands of workers who retired or resigned were denied gratuity and other benefits. 20% of badli workers were not taken back by the mills. Those workers who were retrenched either turned daily hamalis or selling vegetables on the pavements. Such has been the human tragedy and misery of mill workers after the defeat of the strike.

Though this strike is defeated, valuable lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the Bombay textile workers' strike, that could be more useful in organising a better workers movement that could at least effectively protect the basic interests of the workers from the onslaught of the managements and government combine and be capable of leading more militant struggles of workers. The lessons to be drawn are:

- 1) This strike amply made it clear that the parliamentary leftism in India is stagnated. That the parliamentary democracy braced by the left parties has ruined all revolutionary forces. That the left trade unions are no longer capable of leading militant struggles of the workers and toiling masses.
- 2) That the workers have to fight against not only the industrial managements, but also fight against imperialism that has been indirectly controlling the workers movement through its financial institutions like IMF & WB and other conditions in innumerable ways. The direction of the workers struggle shall be anti-imperialist.
- 3) That the state power is rooted in rural India in the grip of feudal landlords and forces, unless it is rooted out totally from the ruling system, the struggles of the workers cannot succeed. As per a report in the economic and political weekly in September-1982 "the village governmental structure has also been used and the village presidents were asked to give not only the names of the striking workers but also to approach the striking workers and convince them to go back (to duties)". This clearly shows how our ruling system is feudal based; which warns that the workers struggles must also be anti-feudal.
- 4) That the urban-rural linkage of workers shall not be a temporary phenomena to be formed only at the time of strikes, but shall be a permanent alliance of peasants and workers and at all times the workers shall fight for the causes of peasantry leading their struggles to a higher stage.
- 5) That the workers must politicise themselves with the working-class politics and consciousness and develop their intellectual development of working-class through combined militant struggles with peasantry and toiling masses.
- 6) That the workers have to develop a strong unity among them throughout the country in all sectors and draw their active solidarity while conducting struggles.

- 7) That the workers shall fight continuously for not only the revocation of anti-worker laws but also for the annulment of anti-farm laws being promulgated time and again.
- 8) That the workers shall fight for the revocation of anti-worker labour codes that have erased the legal and Constitutional rights for the total advantage of big capital and comprador bourgeoisie.
- 9) That the workers shall fight for democratic rights and against the oppression of the state, continuously.
- 10) That the workers shall not be independent of political ideology of their class politics, but shall develop greater consciousness in the theoretical, political and organisational work of working-class politics with the objective of emancipation of working-class and all other tailing masses and achieve the goal of socialism!