

COUNTRYSIDE STIRS IN INDIA

By Kailas Chandra

BOMBAY -- A call for "Bharat Bandh Hartal" [a voluntary stoppage of business throughout the country] on September 25, issued by the Samyukta Socialist party [SSP] and its two trade-union wings -- the Hind Mazdoor Sabha [HMS] and the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat [HMP] -- as a national protest against the food policy of the Congress government proved a total flop in most states.

The sponsors of the "hartal" were themselves responsible for the fiasco. In the first place, the petty-bourgeois leadership of the SSP was opposed to any "industrial action"; i.e., a general strike by the working class. Its appeal was confined to small traders and businessmen to close shop and to students to abstain from classes. The response was negligible.

The SSP rejected a suggestion that all the left parties and central trade-union organisations controlled by them should issue a joint call for a day's token general strike on a national scale September 25. The SSP declared that it would not enter into any "united front" arrangement with the "Communists" (with their alleged "extra-territorial loyalties")!

The Lohiaite section of the SSP nevertheless approached Communist leader S.A.Dange in his capacity as general secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, which is controlled by the CPI [Communist party of India], proposing that he should convene a conference of trade-union leaders to plan an all-India action by the working class on September 25.

Dange refused to respond, ostensibly because there was "no sufficient agreement" among the left parties on the question of a general strike. He was content with the "satyagraha" campaign of token defiance of the law by CPI members in typical Gandhian style in different states. (Dange himself courted arrest and was detained by the Bombay police for a few hours.)

Only in West Bengal did all the parties, including the SSP, both wings of the CPI [pro-Khrushchevist and pro-Chinese], the RSPI [Revolutionary Socialist party of India], RCPI [Revolutionary Communist party of India], join together to issue a united call for a day's token general strike on September 25 in that state. The response was not up to the expectations of the sponsors. The West Bengal state government moved into retaliatory action and arrested more than 2,500 political workers and trade unionists on the eve of the strike.

Chief Minister P.C.Sen boasted in the West Bengal legislative assembly on September 25: "If the May 20 general strike was fifty per cent successful, today's strike was only twelve per cent

successful!"

Sen's statement was of doubtful accuracy. On September 25 industrial activity in Calcutta came to a virtual standstill although the strike was not as demonstrative as the May 20 strike called by the left parties. (Likewise to protest the government's food policy.)

There is no doubt that the September 25 "hartal" looked like an anti-climax to the growing militancy of the masses all over the country in recent months. The bourgeois press was gleeful over the "leftist fiasco." The Free Press Journal, a liberal bourgeois newspaper of Bombay, commented September 28: "The waning popular attraction to repetitive 'bandhs' [closures] in many urban areas, as reflected in the response to the 'Bharat Bandh' organised by the left-ist parties to spotlight attention on foodgrain shortage and spiraling prices, is quite understandable. Carried to the extremes the unvarying pattern of such agitation can scarcely be expected to become the spice of life. It tends to lose novelty and to blunt the edge of emotional excitement. . . ."

The newspaper was certainly wrong in "accusing" the traditional left parties of carrying the struggle to "extremes." On the contrary, the SSP and the CPI were half-hearted about the whole affair. There is, however, some truth in the contention that the masses are losing interest in the ritualistic "bandh" calls. This is not because they tend "to lose novelty," etc. They have not been effective in channelling the growing popular discontent. The leadership is lagging behind. The masses are seeking higher forms of struggle. An all-India general strike, with adequate organisational preparations, would certainly have given new energy to the movement (or "emotional excitement" for the petty bourgeoisie). The reformist leadership of the SSP and the opportunist Dange leadership of the CPI combined to betray the possibility. Perhaps both of them knew that a national general strike would unleash forces which they were not confident of "controlling" or which might have shattered the reformist and class-collaborationist illusions they have fostered.

But the Free Press Journal knows better. It warned the ruling class and its state that "to criticise such agitation and its organisers is not to deny that popular dissatisfaction and discontent over the slow and inadequate progress on the food front continue to simmer and sizzle. Official complacency can thus be woefully misconceived. . . . When the gilt is taken off the gingerbread, the stark fact may stare an impartial observer in the face that noisy and explosive discontent, long confined to politically conscious cities, is slowly, perhaps imperceptibly, seeping through mofussil [smallest] towns and the remote hinterlands of the country." [Emphasis added.]

The Journal draws the attention of the government to the

sporadic outbursts, in the form of food riots and looting of shops, that occurred in many parts of the country, significantly enough on September 25. It points out: "Friday's happenings in some parts of Mysore, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra, Assam and Cooch-Bihar are calculated to give such an impression [of explosive discontent] though some of the volcanic violence which attended them in some places will be deplored and denounced. How far breaking of the godowns [warehouses] and indulgence of violence are due to political instigation, to exploitation by hooligan elements, or to the extremity of popular distress, is hard to determine. But it is imprudent to soft-pedal the existence of distress."

The "existence of distress" (despite Union Food Minister Subramaniam's assertion in parliament that the food situation in the country had improved in recent weeks) caused sporadic and unorganised demonstrations in most states, not in the politically conscious cities but in the remote towns.

