
**CHAPTER 6: STRIKES, BONUS AND HOUSING PROBLEM OF
LABOURERS IN ICHALKARANJI**

The right to strike is based on the general view of the right of the individual worker to bestow his labour as he desires, and this implies also his right to refuse it altogether. This right is, however, restricted in many countries in different ways. Gandhi points out in this context in 1918, "The object of the strike is not coerce the employers but to bring about a change of heart through voluntary suffering and the workers should go through the suffering in that spirit."¹ The right of strike was not recognised in India in earlier days. For the first time, it was conceded indirectly under the provisions of the 'Indian Trade Disputes Act', 1929 which had the main object of providing a conciliation machinery to bring about peaceful settlement of industrial disputes.

Official statistics of textile strikes in Ichalkaranji are available since 1967. There have, however, been strikes for many years before, which were mostly sporadic. It was only after 1967 that various unions started getting organised and to form their unions.

In any case, when employers are unreasonable in not conceding, the just demands of workers and when all other avenues of settlement fail, the strike comes in as a last and effective weapon of workers. To resort to strike, it is essential to have an organised trade union. Without this there can be no strike. Various unions are in existence in the textile industries of

Ichalkaranji, of which a majority of workers are in the loom units. More than 50 thousand workers are in this unit. Naturally, this unit forms the nucleus in textile industry. The Lal Bavata Union (CITU) is one of the important unions of this unit. So, the 'Lal Bavata Union' is always fighting for the workers' problems as many of the problems belong to these units. Many a time it has to resort to strike. There are many reasons, because of which the workers of this unit go on strike.

- 1) Of all the problems that face the worker, the wages is the most pressing and persistent one. His earnings have the greatest significance for him, as they primarily determine his standard of living and that of his family. This is particularly so in Ichalkaranji where indirect benefits by way of social services and social security are very limited. So, the origin of the strikes in which he is involved centre around problems of wages. The workers cannot receive their wages according to dearness.

The Lal Bavata Union has published a booklet in 1981 (published by Com. Suryaji Salunkhe). It clearly states, with the help of four tables that the textile worker spends Rs. 815.58 per month for his family. But the worker gets only 60% of his expenditure as his wages. Unless the wages are sufficient, the worker cannot maintain his efficiency, and hence the choice before him will be either to leave the job or to wear himself out.

2) Bonus is another important reason for strike. The Bonus Act, 1965 states that all factories and all the other establishments employing more than 20 persons in accounting year should pay the bonus to the workers. Generally, the percentage of bonus depends on profit. Management and workers will hardly come to an understanding about the total profits than an industry has made and this will always be a source of friction and might even lead to disputes in spite of the many legal provisions which we have elaborately evolved as to how the quantum of bonus has to be arrived at after deducting the various prior charges. If the worker is to be assured of a minimum level of wages, the approach should be through collective bargaining and negotiations by the trade unions and the workers' organisation with the employers.

The majority of the strikes have occurred due to the bonus problem. The owners are not agreeable to the bonus as per Government formula. Most of the loom workers are intentionally avoided from getting the specific bonus. The spinning Mill and the processing unit workers get the bonus according to their union demands.

The Lal Bavata Union used to publish many handbills every year relating to the bonus problem. Generally the owners have not been accepting the demands of the union. So, the bonus issue is one of the important cause of strikes in Ichalkaranji. A

majority of the strikes are in connection with the bonus issue.

3) Heavy work-load is another cause for the strikes. The loom workers have to work 12 hours per day. Definitely it is some sort of exploitation of the workers. Recently, the Government has stated that the loom-workers should work only for eight hours and to supervise only two looms. But this new formula has not been accepted by a majority of the owners. The Lal Bavata Union has taken strong action against the work-load of the workers. Since 1980, there has been a lot of struggle regarding work-load problem. The spinning mill and the processing unit are not facing this problem; because the work-load in these units is eight hours only.

A majority of the strikes which took place since the last two decades in Ichalkaranji, the Lal Bavata Union had taken the lead. The nature of the strikes in Ichalkaranji is sporadic type. In 1968, the loom-workers were on strike. Nearly 30% workers participated, in which most of the workers belonged to loom-unit. The main cause of the strike was wage problem. This strike continued only for three days.

