

THE  
COLLECTED  
WORKS  
OF  
MAHATMA  
GANDHI

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THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

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COLLECTED  
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OF  
MAHATMA  
GANDHI

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194. LETTER TO THE PRESS<sup>1</sup>

NADIAD,  
March 27, 1918

TO  
THE EDITOR  
THE LEADER  
ALLAHABAD

SIR,

Perhaps I owe an explanation to the public with regard to my recent fast. Some friends consider the action to have been silly, others cowardly and some others still worse. In my opinion, I would have been untrue to my Maker and to the cause I was espousing, if I had acted otherwise.

When over a month ago I reached Bombay, I was told that Ahmedabad mill-hands had threatened a strike and violence if the bonus that was given to them during the plague was withdrawn. I was asked to intervene and I consented. Owing to the plague the men were getting as much as 70 per cent bonus since August last. An attempt to recall that bonus had resulted in grave dissatisfaction among the labourers. When it was almost too late, the mill-owners offered in the place of the plague bonus and for the sake of the high prices a rise of 20 per cent. The labourers were unsatisfied. The matter was referred to arbitration, Mr. Chatfield, the Collector, being the umpire. The men in some mills however struck work. The owners, thinking that they had done so without just cause, withdrew from the arbitration and declared a general lock-out to be continued till the labourers were exhausted into accepting 20 per cent increase they had offered. Messrs Shankarlal Banker, V. J. Patel and I, the arbitrators appointed on behalf of the labourers thought that they were to be demoralized if we did not act promptly and decisively. We, therefore, investigated the question of increase. We sought the mill-owners' assistance. They would not give it. Their one purpose was to organize themselves into a combination that could fight a similar combination of their employees. One-sided technically though our investigation was, we endeavoured to examine the mill-owners'

<sup>1</sup> Evidently this was issued generally to the Press, and was also published in *The Hindu*.

side and came to the conclusion that a 35 per cent increase was fair. Before announcing the figure to the mill-hands, we informed the employers of the result of our inquiry and told them that we would correct ourselves if they could show any error. The latter would not co-operate. They sent a reply saying as much, but they pointed out in it that the rate of increase granted by the Government as also the employers in Bombay was much less than the one contemplated by us. I felt that the addendum was beside the point and at a huge meeting<sup>1</sup> announced 35 per cent for the mill-hands' acceptance. Be it noted that the plague bonus amounted to 70 per cent of their wages and they had declared their intention of accepting not less than 50 per cent as high prices increase. They were now called upon to accept the mean (the fixing of the mean was quite an accident) between the mill-owners 20 per cent, and their own 50 per cent. After some grumbling, the meeting accepted the 35 per cent increase, it always being understood that they would recognize, at the same time, the principle of arbitration whenever the mill-owners did so. From that time forward, i.e., 26th February last, day after day thousands of people gathered together under the shade of a tree outside the city walls, people walking long distances in many cases, and solemnly repeated their determination in the name of God not to accept anything less than 35 per cent. No pecuniary assistance was given to them. It is easy enough to understand that many must suffer from the pangs of starvation and that they could not, while they were without employment, get any credit. We who were helping them came, on the other hand, to the conclusion that we would only spoil them if we collected public funds and utilized them for feeding them unless the able-bodied amongst them were ready to perform bread labour. It was a difficult task to persuade men, who had worked at machines, to shoulder baskets of sand or bricks. They came but they did so grudgingly. The mill-owners hardened their hearts. They were equally determined not to go beyond 20 per cent and they appointed emissaries to persuade the men to give in. Even during the early part of the lock-out, whilst we had declined to help those who would not work, we had assured them that we would feed and clothe ourselves after feeding and clothing them. Twenty-two days had passed by. Hunger and the mill-owners' emissaries were producing their effect and Satan was whispering to the men that there was no such thing as God on earth who would help them and that vows were dodges resorted

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* "Speech to Ahmedabad Mill-hands", February 26, 1918.



to by weaklings. One morning instead of an eager and enthusiastic crowd of 5 to 10 thousand men with determination written on their faces, I met a body of about 2000 men with despair written on their faces. We had just heard that mill-hands living in a particular chawl had declined to attend the meeting, were preparing to go to work and accept 20 per cent increase and were taunting us (I think very properly) that it was very well for us who had motors at our disposal and plenty of food, to attend their meetings and advise staunchness even unto death. What was I to do? I held the cause to be just. I believe in God as I believe that I am writing this letter. I believe in the necessity of the performance of one's promises at all costs. I knew that the men before us were godfearing men, but that the long-drawn-out lock-out or strike was putting an undue strain upon them. I had the knowledge before me that during my extensive travels in India, hundreds of people were found who as readily broke their promises as they made them. I knew, too, that the best of us have but a vague and indistinct belief in soul-force and in God. I felt that it was a sacred moment for me, my faith was on the anvil, and I had no hesitation to rising and declaring to the men that a breach of their vow so solemnly taken was unendurable by me and that I would not take any food until they had the 35 per cent increase given or until they had fallen. A meeting that was up to now unlike the former meetings, totally unresponsive, woke up as if by magic. Tears trickled down the cheeks of every one of them and men after men rose up saying that they would never go to the mills unless they got the increase and that they would go about the city and steel the hearts of those who had not attended the meeting. It was a privilege to witness the demonstration of the efficacy of truth and love. Every one immediately realized that the protecting power of God was as much with us today as it used to be in the days of yore. I am not sorry for the vow but with the belief that I have, I would have been unworthy of the trust undertaken by me, if I had done anything less. Before I took the vow I knew that there were serious defects about it. For me to take such a vow in order to affect in any shape or form the decision of the mill-owners would be a cowardly injustice done to them and that I would prove myself unfit for the friendship which I had the privilege of enjoying with some of them. I knew that I ran the risk of being misunderstood. I could not prevent my fast from affecting their decision. Their knowledge, moreover, put a responsibility on me which I was ill able to bear. From now I disabled myself from gaining concessions for the men which ordi-

narily, in a struggle such as this, I would be entirely justified in securing. I knew, too, that I would have to be satisfied with the minimum I could get from the mill-owners and with a fulfilment of the letter of the men's vow rather than its spirit and so hath it happened. I put the effect of my vow in one scale and the merits of it in the other. There are hardly any acts of human beings which are free from all taint. Mine, I know, was exceptionally tainted but I preferred the ignominy of having unworthily compromised by my vow the position and independence of the mill-owners rather than that it should be said by posterity that 10,000 men had suddenly broken a vow which they had for over twenty days solemnly taken and repeated in the name of God. I am fully convinced that no body of men can make themselves into a nation or perform great tasks unless they become as true as steel and unless their promises come to be regarded by the world like the law of the Medes and Persians, inflexible and unbreakable, and whatever may be the verdict of friends, so far as I can think at present, on given occasions I should not hesitate in future to repeat the humble performance which I have taken the liberty of describing in this communication.

I cannot conclude this letter without mentioning two names of whom India has every reason to be proud. The mill-owners were represented by Mr. Ambalal Sarabhai who is a gentleman in every sense of the term. He is a man of great culture and equally great abilities. He adds to these qualities a resolute will. The mill-hands were represented by his sister Anasuyabehn. She possesses a heart of gold. She is full of pity for the poor. The mill-hands adore her. Her word is law with them. I have not known a struggle fought with so little bitterness and such courtesy on either side. This happy result is principally due to the connections with it of Mr. Ambalal Sarabhai and Anasuyabehn.

*I am,*  
*Yours, etc.,*  
M. K. GANDHI

*The Leader, 3-4-1918*