

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The Textile Strike in Bombay.

By M. N. Roy.

The capitalist offensive in India has culminated in a general lock-out in the cotton industry of Bombay. Strikes in several mills and preparation for a strike in many others answered by the owners very drastically. In the last week of January a partial strike occurred in a number of mills and their owners promptly replied by closing down the mills for a week, thus locking out even those men who had not joined the strikers. This high-handed attitude of the employers, added to their flat refusal to consider the demand of the workers, exhausted the patience of the latter, who began the preparation for a general strike, in spite of the frantic efforts of the leaders to prevent it. By Jan. 29, over 100,000 men had downed tools, and the industry was almost paralysed. The next day a notice signed by the Millowners' Association was posted on the closed door of every mill. By this notice 81 out of 83 mills in Bombay were closed down until Feb. 4, and it was declared that unless the men resumed work unconditionally on that day, the period of lock-out would be extended for another two weeks. So on Feb. 1, the city of Bombay counted over 150,000 men without work.

The demand of the men was for continued payment of the yearly bonus, which is equivalent to a month's wages. This is considered to represent unpaid wages. For years the system of bonus has obtained in the textile industry. In July of last

year, the employers declared their intention of suspending its payment from 1924. The plea on which this decision was taken was that of „trade depression“. It is argued by the owners and their supporters that the price of cotton has gone up and the market is has shrunk; the cost of production must be reduced; and, in the words of Jehangir Bomanji Petit, the owners' spokesmen, „the first remedy is to reduce the wages“.

The „depression“, on which pretext the capitalist offensive was launched, is, however, no depression in the proper sense of the word. What did happen was that since 1922, the industry naturally could not be maintained on the level of prosperity which had been reached during the war and the years immediately following it. The profits in that period rose to almost fabulous figures. The situation was abnormal. It was created first, by the suspension of imports from Britain during the war, and second, by the favourable exchange rate of the rupee. Both the causes were eventually removed; in 1920, imports from Lancashire almost regained their prewar level, and the price of silver also went down. Consequently, already by the year 1921, was there a marked decline in the rate of profit in the Indian cotton industry.

But the relativity of this decline, which was seized upon as the indication of depression, is exposed by the rates of dividends paid in the years of prosperity. In some cases they reached 200 p. c., the average being well over cent per cent. According to the report of the Millowners Association, the profit of the year 1921 was 70 p. c. less than the previous year. The net earning in 1921 was 63 p. c. on the capital outlay. That of the following year was 40 p. c. The figures of 1923 are not yet available. But given that the proportional decline continued, it is not true, as the owners say, that the industry is losing money.

On the other hand, nominal wages have increased hardly 80 p. c. above the pre-war level. When the utter inadequacy of pre-war wages in the Indian cotton industry is remembered, this increase is very negligible. Then, it certainly does not compare fairly with the rise in profits, which was several hundred per cent. The average dividend paid by the mills before the war was 8 to 10 p. c. Further, compared with the rise in the cost of living, the 80 p. c. wage-increase loses any substantial value. In the boom period, the cost of living was more than a hundred per cent above the pre-war level. The retail price of some articles of food had gone up as much as several hundred per cent. Even now the cost of living in Bombay is 53 p. c. above pre-war level, according to official statistics.

Internally, the Indian cotton industry does not find itself in a serious crisis, although it is true that to some extent the waves of world depression did affect it. But the real fact is the revival of Lancashire competition. Absence of foreign goods enabled the Indian producers to force their prices exorbitantly high. This cannot be done any longer. The situation changed already from 1920. The fall of prices has caused a continued drop in the rate of profit. But the youthful capitalism of India is loath to return to a normal position from the fabulous rates it has been accustomed to. First the manufacturers held back thousands of bales of cloth and yarn to force the prices up. It was a stupid act, because it only left the market to the mercy of Lancashire. Over-production in India! What a monstrous lie! More than 50 p. c. of the cloth required has got to be imported, and the average consumption is only 13 yards per head per year. By the beginning of last year, the owners were convinced that they must sell cheaper. Not willing to shoulder all the loss (?) they demanded that the workers must share it too.

