

BIONOTE

Meenal Sethuraman

She was born in 1947 in Burma, where her parents were working. Father had settled down there as a mistry. He later came to Madurai for road-laying. She took up agriculture for a time and then joined Madurai Glass Factory, where she worked for 5-6 years. She participated in a strike actively in 1976. From tehn on she became a fulltime activist.

She worked among categories of workers, organising and leading them: printing workers in Devakottai were organised in a workers' union in 1976-77; South Zone Hotel Workers' Union of 500 workers; Rameswaram Canteen workers, etc. AN strike of canteen workers of Rameswaram was organised in 1977 on the questions of wage, working conditions and others. Then the girl workers of the Prawn Packing Co. of Madapam were unionised. Their union was earlier with the ADMK. In the nearby Kilakari, coconut processing owrkers were organised. Workers of the CECRI (Central Electro-Chemical Research Institute) were unionised and a society was also formed. Transport workers and the stainless workers organised in Ramnad and various other places.

In the meantime, a South Zone General Workers' Union was formed inclusive of those working in the courier services, kumkum, chewing, tobacco and other industires in Sivagangi.

Meenal Sethuraman is a member of the Equal Remuneration Act COMmittee on behalf of the AITUC. SHE also took up teh case of women prisoners and warders.

She has been a corporator for two terms now. SHE has been organising the municipal workers; the first union of sweepers, menials and sanitary workers was formed in 1977. Pasumappam Local Body and General Health Workers' Union was established in December 1987.

SHE became a councillor in 1996 and then in 2001. SHE is at present ta vice-president of Tamilnadu State AITUC.

MEENAL SETHURAMAN

Transcriptive note

(Meenal Sethuraman gave interview in Hotel Duke, Madurai, on 15 March 2005 in the afternoon. She came well-prepared and knew exactly what to say. She was clear and precise, and at the same time provided rich information. She spoke mainly in Tamil, interspersed with some Hindi. She was interpreted by TRS Mani and K. Parthasarathy. —Krishna Jha, Anil Rajimwale)

I was born in Burma, where large numbers of Tamils lived and worked. My father had settled down there as a mistry but we had to come back as refugees when I was 13 in 1960.

I was educated upto 8th class. Father did road-laying in Madurai. After a brief period of agricultural work in teh village, I joined Madurai Glass Factory, where I worked for 5-6 years as packer. We went on strike and I was thrown out. I became a fulltime activist.

Among the first experiences of work among the workers was organising the printing workers of Devakottai. 250 workers were organised under the Press wprkers' Union affiliated to the AITUC. It was formed in 1976-77. South Zone Hotel Workers' Union and Rameswaram Canteen workers were also organised. The canteen workers were also organised. The canteen workers went on strike in 1977.

In those days, a militant struggle was organised in teh Prawn Packing Co. in Mandapan (Rameswaram). 108 girls went on strike for 6 months. AITUC collected foods and funds during these months to sustain the strike. Everything was being done to break the strike by the opponents— writing obscene letters to the girls, letters to their parents to teh effect that they were engaging in prostitution, etc. But the parents themselves joined the strikers and participated in the picketing. The case went upto Giani Zail Singh, who had come on a visit. The girls got frustrated when nothing was done, and they attacked the convoys of vehicles. The fisherfolk were mobilised against the girls.

The compassionate Cllector helped by appealing to the rice-mill owners. There were only 5 ladies, while the other side was 50-strong. There was a danger of attack. But teh 6-month long strike ended successfully, and each of the girls got Rs. 5000/- consolidated.

Important struggles took place in teh CECRI (Central ElectroCHemical Research Institute) in Karaikudi. The workers consisted of cleaners, gardeners, guest house workers etc. A society was also formed, of which P. Chidambaram, the central minister, was the President. The struggle took place regarding PF etc, which were denied to the workers. All the 75 workers participated in teh struggle. The Labour Commissioner awarded in favour of teh

workers. A total of 58 lakh rupees was deposited, but the management tried to reduce the wages. The leadership of the Labour Contract Society was changed. The authorities tried to deal with the situation as law and order and revenue problem and not as a labour problem. Ultimately the management had to give in. Earlier, they had tried to reduce the payment to the workers at the rate below the market rate. I am a member of the Equal Remuneration Act Committee on behalf of the AITUC. I took up the case of women prisoners and warders. I happened to be in prison for ten days because I broke the liquor mud-pan. There I found that women prisoners and warders were paid only if there were sufficient number of women prisoners. I raised the question in the Committee and took the copy of the government order to the prison.

I have been organising the municipal workers for quite some time. I have been a corporator in 1996 and since 2001 again. That helps. The first union of the sweepers, menials and sanitary workers was formed in 1977. Earlier, the unions did not enrol the scavengers. They approached me and I got their union formed and registered. Now they get footwear, soap, turban etc from the Municipality.

Pumpset operators, overhead tank operators and such employees have been organised. In their movement there were attempts at self-immolation by 13 workers.

Being on the Taxation Committee of the Municipality, one can do a lot and solve many trade union problems of the vendors, dhobis, workers etc. In a nearby place, an union of about 60 families of the soothsayers have been formed under AITUC against the Police harassment of treating them as vagabonds.

All the conservancy workers now have their own land and houses; land is 1.5 cents (1 acre=100 cents) in Devakottai and Kadaikudi. Their descendants will get land too.

I am at present a vice-president of Tamilnadu State AITUC.

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