

# **The Madras Labour Union (of The Buckingham & Carnatic Mills)**

The history of Madras Labour Union is synonymous with the history of trade union movement in India. The oppressive work conditions triggered the urge among workers, to organise themselves. This urge took a definite shape and culminated in the formation of a trade union, which was the first of its kind in India.

G. Ramanjalu Naidu had a rice shop and G. Selvapathy Chettiar had a textile shop on De mellow's Road facing the Mill. These two humanists were pained to see the working conditions of B&C Mill employees, who worked for almost 12 hours a day; who had hardly had enough time to eat; who looked tired and untidy with cotton dust all over them. They established a close contact with these workers and got to know and understand their grievances. At times they even wrote anonymous letters to the management pointing out certain problems faced by the workers. Though there was some relief to the workers because of this, many issues remained unsolved.

Encouraged by the response to their anonymous letters to the management, these two persons called for a meeting of these textile workers and organised it on behalf of Sri. Venkatesa Gunamirdha Varushini Sabha, in which both Ramanjalu Naidu and Selvapathy Chettiar were members. Thirty workers participated in this meeting, which was addressed by N.C. Kannabiran Mudaliar. He spoke to the workers about the need for an organisation and he quoted extensively from Mahabharata to convince the workers!. This spark was further kindled by Thiru. Vi. Ka, who was then a Tamil teacher at Wesley College, Madras, who addressed the workers a couple of times on the need for forming a Union. Thiru. Vi. Ka, who later became the Editor discussed this issue with Diwan Bahadur Kesava Pillai, who was writing on the issues of textile workers in "Indian Patriot".

On 2-3-1918, under the argis of the Sabha, a meeting was organised which was attended by thousands of workers. The police tried to intervene but both Ramanjalu Naidu and Selvapathy Chettiar resisted their intervention and continued with the meeting. The process of forming the workers Union continued and so did the intervention by the Police. However, the "twins" were unrelenting. They also sought the help of Dr. Annie Besant and B.P. Wadia who were then publishing "New India" and were getting on with the "Home Rule" movement. B.P.Wadia addressed the textile workers on 13-4-1918 and his speech was translated by Thiru. Vi. Ka. These meeting attracted various sections of the people much to the displeasure of the mill owners, who started pressurising the workers. The Madras Labour Union (MLU) consisting of textile workers of Buckingham Mill, Carnatic Mill and Choolai Mill, was formed on 27-4-1918. The subscription was one anna a month and the Union was to hold it's meeting every Saturday.

The following were the office-bearers.

President	:	B.P.Wadia
Vice President	:	Thiru. V. Kalyanasundaram Diwan Bahadur Kesava Pillai, Advocate Challa Gurusami Chettiar+, and Advocate P.S. Gurusamy Naidu.
Secretaries	:	G. Selvapathy Chettiar, G. Ramanjuly Naidu
Treasurer	:	Dwarakanath Dillong.

This union helped the workers in everyway possible, including formation of a store for giving them provisions at a less price. Aggrieved by this, the management complained to the Governor about B.P. Wadia that he was obstructing the functions of the Mill, when they were

manufacturing textiles for the Army population. The Governor directed B. P.Wadia to meet the management.

The first ever charter of demands was presented by MLU on 30-5-1918 to the management with the following demands:

1. Lunch break for 40 minutes
2. Wages to be on par with those at Ahmedabad
3. Workers should be treated with respect by the Europeans
4. There should be a procedure for terminating an employee
5. Monthly salary should be paid before the 7<sup>th</sup> of every month
6. Workers salary should not be cut for not running the machine due to technical snag.

A copy of these demands were also sent to the Government. There was no response. The activities of the Union angered the management, who tried to break this Union. On 28-10-1918, the mill declared a lockout. Bi-lateral talks were held and the issue was settled. The details contained in the foregoing paragraphs bear testimony to the development of labour legislations in India.

The trade Union Act, 1926 was considered an immediate necessity to the British Government, since the need to ensure the bonafide of a Union and its registration was given utmost importance. The leaders of MLU participated in the conference that led to the formation of AITUC on 31-10-1920. V. Chakkarai, M. Singaravelu and Thiru. Vi.Ka., contributed in a big way for holding the sixth conference of the AITUC at Madras. Several communications of MLU would reveal the involvement it had in espousing the cause of the workers.

The silver jubilee anniversary of MLU was observed on 14-4-1943. The Golden Jubilee celebrations were held on April 26-28, 1968. The platinum Jubilee was celebrated on 8-3-1995. Presently this union is Marching towards the centenary year of its formation.

This distinguished Union has stood the test of time, under adverse conditions and under different leaderships. Several lockouts, strikes, demonstrations and litigations have been faced by this Union successfully. At times when there was a crisis, the workers relentlessly carried their struggles forward, probably because it is instilled in them that they are the forerunners of the trade union movement in the country and that therefore, they should only march forward.

The Madras Labour Union has been a forerunner to the major labour legislations in the country. Right from the issue of lock-out, rivalry among trade unions, incidents of unfair labour practice by the management, awarding compensation to workers for injuries suffered during the course of employment, the practice of depositing such compensation with the labour authorities instead of paying it directly to the injured workmen, the requirement of registration of a trade union as a precondition for its recognition by the management etc., were dealt with in the legislations that were enacted subsequently as a result of the first hand experience the MLU had had in this regard.

It is very important to study the reasons, that led to the strike by MLU in the year 1921, the unions' experience in conducting the strike, the way the management of B&C Mills dealt with the strike, its results and its impact on the Trade Union movement in the country.

A very important aspect of the MLU's experience in the year 1918 in dealing with its British management when Britain was fighting the dictatorship of Germany as against the nationalist and proletariat spirit of the leadership of the MLU and its impact on the workers of B&C Mills is worth a detailed study. When B.P. Wadia did not want the supply of uniforms to the British

Army (which was manufactured by B&C Mills) to suffer, the logical corollary he could arrive at was to call off the strike by MLU. However this view was not approved of by the rest of the leadership. It is an interesting fact that Annie Besant expressed her regret to the B&C Mill workers in this regard stating that B.P. Wadia acted on her advice. For a short period of two years, in the absence of B.P. Wadia, Dr. G.S. Arundale took over the reins of MLU. However, the Indian Trade Unionists like Thiru.Vi.Ka, Selvapathy Chettiar, Ramanjulu Naidu, B.Shiva Rao, among others, who were driven by nationalist sentiments, as well as their commitment to the cause of workers who were exploited under the British Rule took the lead and continued their work in the trade union. Movement.

The formation of the AITUC and the holding of its sixth conference at Madras in the ear 1926 gave them strength as they could actually see themselves as a part of a larger movement which was spreading its wings throughout the country.

In May 1921 workers of one of the departments of the mill went on strike regarding the issue of dismissal of some of them. Thiru. Vi. Ka who was the President then, asked the striking workers to report for work since they had not consulted the Union on this issue. But the management, however, effected a lock-out which lasted for six month. This strike was supported by the Public and there were incidents of violence, firing by Police, death of several person due to bullet injuries. The management resorted to employing fresh persons and the workers in an attempt to thwart this move, wanted to report for work. The management adopted several measurers, most of them illegal, to make the union defunct.

The recent past of the MLU has witnessed several turning points, up-to-date with the recent statutes relating to BIFR, SICA, etc., The MLU has heroically fought several battles both inside and outside courts. The anti labour policy of the governments and the rivalry among unions and the impact of liberalisation which has weakened the trade union movement as a whole, have been the experience of MLU.

It remains to be seen how the forerunner of the trade union would also play its role as a forerunner in the present situation in its fight against all odds.

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