The first attack was made upon the workers at Ahmedabad, the second largest textile centre. Last year the Ahmedabad owners decided upon a 20 p. c. wage-cut, besides this they had already questioned the workers' right to the bonus. The workers struck, and resisted for nearly three months. Thanks to the sabotage of the labour leaders, who are closely related to the owners, either domestically or economically, and certainly socially, the strike was not general. 30,000 out of over 70,000 men were out. The Indian worker is threatened with starvation on the first day that he is without a job; there is no Union Fund; and the anxiety of the upper-class leaders to break up any strike knows no bounds. All these reasons taken together defeated the Ahmedabad workers. They finally accepted a 15 p. c. wage-cut, and the question of bonus was referred to arbitration. The Bombay men were not unwilling to come to the aid of their Ahmedabad comrades; but the leaders would not permit this.

The victory at Ahmedabad was followed up by the Bombay owners by the decision to discontinue the payment of the bonus. The recent defeat of their Ahmedabad comrades naturally made the Bombay men shy of any immediate action to reply the employers. But as the time when formerly the payment used to be made drew near, they began to be restive. Despite its meagreness, the bonus is a big thing for the Indian worker. The idea that it was going to be taken away became unbearable, and a spirit of resistance was displayed. In the beginning of January, discontent became acute and fractional strikes occurred. At the same time, 3000 workers in the railway work-shop were locked out, on the pretext of some disturbance resulting from the rude behavior of the medical officer. This incident taxed the patience of the working-class. There was an atmosphere of tension. The mill-owners appealed for help and the government responded by sending forces armed with machine-guns and armoured cars to guard the mills in which the workers had struck. The leaders kept on rebuking the men for rash action and ordered them to resume work immediately, leaving the leaders to negotiate. Neither the government nor the employers would listen to the leaders, but the latter's faith in negotiation and constitutional action was inordinate and their hostility to the strike was out-spoken. Throughout the month of January the situation kept growing worse, until the almost general strike was answered by a general lock-out.

The lock-out infuriated the men; the working class quarters of Bombay were heavily guarded by armed forces. On Jan. 31 a great mass meeting was held to determine the action of the workers in view of the lock-out order. The workers were determined to resist and declared their will to „hold out for months if necessary“. But the spirit of the workers was not shared by their leaders, who were already disturbed because the workers had gone on strike against their advice. In view of the outrageous attitude of the millowners, neither the leaders nor the nationalist press, however, could withhold full support for the workers' demand. The leaders, nevertheless, sought to terrorise the men by telling them how inopportune the time was for the strike, how the owners had been waiting for such an opportunity to close down the mills, and how the workers would harm themselves by holding out. The meeting passed a resolution asking the government to appoint an arbitration board to decide the bonus question; it was also resolved that the workers would go back to the mills as soon as the board was appointed. So what the leaders forced the men to agree to was practically an unconditional surrender. Of course it still remains to be seen how this resolution will work out. It depends upon the attitude of the government and that of the men when they are faced with the actual implication of the resolution forced upon them by the leaders who by their own profession, stand closer to the interests of the employers than to those of the workers.

IN THE INTERNATIONAL

Mass Influx into the Communist Party of Russia.

By Frida Rubiner (Moscow).

According to the results of the great census which was carried out by the Russian Communist Party in 1922, the composition of the Party, as regards social origin, was as follows: workers 44.3%, peasants 28.8%, clerks etc. 22.2%, and others 6.7%. It was however, repeatedly pointed out that the actual percentage of workers was much less. The greater part of the Party members who come from the working class have long since taken administrative and official posts in the Soviet state service, and are more or less estranged from their class. The danger of this deproletarianizing of the revolutionary working class party was realized very acutely during the Party discussion which recently took place, and the conclusions which were drawn therefrom were: 1. the Party must exclude more than ever all non-proletarian elements who are alien to the class, and 2. that new members must be recruited from the factories.

This decision regarding the acceptance of new members goes very far towards meeting certain strivings in the ranks of the workers. If the Russian Communist Party has not grown