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36. *SPEECH AT MEETING OF MILL-HANDS, AHMEDABAD*¹

February 25, 1920

We have assembled here today to set up a union of workers, to approve its rules and adopt the necessary resolutions.

Before we start on this work, I must tell you that we should be perfectly clear about the aim of the organization we have undertaken to set up. About two or three years ago, revered Anasuyabehn² had thought of founding a union of weavers and she had even taken some steps in that direction. But my advice to her then was that it was responsible work and that, though we may have taken it up with the idea of serving the workers, if later we failed to shoulder the responsibility adequately we might, instead of serving the workers, do them much harm. I do not mean to say that I am free of that fear today, but it is becoming plain to me that, in some ways, conditions in India are changing so much that we would do well to watch these changes carefully, study them and set up some such organizations by way of protection. All I want you to understand is that, if we do not have, for running our organizations, sincere workers who know their duties well, we would be bringing down the axe on our own feet. If such workers are not available, we had better not take up the difficult business of running a union. This is exactly what I said two years ago, and I repeat it here today.

All manner of movements are going on these days among the workers of our country. In all the countries ruled by the British and the European States, there is such chaos after the War that, if the workers fail to look after and safeguard their interests, they would be crushed. Today, those people who cannot stand together as a nation and do not keep in step with other nations will find it impossible to survive. The very machinery of Government is such that anyone who refuses to play his part in it and remains ignorant of his interests is sure to be wiped out. In former times, there was no need for us to know what the king was doing, no need even to mention his name. It was enough then if one paid the revenue dues in time, gave a bold answer on occasion or bought survival for the moment with a bribe. Today one cannot get away in this way.

¹ The workers of the spinning departments of various mills had met to consider the formation of a labour union.

² Anasuyabehn Sarabhai, a social worker and labour leader of Ahmedabad

Whether we want it or not, we are so intimately connected with the administration that, if we do not learn to look closely into affairs and understand our interests, we are bound to be crushed. It is for this reason that I, though religiously inclined and having no interest in politics whatever, have been busy for the last several months with nothing but politics. The sole reason for this is that I doubt whether I would be able to follow my dharma without thus participating in political affairs. And this is exactly the point I wish to explain to you in simple words, namely, that the workers have no option but in some measure to interest themselves in politics.

Formerly, we knew only our fields. There were neither mills, nor mill-owners, nor laws governing them. All these things have come in now. We should therefore know what they are. There are laws of dharma and of family life. We do not, however, call them laws because they provide for no punishment or fine. Now the time has come when no single individual can do us good, nor harm us either. We shall have to manage our affairs ourselves. It may so happen, in all this, that our representatives in the Government or the legislature may cut our throats for us while professing to speak for us. For this reason, too, we shall have to understand these matters. We shall have to learn how to bring up our children, shall have to discover the reasons why the facilities for their education are poor and know why the prices of food grains rise. The mothers present here will also have to learn how to bring up their children. The time will come when it will be compulsory for us to send our children to the schools which will be opened. If we do not exert ourselves to understand how these things work, to our advantage or otherwise, if we do not learn to be independent of others, we are as good as dead. We have always had unions of *Vanias*¹ and Brahmins, even of Kshatriyas, of a slightly different kind. Now the time is ripe for unions of workers in which weavers, smiths, and spinners may come together and establish unity among their ranks, may discover what is good in themselves and what is bad and remedy the latter. I caution you once again; by all means set up organizations, establish your unions, but see that you frame your rules and select your representatives, men to whom you will entrust your interests, with a full understanding of your responsibility. You will keep a watch over them not only about the finances and the management of your affairs, but also to know what they have actually done in your name and where they

¹ Members of a mercantile community

have signed on your behalf. You will have to go into all these things.

I want to tell you another thing. To those of you who believe that the unions we are establishing are for the purpose of fighting or coercing the mill-owners or that we shall be able to use these unions for such purposes, I would advise not to join the proposed union at all. I have never done anything in my life to coerce owners or harm their interests, and I will never allow myself to be an instrument in this. Only, if they try to suppress the workers, I will be ready to give up my life to save them. Neither the revered Anasuyabehn nor Shankarlal¹ has the slightest ill will for the mill-owners. I know well enough that they only love service of the workers. Hence it is that, whenever I get the chance, I join them in this service of theirs and I tell them over and over again on this occasion that, if they would truly serve the workers, they should have regard for the interests of both the workers and the mill-owners. The mill-owners do not need anyone's services. The workers are poor, timid and simple-minded and need others' services. By establishing unions, we do not wish to intimidate the mill-owners but to protect the workers, and we certainly have the right to do this.

