

## **Parduman Singh, Putli Ghar (Amritsar)**

He was born in Jhelum on 7th of March 1924. His education was spread out in many places. His first political activity was when he was in his 10th class on 26th Jan. 1940 the date set by Congress as independence. Next he joined AISF and was engaged in the fund collection work for the Bengal Famine. Then he started Sarvodya work in villages near Amritsar. This work he did till the partition. At that time the villages in which they worked were mainly Muslim dominated and so as the partition took place they got caught up in doing relief work for the refugees coming into Amritsar from Pakistan side. At that time this work was mainly being done under the leadership of Ms. Mirdula Sarabhai who was appointed by Pt.Nehru. An incident which still stuck to his mind of those days was that a train that left Amritsar was stopped just little after the station by Hindu-Sikh mobs attacked it and killed almost all the Muslims in it. When it was brought back to the station Mr. Parduman Singh entered one of the compartments to help the dying Muslims that he saw a Muslim lady whose breasts had been completely cut off and when she saw him she began shrieking in fear shouting that another Sikh had come to murder her as she associated Sikhs with killing. Mr. Parduman Singh calmed her and took her to the hospital for treatment. Thus in those horrifying days he was engaged in mainly saving both Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from each other in Amritsar and then seeing to it that the respective communities are sent to their countries at least alive! A little after that he left the relief programme started by Congressmen as he felt repulsion towards Congressmen as they had agreed to the partition of the country and which led to these mass killings.

After returning to Amritsar from Delhi Mr. Parduman Singh started a bookshop which was selling progressive literature. The 1948-52 period was when the CPI was banned and most of its cadres had grown underground so his bookshop was closed as a warrant was issued against him. During this period he worked at night organizing the railway workers who were till then totally unorganized. A strike was organised by them. Later he also organised the textile workers and organised a general strike in Amritsar in that underground period. He also worked among the farmers, peasantry and agricultural labourers and they also joined this general strike. It was his first major political work and it was a great success as the whole of Amritsar joined, be it the industrial workers or the peasant and agricultural workers.

Mr. Parduman Singh joined the TU movement after the ban on the CPI slackened and finally it got lifted. He had joined the CPI in 1948. During the underground period he had to live in the outskirts and only in the night could he and his other comrades sneak back into the city and meet the railway and other workers to organise them. It was a difficult period.

According to Praduman Singh Amritsar had a unique position in pre-partition days. It was the biggest trading center for textile industry and all other sort of business. The working class in Amritsar in the pre-1947 days was mainly Muslims. But due to the partition they all left to be replaced by refugee Hindus and Sikhs who were mostly not from proletarian backgrounds and so organising them was really difficult. After partition Amritsar slowly regained its prominence as a business center and became the biggest textile center in Western India.

As regards the working of AITUC in the pre-partition days before 1947, according to Mr. Parduman Singh the Textile Workers Union was formed in 1944 and prior to that there were Labour Federations. The AITUC comrades working in Amritsar prior to 1947 were- Coms. Karam Singh Mann who was at one time the Secretary of the then Punjab unit of AITUC, Com. Zahoor Kashmiri, Com. Abdul Gaffoor Tash, Com. Allahbhaksh Sajjid, Com. Jagat Ram Dutt, and Com. Banta Singh. These comrades were doing the work of AITUC in the pre-partition days.

The initial struggle was for the 'piece-rate' given to workers who were mainly from Pakistan side. In this strike Com. Parduman Singh was arrested and was thrown into Ambala Central jail for over 6 months. Then after coming out he started the struggle for revision of wages. This was all around 1952-53. At that time Amritsar was really a big textile center and there were many middle level textile factories. At the same time the INTUC had started work in Cherata in some important mills. At that time the AITUC union had two major strikes in Meira Textile Mills and the other in Embroidery Mill, Cherata. The employers at that time were very organized in the textile mills of Amritsar and they thought and worked hard to crush these two strikes. They believed that if the strikes in these two mills was crushed then the very backbone the textile workers movement could be broken once and for all in Amritsar. Com. Parduman Singh and the other leaders the Textile Mazdoor Union affiliated to AITUC were very aware of this fact and so for months together the strike was going on and they took care to maintain the unity of the working class which was absolutely crucial if the movement had to succeed in any manner. After many months of striking when the strike was at its lowest ebb Com. Parduman Singh and the leaders of the Textile Mazdoor Union of AITUC and the union of INTUC led by one Mr. Munilal met and they decided to leave aside their two affiliated unions as formed a separate body called the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Committee. This was in 1954. The sense of unity was suddenly revived in such a massive way by the formation of the Ekta Committee that a dying struggle all of a sudden became alive and got totally charged. The whole of Amritsar was on fire with it joining the movement. All of a sudden the textile strike had acquired a larger than life character and had become a mass movement. All the workers of Amritsar gave their support and funds etc. Eventually on the night of 10th of April 1955 they received a message that some

