

STRIKING PRINTERS

A Notable Centenary

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In the history of working class action, 1993 has been a year of many anniversaries — the 40th anniversary of the *hartal* (1953) which was one of the most militant popular protests at urban and rural level; the 60th anniversary of the famous Wellawatte Mills strike (1933) when the future leaders of the LSSP wrested trade-union leadership from A.E. Goonesinha; and the 70th anniversary of the first general strike in Colombo (1923) led by Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union. But the most important one which went largely unnoticed was the centenary of the first strike of the printers of H.W. Cave and Co., and the formation of the first trade union in Sri Lanka, The Ceylon Printers' Union.

Who were the 'movers and shakers' of the events leading to this first working class strike action in Sri Lanka?

In July 1893 an unsigned article on the role of trade unions appeared in the *Independent Catholic*, a small sectarian Catholic paper edited by a Goan doctor P. Lisboa Pinto, who had broken with the church. The article was by another rebel, A.E. Buultjens, a Burgher who had become a Buddhist while studying history in Cambridge and had returned to become principal of Ananda College. His article referred to working class agitation in other countries and the need for trade unions in the island. Reflecting on the grievances of Colombo workers he urged the local printers to form a union. Buultjens wrote:

They are a fairly strong body and on the whole were more enlightened than their fellow workers and above all we know they have their wrongs. It is therefore their duty to become the leaders of this movement we are suggesting for the establishment of trade unions.

On September 12, 1893, sixty printers at Caves struck work because of a two day delay in monthly wage payments. The following day the Ceylon Printers Union was formed at a meeting of 400 printers (Sinhalese, Tamils and Burghers) and banners proclaiming 'unity is strength' were prominently displayed. A young lawyer H. J. C. Pereira, who was later to become the President of the Ceylon National Congress, chaired the meeting. Pereira attacked the local employers saying:

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The Ceylon workers [are] undergoing considerable hardship at the hands of some hard masters, and combined profits of labour and capital [are] all being enjoyed by the masters, with the exception of a very small margin which remains to the labourers.

Pereira also remarked that it was only those employers who were "unjust, cruel and oppress their men that need tremble at the very name of the union". Pinto, Buultjens, Martinus Perera and C. Don Bastian (the latter two Buddhist temperance activists) spoke at the meeting highlighting low wages and hard working conditions of Colombo workers. Don Bastian, a former printer said that although traditional Sinhalese writers had always stressed the respect due to masters, the workers nevertheless "had their own rights, the defence of which constituted no irreverence to their superiors."

Buultjens deplored the employers "who have ignored the rights of workers" and a resolution was passed hoping that "workers' societies of a like nature be established all over the island." The *Independent Catholic*, commenting on the meeting, said:

The idea was certainly novel, startling and to some, we suppose, it almost seemed daring, for it was the first occasion in the history of this little Island that the labourers were going to stand up for their rights.

At the end of the meeting, two hundred printers joined the union. Pinto and Buultjens were elected its president and secretary respectively and committee members were elected to represent the main printing offices in Colombo.

The Caves strike lasted six days and ended in an unconditional return to work, as the management not only declined offers by Buultjens and Pinto to mediate, but also refused to negotiate or make concessions. Each printer was told that his pay day would be as before, while the five workers who were alleged to have been the "ring-leaders" of the strike were dismissed and the others pardoned and given their jobs back. The *Times of Ceylon*, representing the employers' interests, observed: "the present attitude of the men is a very contrite one, and we feel persuaded that such an occurrence is likely not to occur again. All employers of labour in Ceylon have reason to thank Caves for having stood out as persistently and so successfully".



Labour Laws

The repressive nature of the labour laws that existed at the time was highlighted when one of the Caves strikers was subjected to criminal prosecution. A machine roller named William was charged with absenting himself from work without notice or sufficient cause. William who was one of the five “ring leaders” dismissed for instigating the strike, had drawn attention to himself before the strike, by sending a written request for his wages and by going alone to the manager to demand his wages. The court acquitted the accused, declaring he was not a “journeyman artificer” under the Ordinance which led the *Times of Ceylon* to protest and call for an appeal against “the extraordinary ruling.” But an article (probably by Buultjens) referred to this statement as a “barrage of insane balderdash and barefaced falsehoods” and called the attention of the Governor to the Labour Ordinance which enslaved the printers “placing them on a level with menials and domestic servants”; an appeal was made “to the enlightened public of the Island” to condemn the Ordinance as “a disgrace to the English Government”.

Outcome

The first strike of Sri Lankan workers ended in defeat, yet marked the beginning of the spread of labour unions in colonial Ceylon. The organizers of the printers’ union had in fact hoped that the movement to unionise would develop. A printed book of union rules stated that the union’s objectives were the “professional interest and general welfare of workmen connected with the printing trade.” The union entrance fee was 50 cents and members contributed 2 percent of their monthly earnings to the union funds. With welfarist stress, the union was mainly concerned with mutual insurance against sickness, old age, unemployment and death. At this time, workers were not entitled to paid sick leave, and they did not receive loans in times of hardship. There were no pension or retirement benefits either. The union also spoke of a monthly newspaper, the *Ceylon Printer*, which aimed “to defend the professional interests of the Ceylon printer, to elevate his character, to teach him unity of purpose and honesty in action and to make him provident and parsimonious.” These were notable modern innovations.