Newspaper headlines on September 25 and subsequent days offer eloquent testimony to the "extremity of popular distress." Here are a few of the "incidents" reported in the daily press:

• "One person was killed and one injured when the police opened fire [September 25] at two places in Bellary [Mysore state] even as the looting of foodgrains godowns continued well past midnight. Mobs roamed the market areas which remained closed in response to the 'Bharat Bandh' call by the SSP and the CPI."

• "Two persons were killed in a police firing on a mob of demonstrators at Kishangang in Purnea district [Bihar]. . . . Nearly 25 persons and 11 policemen and officers were also injured in a clash between the demonstrators and the police at the Kishangang Sub-Divisional Officer's Court, following the arrest of Lakhan Lal Kapur, joint secretary of the SSP, in connection with the 'Ghera Dalo' [literal meaning: surround government offices] agitation launched all over the State on Sept. 25."

• "An unruly mob of over 2,000 led by SSP workers was alleged to have attempted to enter the Malhargang grain market [in Indora, Madhya Pradesh]. They were also said to have looted some vegetable vendors. The District Magistrate has promulgated a ban on assembly of more than five persons."

• "Seven persons were injured, two of them seriously at Marakpur, 60 miles from Kurnool [Andhra Pradesh] when police opened fire to quell a riotous mob in a procession taken out Sept. 25 morning. According to the police, the crowd indulged in looting of grain shops."

Such "incidents" continued to occur in subsequent days, again in the rural areas and small towns and not in metropolitan areas like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi:

- "Three persons were killed and four injured when the police opened fire at two places in Guntakal [Andhra Pradesh] to disperse mobs looting foodgrain godowns and shops, according to an official report."

- "Nineteen persons were arrested on the charge of looting foodgrains from three shops in Baldevgang Mandi [Agara, Uttar Pradesh]."

- "The police fired shots in the air to disperse a mob which attempted to raid foodgrain godowns in Akkalkot town [Maharashtra] on Sept. 29. Sixty persons have been taken to custody. The mob later went to the local mamlatdar's office where it demanded jowar [local coarse grain]."

There are too many "incidents" of this type, of hungry people acting on their own in a sporadic manner, without any organised leadership, all over the country!

This is indeed not a very happy situation. No one would idolise unorganised mass violence of this kind, not the revolutionary Marxists at any rate, of looting of foodgrain shops and godowns. But they are symptomatic of what is happening in the country. While the masses are acting thus, the Congress governments, despite their protestations of "socialism," are acting in different states in the most trigger-happy and ruthless manner in relation to the masses, and not against the foodgrain hoarders and the bankers who cover them.

Indeed farces are being enacted in some states like Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh where a few traders have been arrested (and promptly released on bail) for not declaring their foodgrain stocks; and some godowns have been raided by the police to seize hoarded grain stocks.

Despite the complacent claims made by New Delhi that there has been "improvement" (Union Food Minister Subramaniam has gone to the absurd extent of accusing the left parties of creating a "mentality of food scarcity" in the country!), the food situation is becoming more and more acute; contributing to unbridled inflation and shooting up of prices of essential commodities.

The only way the Shastri government hopes to solve this problem is to import additional foodgrains from the United States. New Delhi signed a new contract September 30 to import 4,380,000 tons of U.S. food during 1964-65 under Public Law 480 at an estimated cost of Rs. 1,900,000,000 [one rupee = \$.21]. (This brings the total aid received by India from the U.S. under Public Law 480 since 1956 to Rs. 13,700,000,000, sufficient to give U.S. imperialism a stranglehold over the Indian economy.)

An equally complacent attitude has been adopted by the tra-

ditional left parties in face of the growing mass unrest. The policy is one of inaction at a time when the working class in the major cities, the white-collar wage earners, the students and the rural poor are being drawn into the vortex of gigantic struggles. The working-class parties find themselves virtually paralysed and incapable of initiative.

The ultra reactionaries are moving forward in this situation. The Madhya Pradesh police recently opened fire on an assembly of mine workers, who were staging a rally in support of their trade-union demands, and killed three workers. Even an atrocity like this has gone unnoticed by the organised trade-union movement in the country. The Congress governments in the states continue their trigger-happy policy in relation to the masses without even serious protest from the left.

The present situation in India has great revolutionary potentialities. But if the energies of the masses are sapped by futile and chaotic outbursts instead of being co-ordinated into a national upsurge to sweep away the capitalist society which has outlived itself, only the better organised reaction would take advantage of the situation. The working-class parties must seize the initiative by organising united action of the working class on a national scale for immediate economic demands linked with wide political demands.

The Indian bourgeoisie cannot possibly solve the basic problems presented by the masses, either on the economic or political fronts. Every mass movement today poses the problem of political power. The bourgeoisie in India is entering a new phase of continuous political crises. It is resourceful enough to meet them by resorting to military dictatorial means sooner or later, with the help of U.S. imperialism, unless the working class intervenes effectively and in time.

This poses a new challenge to the working class parties, who are still suffering from reformist parliamentary illusions. They can face this challenge only through united action of the masses, not by their present manoeuvres for electoral alliance as in Kerala. The working class must be educated to create a new leadership on the basis of workers' councils in factories and workshops to be co-ordinated on a regional and national basis. Trade unions must build workers' guards before the reaction gets ready to strike.

The first requisite is a strong revolutionary vanguard with a correct perspective. This is sure to emerge in the course of the coming upsurge of the masses.