For 'Minimum Living Wage', there was strike in loom-unit in 1972. This year the dearness increased rapidly. Further, there was a severe famine in South Maharashtra. The villagers suffered badly in the famine. So, the villagers migrated in large numbers

to Ichalkaranji. Naturally, there was competition for the work. The owners took the advantage of this and curtailed the payment of the workers, because of which within a week the strike had to be called off.

In 1973-74, there were so many strikes in textile industries. The workers demand was that the owners should pay the bonus of 8.33%. Some owners paid the bonus as per the unions' demand, but a majority of them refused the demand.

There are rarely any strikes in processing units. In 1977, the processing workers were on strike for dearness allowance.

The union leaders stated that in the year 1978-79, there were no strikes because the workers were paid the satisfactory bonus. In 1980, the Lal Bavata Union demanded 12.5% bonus from the owners. Some owners accepted the demand but most of them refused to do so. So, there were 4 strikes in 1980 and 8 in 1981, but all these strikes were related to the workers working in loom units. There was not a single strike of Spinning and Processing units after 1977.

'Strike Funds' are essential for making payment to the workers in the time of strike period. But strikes are declared and conducted in Ichalkaranji at present with practically no funds at the disposal of the unions. The worker depends more on his "power to starve" and suffer for the sake of his cause and

self respect. Fortunately strikes in Ichalkaranji have lasted for short periods. So, the workers have not suffered heavily in the period of strike. The only remedy lies in strengthening the organisation with sanctions and in equipping the union with adequate 'Strike Funds'. If this is done, it will generally result in the employer coming to terms with the workers rather than the workers having to resort to direct action for the redress of their grievances.

Workers having tried their best to improve their lot with the help of their accredited leaders and through their organisations and, in certain cases by collective action, in the earlier stages, their efforts were unsuccessful in most of the cases. The main reason for this is that they were not on equal footing with their employers, for bargaining and lacked resources on which they could fall back their living in the absence of wages. Further, as stated earlier, the organisation of workers had no legal status, and for any concerted action the offers and members of their organisation were exposed to both civil and criminal liability. Fear of loss of employment and victimisation at the hands of the employer operated as serious handicaps in their efforts to get any improvement of their sad lot.

Bonus

Bonus has always been the bone of contention between the

workers and the employers and has often been a reason responsible for a number of industrial disputes. The word 'Bonus' has Latin origin. It means 'good' and interchangeable with 'boon'.

The Government appointed a tripartite Bonus Commission in December 1961, with M.R. Meher as Chairman. The Commission submitted its report in 1964. Regarding the concept of Bonus the Commission has held that "it should be construed as a share of the workers in the prosperity^s of the concern in which they are employed."² With these guidelines of the Bonus Commission the payment of Bonus Act was passed in 1965. The Act was made applicable to all factories and to all other establishments employing more than 20 persons in any accounting year. Further in 1973, the Government accepted the suggestion of 8.33% of bonus to the workers on the basis of the recommendations of the Bonus Commission.

Prior to 1967, the bonus was unknown to workers in Ichalkaranji; because the workers were not organised. The unions which existed, were quite new. The workers did not dare to join the unions, because of which it was difficult for the workers to fight with their employers and put forth their grievances. The owners paid negligible amount, or a pair of dhoti in Diwali as gifts. This little amount or a pair of Dhoti came as bonus of the workers. From 1967 the unions' strength increased, as many of the workers joined the unions. Naturally,

the bonus problem created stir in textile industry.

Since 1967, there has been struggle for bonus in Ichalkaranji. The 'Lal Bavata Union' has always played an important role in connection with the bonus problem. According to this union, the owner is intentionally refusing to pay the permissible amount of bonus to the workers. So, this union often calls for Morchas, Gheraos and general meetings of the workers. Some times, it has also called for declared strikes. Every time after having lengthy discussion and prolonging the issue the owners have agreed to pay certain amount as bonus, but only after strikes.

The workers get the bonus every year at the time of Diwali. The loom workers get the bonus @ 8.33% to 15%. But in spinning mills and processing units the percentage of bonus is more than 16. This difference in the proportion of percentage is due to the profits of the units and bonus is based on the profit of the accountable year. Further, the spinning mills are under the cooperative sector. Naturally, the workers get the bonus on the basis of profit.