Modernists

One of the most remarkable aspects of this early Sri Lankan labour strike and trade union is that its leaders were also pioneers in the progressive modernist movement of Sri Lanka. Pinto and Buultjens who were radical reformers were essentially modern in their attitudes. Their opposition was against colonialism, capital-

ist exploitation as well as political and ideological hegemony of the church. Their political and intellectual modernism was both anti-colonial and anti-clerical; Lisboa Pinto, a physician of Goan origin, had rebelled against and broke with the Catholic church and formed a group known as ‘Independent Catholics.’ In his newspaper, the *Independent Catholic*, he campaigned against the Papacy in Rome, prompting the *Ceylon Observer* to remark that “Rome had raised up for herself a not contemptible foe in Lisboa Pinto.” The Catholic Church in Ceylon in turn accused Pinto of “defaming the Church and the Papacy, holding up the Catholics of Ceylon to the contempt of other religionists, and practising upon the credulity of his protestant readers.”

Buultjens, who studied political economy at Cambridge under Alfred Marshall in the early 1880s, became interested in labour issues while he was a student in England. Having come under the influence of liberals, freethinkers and Theosophists, Buultjens had renounced Christianity while a student at Cambridge. His subsequent conversion to Buddhism became a social scandal, because a Burgher/Christian was not expected to change his religion; and his breaking with the family tradition was considered to be “almost a social offence.” His old school, St. Thomas’ College, scandalized at Buultjen’s conversion, went to the extent of erasing his name from the school’s panel of honour. Back in Sri Lanka he was very active in Buddhist education including the formation of the first Buddhist girl’s school in Colombo. In furthering Buddhist education, he came into conflict with the colonial state on many occasions.

It is interesting that these early modernists—who were bold enough to organise the printers’ at a time when the colonial state kept a tight grip on the working class—came from small ethnic minorities. Their ethnic background as well as exposure to European liberalism, dissident religious and political trends had obviously made them free of local middle class conventions and intellectual inhibitions. Pinto and Buultjens also made use of their privileged education to challenge orthodoxy and introduce the working class to new forms of organization and protest.

The first strike was certainly not the last as the employers had hoped and the first flash of working-class consciousness of the printers’ spread to other groups of workers. In the thirty years up to the general strike of 1923, carters, railway and harbour workers and many sections of urban labour took to strike action to highlight their grievances. In the 1920s, A. E. Goonesinha, a social democrat, led militant strikes succeeding in obtaining trade union recognition and increases in workers’ wages. After the Left took over the working class leadership in the 1930s, there were many historic struggles including general strikes in urban and plantation sectors in subsequent decades. Labour legislation also



introduced protection for workers, and by the 1970s, some forms of worker participation and worker education were in place. The defeat of the general strike of 1980 and the dismissal of thousands of workers was a major set back; trade union power and influence declined and in the new industrial zones, the emergence of trade unions was actively prevented.

In this centenary year of Sri Lanka's first trade union and workers' strike, many questions come to mind regarding the working class movement. Has class consciousness of the workers been reduced to its lowest ebb? Are workers today less inclined than the heroic William of 1893 to take risks in presenting their grievances? Do workers want to see themselves not as 'working class' but as part of a mobile social group, which is expanding with the heightened penetration of capital and capitalist relations in almost all spheres of the economy?

Meanwhile, the government, as a part of its structural adjustment policies is about to repeal pro-labour industrial legislation that has been won by Sri Lanka's working class in a century of struggle against capital. While reflecting on the working class consciousness displayed by the Williams' of 1893, we may wonder if the flash-point today will be strikes led by a 'Miss William'? In 1893, the printers fired the first salvos in shattering the industrial peace of colonial Sri Lanka. In 1993, and in the following years too, there will surely be a new breakthrough in class actions. This, I guess, will come from women workers in the garment and other factories who have already demonstrated a considerable level of class consciousness and a willingness to take militant action, attracting attention to their grievances against national and multi-national capital. Perhaps, it is now the turn of women workers to become the vanguard in the resistance to exploitation and oppression.

COMMUNICATION

Raj-Puthras Revisited

As a distinct "talking point", boxed in pink, the *Sunday Observer*, October 3rd, reported the modest audience and the less-than-a-celebrity chief orator at the S.W.R.D. memorial lecture recently. Semi-humorously, this argument was pretentiously juxtaposed against the eminent foreign scholars who were invited to deliver two other memorial lectures during the past month.

For the leading state sponsored English newspaper to present this event, in the manner it did, high profile, front page and succinct, illustrates the grotesque degeneration of journalism as well as educated social consciousness.

Admittedly this was a perfect opportunity for the ruling party to throw some mud at the opposition. But in the method employed, glorifying the two previous memorial lecturers, not the lectures, the editors revealed their own lack of basic intellectual curiosity in the content of a lecture. This tendency for xenophilia— admiration of foreigners or strangers, preferably white, indicates symptoms of the colonized consciousness that Frantz Fanon exposed a few decades ago, evidently never absorbed by most. It is a subtle, ingrained inferiority complex that continues to sacrifice humane indigenous knowledge at the altar of Western, white elitism.

Beside the depiction of white xenophilia, the admiration of genealogy, social descent, and scholastic pedigree are common remnants of a colonial social consciousness that continue to distort the notions of knowledge and ideology, between intellectuals and simpletons. Both speakers were publicized in the shadows of their fathers, not for the content of their lectures, which from their nature, could have been easily reproduced for any audience, in any part of the world. But it was the local orator who had to stand firm on his own merit, lacking the celebrity glitter of the other two, and deliver a speech that was more relevant to the Sri Lankan context.

In brief, illiteracy among the educated, or de-schooling of colonial education has once again been depicted, boxed in pink, on the front page of the local Sunday paper. When the English elitist intelligentsia criticises the so called "tabloid" Sinhalese newspapers for unprofessionalism, one wonders in humiliation about the professionalised incompetence of the educated journalist, and the disgrace brought upon the two foreign speakers, in such a slavish, witless, ultra-moronic, "talking point".

Mano Rajya