workers were killed by police in a lathi-charge in Cheratta. The Ekta Committee met at night and called for a general strike in all industries and sectors in Amritsar. That strike lasted for almost One and Half months and the bravery of the workers was such that it can't be imagined that people from areas around Cheratta used to come in big processions to Cheratta to do nothing but to be lathi-charged. The police was really brutal. They even went into the houses of workers and beat up even the women and children. This 1955 strike was a glorious struggle and in it they had invited A.K. Gopalan then an MP and in it nearly 25,000 workers had joined that struggle. Then after over one and half months the struggle ended in withdrawal. And as a result of the struggle for the first time the entire textile industry was brought under Industrial Disputes Act and a Tribunal was set up to look into the general demands of wages and bonus etc. At first Com. Parduman Singh and the INTUC led Shri. Munnilal boycotted the tribunal but he later started doing the tribunal work. Meanwhile Com. Parduman Singh went underground and Com. Satyapal Dang had come and he was overground while Com. Parduman Singh had to work from behind. Next Satyapal Dang was arrested. The 1954-55 textile strike was the first glorious struggle of Amritsar workers in post-independent India. After this great struggle it was decided that both the INTUC and AITUC affiliated unions would merge and it was decided not to affiliate with any all-India party. The union which was formed was called the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Union. In three years when the Eranakulam session of the AITUC took place in Kerala the union decided to affiliate to AITUC. The President of the union was Mr. Munilal Langotiwala and Com. Parduman Singh was the General Secretary when it got affiliated to the AITUC. Then from 1955 for over 35 years Com. Parduman Singh was the General Secretary of the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Union. So this union became from then on quite strong and today among the industrial workers in Punjab it is the strongest.

Meanwhile he and other members of CPI did not only confine ourselves to workers demands but also took political positions. During the war in 1965 when the war took place near the Amritsar border the union opened canteens for the soldiers and took out processions all over Amritsar city against American Imperialism as Pakistan was being supported by the US. This was done during the 1971 war. Thus the political struggle went on side-by-side. After the war in 1965 the union launched a massive struggle throughout the textile industry in Amritsar for minimum wages for piece-rated workers who were totally at the mercy of the employers and they could make them starve even. Thus the struggle launched was both for a minimum wage as well as a minimum wage for piece-rated workers also. Thus it was a two pronged struggle. In that period the Government of India had imposed the Defence of India Act according to which those who organize any strike would be thrown into jail for 7 years and those who participate in it would be given a 2 year imprisonment. But there was great unity among the

workers and there was great fire in the workers to struggle. The situation was such that all over Punjab thousands of workers went out to get themselves arrested and the government would not arrest them. They broke the Defence of India Act. Nearly 3,000 workers were arrested all over Punjab and that strike lasted till 2nd June 1965. Com. Parduman Singh was also arrested. Com. Dange and Com. Satish Loomba came to Punjab and held talks with the government and a settlement was arrived at in favour of the demands and they got minimum wages as well as minimum wage for piece-rated workers as well as that all workers were allowed to get back to the mills and released from jails. During this period they also raised the demands for casual leave, holidays and sick leave. After the agreements all these demands were implemented in all the factories. Later they fought battles for bonus and raising scales of pay and before 1970s there was no gratuity scheme anywhere in India for industrial workers. The union fought for this issue. In fact prior to this there were none of these facilities for workers in any of the sectors be it industrial or the service sectors like banks etc. Once this issue was accepted by the government in the textile sector industrial workers the same demand got raised in all other sectors and it had to be conceded. An Act was passed to this effect. During this time there was a labour minister named Mr. Amar Nath Vidyankar who was a Gandhite. They also pressed for a Shop and Commercial Establishment Act for both the shop-owners and workers who had to work from 4.00am to 12.00 pm at night. So they could not see their family and children. Even holidays were not there. The AITUC and its affiliated unions in Amritsar and all over Punjab agitated for this and thanks to a Gandhite labour minister the matter was agreed upon by the government. So in 1958 this act was passed in Punjab. The 1965 strike was really successful as the union was able to win the basic demand i.e. piece rates for weavers. The minimum wage for weavers was also raised from Rs. 54/- to Rs.75/-. There was a difference between textile workers wages of Punjab and other places like Bombay and Madras.

Mr. Parduman Singh also led the working class during the phase of terrorism and the struggle the CPI and the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Union launched throughout the period. According to him the role of the police was very perfidious and other TU centers like the INTUC and BMS too did nothing. There were several instances of the bravery of the working class which unlike the students or the intelligencia or middle class according to Com. Parduman Singh successfully resisted and opposed the might of Bhindrawale's brand of Sikh fundamentalism. According to Com. Parduman Singh the working class in Amritsar at the height of terrorist violence directly opposed it and they refused to be divided on communal lines. This was the greatest contribution of the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Union.

As regards his efforts at organisational building of the AITUC it was proved by the hosting of the All-India AITUC conference at Amritsar. He dwelt in detail on the days of the CPI when it was banned and the pre-partition days of AITUC in Amritsar. Another

achievement of his was the Old Age Pension Scheme which he got accepted by the government of Punjab for industrial workers. This was he believed a major achievement in the road to giving greater rights to the workers. He established the Social Security Association of India with the help of a German funding agency. It was the first in India and it really became a forum where all TU centers were brought in to fight and put up issues concerning social security of the working class. He is also involved in work among migrant labourers particularly the rickshaw pullers. Today there is a changing profile of the industry and working class in Amritsar and Punjab. According to him the effect of the policy of liberalisation and structural adjustment on the whole industrial sector as well as agriculture in and around Amritsar and the implications were not good. He talked about the future of TU movement.

As of today he is not holding any formal position in the Textile Mazdoor Ekta Union of which he was founder but is currently vice-President of All India AITUC and guides the TU movement in Amritsar still. His presence is like a guiding light to the new leaders in CPI and TU movement in Amritsar. Even in this advanced age he continues to come daily at 9.00 a.m. and sits till 5.30 in the AITUC office in Putlighar in Amritsar. He is truly one to the living gems of India's labour history.