If the workers find it necessary today to send their wives and children to work in factories, it is our duty to see that they do not have to. There ought to be no need for workers' children to go and work, at the cost of their education, for the sake of an extra income of three to four rupees. Work is not for children. Nor is it for women to work in factories. They have plenty of work in their own homes. They should attend to the bringing up of their children; they may give peace to the husband when he returns home tired, minister to him, soothe him if he is angry, and do any other work they can staying at home. If we want our family life to be comely and sweet, we ought to do this. It is not for women to go out and work, as men do. If we send them to the factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline. To those who advance the example of Europe, asking how it is that thousands of women there do the work of men and that men and women work together, my reply is: 'I don't bother myself about Europe.' From what little insight into the laws of social life I have gained, I feel convinced that for men

¹ Shankarlal Banker, a political worker and labour leader of Ahmedabad. He was also associated with *Young India* and *Navajivan*, and with the Home Rule League and the Satyagraha Sabha, Bombay.

and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. Do not, therefore, send your women out to work; protect their honour; if you have any manliness in you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them. Today the workers, in their helplessness, are forced to send their women and children out for work, much against their will. It is true, of course, that they should have better wages if they are not to be so obliged. All this could be easy to achieve through a union, if established.

Thus, in setting up a union of this kind, you have to apply your mind and decide about three things:

1. You should go through the laws of labour unions.
2. The mill-owners should not have undue authority over workers.
3. For joining the union, you will have to pay an entrance fee and a monthly subscription afterwards.

Moreover, if you receive more money, you will have to think what you will do with it. It would be better for me that I do not receive this money if I were to lose this extra money in a tavern, or drink tea or eat fritters with it. Personally, I would prefer to give some relief to my wife and educate her; if I had more money still, I would engage a lady-teacher for her, educate my children, get my clothes washed, change my damp and dirty house for a better one; if I do this, I would have received the extra money to good purpose. If we could do all these things through a union, it would be a good thing to establish one. But I am still doubtful, and I tell you again and again that, if we forget all this, we who wish to serve you, and you as well, will be wicked creatures in our next birth.

There was a time when all people were religiously inclined. By joining and sharing in all these activities, I have been trying if, even in this way, the religious temper may somehow be revived in the people of this country. It is my firm belief that we shall be saved in these hard times if this comes about; else we are doomed. This religious temper is not very difficult to cultivate. It is the simplest of things and can be cultivated most easily. I tell you, in a word, that he who gives a free rein to his desires is self-indulgent, and has no regard for self-control, that such a one is far removed from religion. He who wrongs none, who never robs anyone of a single farthing, he understands what dharma means. If we turn ourselves into drunkards, rogues and knaves, our living, our earning will all be in vain. If we become truthful, good, straightforward, courteous and religiously inclined,

we shall have lived indeed. Let our unions be established; they will foster understanding and unity among us. We shall be able to work systematically. I know that the mill-owners want a union to be formed. Today, each has some difficulty or other to solve, and complaints to attend to, individually. If there were a union, matters could be discussed with the office-bearers and settled in orderly fashion. Thus, a union is to the advantage of both the parties; give the fullest thought, therefore, to the matter before you proceed further.

[From Gujarati]

Navajivan, 29-2-1920

37. LETTER TO REGISTRAR, HIGH COURT, BOMBAY¹

THE SATYAGRAHA ASHRAM,
SABARMATI,
February 27, 1920

THE REGISTRAR
HIGH COURT
BOMBAY

DEAR SIR,

I enclose herewith the statement I wish to read or submit to the court on the 3rd proximo, the date fixed for taking the Rule *Nisi*² issued against me. I enclose also Mr. Mahadeo Desai's statement.

Yours [faithful]ly,

[ENCLOSURES]

[GANDHIJI'S STATEMENT]

With reference to the Rule *Nisi* issued against me I state as follows:

Before the issue of the Rule certain correspondence passed between the Registrar of this Honourable Court and myself. On the 11th December I addressed to the Registrar a letter³

¹ The drafts of this letter and of both the statements enclosed are in Gandhiji's hand.

² Issued in the proceedings for Contempt of Court against Gandhiji as editor and Mahadev Desai as publisher of *Young India*, Bombay, which, on August 6, 1919, printed with comments a letter from B. C. Kennedy, District Judge of Ahmedabad, to the Registrar, High Court, Bombay. *Vide* also "Was It Contempt of Court?", 10-3-1920.

³ For the text of this letter, *vide* Vol. XVI, pp. 339-40.