

Coimbatore District Textile workers' Union

A brief sketch of the origin, demands placed, struggles launched and achievements of the Kovai district textile workers' union.

Formation of the Union

The Kovai District Textile workers' Union was formed at Udayar Palayam, in a meeting held on 12th December 1937, under the Presidentship of freedom fighter N.G. Ramasamy. The following functionaries were elected.

1. President : N.G Ramasamy
2. Vice President : K.V. Ramasamy & Krishnasamy Thevar
3. Secretary : R. Ramasamy
4. Assistant Secretary : T.P. Ramasamy, K.P. Arumugam, V. Jaganathan
5. Treasurer : V.G. Muthu

M/s. C. Subramanian, T.S. Avinasilingam Chettiar and K. Subri were elected as advisors.

Enquiry Commission

In pursuance of the assurance given by the then labour minister Sri. V.V. Giri, during the bonus struggle of 1937, a one-man commission chaired by Retired. Justice M. Venkataramaiah was constituted on 6th December, 1937, relating to various demands of the workers including their wages. This commission for workers was the first of its kind. Mr. C. Subramaniam appeared for the workers and the proceedings of this commission lasted for three months and its recommendations were given to the Government on 9th April, 1938. The main recommendations of the commission related to working hours, wages, housing and medical facilities for workers. The wages suggested by the commission were :

- for tapping boys - Rs. 8.00, - Rs. 7.50, for half side- Rs. 9.00,
- for three forth side - Rs.11.00, - for full side - Rs. 15.00

Struggle for Dearness Allowance (DA)

The second world war led to a steep rise in the prices of essential commodities in India resulting in the workers not able to make both ends meet. The union raised the demand for 25% DA, to offset the price rise. Rejection of this demand by the mill-owners led to a general strike in all the mills of the district in June 1941. After ten days strike due to the intervention of the government the mill-owners agreed to give 12.5% DA, bringing an end to the strike. This is the fore-runner for the workers in the textile mills and other industries for getting DA.

Freedom Struggle

During the freedom struggle of August 1942, the Union was declared illegal. The Union leaders along with hundreds of workers were put behind bars. In the absence of the leaders, the union was functioning with local leaders. After the release of the leaders one by one, the union became strong again. With the British Government deciding to conduct the election to the state assemblies, Sri. R. Kuppusamy got elected to the assembly in one among the four constituencies reserved for workers in the Madras assembly in 1946. Andhra Kesari S. Prakasam led the Ministry for the state.

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Wages, DA demands

The union released the demand for DA and wages revision again with the congress government in 1946. The Government constituted the "Venkataramiah Commission" to go in to the question of wages, DA and working conditions of the textile workers throughout the state. In his report submitted to the Government in 1947, the Commission fixed a minimum basic Pay of Rs.26.00, for unskilled workers and also recommended constitution of two more committees to decide the question of work load and wages of other workers. With regard to DA it suggested 3 annas for Kovai and Chennai and 2 ½ annas for Madurai and Salem areas per one point rise in cost of living index.

Bonus Struggle

Having received no bonus from 1942 – 46, the Union raised the demand for the same, for the four years in total. Three months basic Pay was offered by the mill-owners for the entire period, which was rejected by the union, leading to the strike for a week throughout the district. Finally with the intervention of Sri.Prakasam, the Chief Minister of the State, the strike came to an end with an offer of five months basic pay as bonus.