As we have stated above, for getting sufficient or the due bonus, the workers have called for strikes. In 1973-74, there were many strikes in textile industries. The workers' demand was that the employer should pay bonus of 8.33%. The union leaders

explained that in the year 1978-79 there were no strikes; because this year, the workers did get fair bonus. In 1980, the 'Lal Bavata Union' demanded the bonus @ 12.5%. Some owners accepted the demand of the union but some refused. So, there were four strikes in 1980, and eight strikes in 1981, but these strikes took place only in loom units. The loom units are totally under the private sector. There was not a single strike in spinning and processing units after 1977.

Some times, the union did not succeed in getting the fair bonus from the owners. The workers were unable to go on strike for a longer period. So, there was compromise between the owners and the union leaders. For this purpose, where workers are not properly organised or where sweated-labour conditions exist, the Government should appoint a committee to fix the minimum bonus for the workers.

Housing Problem

With the growth of industry, trade, commerce and business, towns and cities started developing and there was a gradual shift of population from rural to urban areas due to migration. These people had no houses in the towns and, as such, they had to stay in rented houses. Investors and in the case of industries, the industrialists provided residential accommodation on rental basis because the cost of material and labour was then not high

and a low standard of accommodation was accepted by the workers. In spite of the cost of land being nominal, no attention was paid to environmental hygiene. All this made it possible for the investor to get an economic return.

In Ichalkaranji, the workers were asked regarding the type of house in which they reside. Some 53 (96%) of the workers answered that they were residing in mud-built houses or Kaccha structures, whereas only 3 (4%) workers have solved the problem of housing with the help of huts constructed by themselves. Hence a majority of the workers were residing in mud-built houses. When a detailed analysis for the workers who stay in mud-houses was made, it came to be known that of the 53 workers 28 (51%) were having their own houses, 23 (44%) were residing in rented houses and 5 (4%) were staying in their relative's houses. It indicates that the workers' position seems to be much better as compared to the conditions in other growing industrial cities. The main reason is that a majority of the workers were having more than eight years service in their factories. In short, the workers/^{who} have stability of service, have been able to procure well built houses for them.

Further, the workers coming from outside were having their own houses in the villages. It means that the workers/^{who} were coming from outside, had not migrated to Ichalkaranji. Cooperative housing societies have also tried to relieve the scarcity of

accommodation among the middle and low income groups. There are so many proposed housing societies in Ichalkaranji, but their efforts have not yielded much in this direction.

The General Secretary of Rashtriya Processing Kamagar Sanghatana under INTUC explained that their union had purchased 4.50 hectares of land for the housing scheme of the workers.

The 'Yeshwant Cooperative Processors' had stated in 1977 that "We have formulated a Cooperative housing scheme for the workers and staff members. Under the scheme about 200 tenaments would be constructed. The Bank of Maharashtra (Nationalised Bank) has already considered our proposal and with their patronage we have completed construction of 60 twin houses."³

The spinning mills in Ichalkaranji had constructed rooms and flats for their office-bearers. But these mills had solved the housing problems of their workers which was negligible.

In sixties attempts were made by 'The Ichalkaranji Girani Kamagar Samiti' for developing housing society, but they were fruitless because Dr. Kulkarni states that, "the Samiti had been endeavouring to register housing society of workers from 1952. Owing to red tape and bureaucratic working of Government Departments the registration had not been possible even after three years of continuous efforts in that direction."⁴

The big power loom owners had constructed chawls for their workers. These rooms are very small to adjust the family of the workers. There is a latrine and a tap-water connection among ten one-room tenements. On the whole, construction of houses by employers has been very inadequate and has fallen short of expectation. Where accommodation has been provided it has not been of sufficiently spacious nor satisfactory in quality.

The employers have generally taken the stand that the State has the responsibility for providing houses for the working class, and that apart from other handicaps, they do not have sufficient means for investing in house-building. Some of the union leaders explained that there has been rapid growth of slums. If the slums are to be eradicated, a special programme will have to be arranged both by the Municipality and the Government.

For this purpose they suggested that, on the Government and Municipal lands, housing for the workers should be provided at a nominal rent, which will also be a source of income. It is found that Ichalkaranji has been a fast growing town and the textile industrial development has been equally rapid. Naturally, the number of workers has also been increasing day by day. Besides the functioning of the unions has no doubt been satisfactory, as they are aware of the Bonus issue and the

Housing problem.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1

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2

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3

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4

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