

Yashwant Vishnu Chavan (Sarwa Shramik Sangh, Lal Nishan)

A **short biographical note** of Yashwant Chavan interviewed by Krishna Jha in Mumbai on 24 June, 2003

I have retired from the party as well as union in the sense that I hold no more posts but am still in saddle. My trade union friends usually consider my innings in the movement as those of a veteran as the decades keep piling up and some of them even go to the extent of addressing me as the "Bhishmacharya". I live with my family in the office premises of the union.

I was born on 28 August, 1920 in Kolhapur where my father worked as a judge in the estate high court of Kolhapur. I studied upto high school in Kolhapur. It was a time when there was draught in Kolhapur and the peasants were starving. Alongwith some friends, I decided to take a morcha to the king of the estate but we were stopped by the government. SK Limaye from Poona came to know about the group and visited me. He also told me to organise study circles which were attended by 30 students from Kolhapur alone. When after the classes Limaye asked the participants whether they wanted to become Communist, only I raised my hand in affirmation.

The atmosphere at home was democratic and secular. Father was a liberal and allowed me to join college in Bombay. But I came to Bombay to know about trade union movement. I got admission in Elphinston college. The Bombay students' Federation launched an agitation against rise in the fees and soon I got involved in it.

As SK Limaye came to Bombay few months before war, textile workers union was formed. In the after war period, SA Dange came out with the demand of Dearness allowance which was unique and unbelievable for the workers. The leaders were soon arrested but the workers went on strike for 40 days after which their demand was conceded. It was my first experience of victory.

In 1942, the call for "Quit India" movement was given and I joined in. The Communist Party line was to oppose the demand and hence I was expelled from the party. Alongwith others, I organised a group called "Navjeevan Sangathan" on January 22, 1943 and pledged that the day CPI retraces its stand, they would join back the party.

In 1948, CPI expressed regrets on its stand but did not accept me and my friends in the party. Finally the group launched Workers' and Peasants' Party as its own party out of which came the Lal Nishan party.

Navjeevan Sangathan organised silk workers and went for one-day strike which got extended for an indefinite period. Entire Bombay silk workers were involved in the agitation. Alongwith some other leaders, I was kept in preventive detention. After coming out of jail, the Sangathan was dissolved as there was a split and I formed a new party called Kamgar Kissan Paksha which got dissolved soonafter. The group wanted to join Communist Party but were not allowed as their leader Nana Deshmukh objected to it.

By 1954, we were aware of the changes in the Congress character and felt that the policy of total opposition should be changed to that of cooperation. A newspaper called Lok Sakha was launched which became Lal Nishan Sangathan and then only Lal Nishan. When in 1964, Communist party got split, Yashwant and his comrades formed their Lal Nishan Party.

In the Sanyukta Maharashtra movement, a committee was formed and Lal Nishan alongwith the Republican Party, Shetkari Sangathan and the Communist party took the lead. In one day Rs one lakh was collected from the workers. In 1960, Maharashtra was formed and Congress leader Yashwant Rao Chavan became its first chief minister.

I was active in the engineering section of workers in the textile mills and later formed All India Textile Engineer's conference.

In 1982, all the factions of Trade unions were getting dispersed, Datta Samant entered the scene and got wide support. Shiv Sena had a liberal attitude till then but did not approve the call for indefinite strike given by Datta Sama. It was the beginning of a new phase in the trade union movement.

In 1989, Lal Nishan Party split and Leninist faction was formed which affected adversely the movement launched among Anganwadi workers, New Basti teachers, Public works department.

In my opinion trade unions should be free from party dominations and an activist should always join the functioning union instead of forming a paralell union.

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Yashwant Chavan argues that trade unions should be free from party dominations and an activist should always join the functioning union instead of forming a paralell union.