Retrenchment of 1948 and the strike call

As per the "Venkataramiah Commission" recommendations of 1947, the Tripartite Committee headed by Sri. Uttanda Rama Pillai, IAS, was constituted by the State Government to define the work norms in the textile industry. This committee rejected all the suggestion from the workers side and accepted those of the mill-owners side in total, against which the union gave a strike notice. The mill-owners implementing the new norms unilaterally, the strike commenced even before the notice period ended. Due to the new work norms, in Kovai District alone 11,200 workers were retrenched in 31 mills with the Government, mill-owners and Police nexus. False cases were foisted and hundreds of leading cadres and leaders were arrested. The strike ended after three months with a total failure. Hundreds of leaders and thousands of workers lost their jobs. Pressing for the withdrawal of victimization methods and demanding job for dismissed workers, the leaders started a fast unto death in Singanallur and Peelamedu with the intervention of Tamilnadu Congress Committee President Sri. Kamaraj. A consolation meeting was held in Kovai in the presence of the Chief Minister Sri. O.P. Ramasamy Reddiar in which Sri Kamaraj and the labour minister Sri. Gopal Reddy also participated. An understanding was reached at the talks to give job for the retrenched and dismissed workers, introducing a third shift in the mills.

But the mill-owners side took the stand that no understanding was reached in the presence of the Chief Minister and asked the workers to register their names with the Mill Workers' Association for which list, one by one will be given job "as and when" vacancies arose. The announcement from the mill-owners was condemned by Sri. Kamaraj. In April 1948, at Arani, during the political conference of the Congress party was held, in the presence of Sri.O.P. Ramasamy, he even openly suggested that such mill-owners should be arrested and sent to jail.

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Retrenchment Compensation

The union raised the demand for retrenchment compensation for those who are affected in 1948 retrenchment. Finally as per the labour Appalate Tribunal order, 6,600 workers received compensation. This was responsible for the introduction of the retrenchment compensation clause in the Industrial Disputes Act.

Bonus Struggle Again

Failure of the 1948 strike led to “No Bonus” for workers up-to 1951. The demand for four years bonus was referred by the Government to the labour court. Even while the case was taken up, Mill owners association held talks with Union and an agreement was signed providing for thirteen months basic pay as bonus for the four years together. This is the first bi-patriate settlement between the union and the SIMA.

Power-cut compensation

Due to the power-cut in Tamilnadu in 1950, there was no work in many mills for several days in a year and the number of such days swelling to months in a year progressively. There was no clause in the Industrial Dispute Act to provide for compensation for day of “no work”, due to power-cut. The Union launched a struggle demanding living wage for job-less days. This was ridiculed by the then mill-owners and even by some of the trade union leaders. The struggle for their demands got intensified day-by-day, which led to consultation talks in the presence of the then Chief Minister Rajaji. The talks having failed the issue was referred to labour court, which gave a judgement providing for a maximum of 45 days half wages in a year as compensation for job-less days. This paved way for amending the Industrial Disputes Act by the Central Government.

Wage revision demand again

As per the “1947 Judgement”, unskilled workers were being paid the maximum wages of Rs.26/= only. The suggestions of the “Wage Committee” were not implemented. After the 1952 general election, the wage revision demand gained momentum, leading to the formation of a committee by the Government consisting of representatives from the Government, labour, mill-owners and professional experts, to go into the question of work norms wages and DA of textile workers of the state. This committee headed by Sri. Baktavatsalam Naidu, held talks with representatives of mill-owners and labours and gave its recommendations to the Government, which were rejected by the mill-owners. They took the stand that these were only recommendations and not binding on them. After prolonged struggle the mill-owners association agreed to held direct talks with the union on the basis of the tripartiate recommendations. After several months of the talks an agreement was reached in 1946. This is the first Tripartiate Agreement reached in Tamilnadu textile industry.

First “Wage Board” recommendations

After the 1957 general election, the Central Government appointed a “wage board” to go into the wages and DA of textile workers, throughout the country. This board consisting of representatives from mill-owners, labour, Government and experts, submitted its recommendations in 1960. This again was rejected by the mill-owners. After a protracted struggle with a threat of a general strike, for the implementation of the “wage board”

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recommendation within a time frame, the state government intervened and in the presence of the state labour minister sri. R. Venkataraman an agreement was reached on the basis of the "wage board" recommendations. Following this an agreement was reached on rationalisation.

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