

# Heroic Struggle of the Indian Proletariat

By N. M. ROY.

The happenings at Colombo and Bombay are not isolated events. Nor are they the outburst of "religious fanaticism," as the imperialist news service depicts them to be. They are the culmination of a long series of events taking place during the last year which indicate the appearance of the proletariat as the driving and leading force of the Indian Revolution. Growing out of a bitter and protracted economic struggle, the happenings of Bombay are of the greatest significance, involving not only a local industrial issue; they represent a stormy development of the entire political situation of the country into the higher plane of revolutionary mass action.

First, a few words about the events at Colombo. They did not last so long as the struggle in Bombay. But they are none the less important. The movement was so broad and so deep that for nearly a week the government abdicated its functions to the popular leader, Gunasinha. The city was practically under the rule of the trade unions. Uniformed labor guards paraded the city and replaced the police, which had to be completely withdrawn on the demand of the proletariat. The situation was so intense and such an atmosphere of panic prevailed that a British member of the government was obliged to make an apologetic statement in the parliament, on behalf of the governor, contradicting the charge of the imperialist press that the government had abdicated in favor of the trade unions. Not only the police, but even troops could not face the strikers and the mass demonstrations organized in their support. The situation could be kept under control, avoiding a general outbreak and unlimited bloodshed, only with the help of the popular leader, Gunasinha. For many reasons, the movement cannot be expected to go any farther in the near future; but the proletariat comes out of it decidedly victorious. The weakness of an alien government has been revealed in this trial of strength with the revolutionary masses.

In Bombay, the movement developed into a regular barricade fight owing to several reasons. Firstly, the movement there is more mature, being the culmination of a year-long industrial dispute; secondly, the government forces there are much too powerful to be so easily cowed down as at Colombo; thirdly, the imperialist government and the native bourgeoisie jointly provoked the precipitation of events in order to justify new repressive laws. Although the heroic action of the Bombay proletariat indicates revolutionary maturing of the entire situation of the country, it cannot be expected to develop directly into a general national outbreak. It is only a prelude to what is coming. Its historic significance can be understood and the perspectives opened by it clearly seen when one visualizes the general political situation which provides it the background.

The last two years have been a period of developing class struggle evidenced by great strikes and lock-outs which usually developed into mass activities of enormous dimensions. During the last year the situation became so acute that practically all the important industries were affected. The main events of this period were: 1, the great railway strikes lasting for months, involving hundreds of thousands of workers and frequently resulting in pitched battles between state forces and the strikers; 2, the strikes in the Tata Iron and Steel Works of

Jamshedpur; and, 3, the lock-out of nearly 200,000 textile workers in Bombay for five months. As far as immediate economic demands are concerned, the workers lost oftener than they won in those innumerable battles. But taking a longer view of things, they all contributed to the final triumph of the proletariat. The net result of those struggles is: 1, development of the fighting power of the working class; 2, increase of their will to fight; 3, liberation of the labor movement from the agents of the nationalist bourgeoisie; 4, defeat and discredit of the reformist leaders; 5, rise of revolutionary leaders from the ranks of the proletariat; 6, political independence of the proletariat in the struggle for national freedom; and, 7, rapid growth of the influence of the Communists and other revolutionary elements close to them.

By superior forces at the command of the imperialist state, and by close collaboration between this and native capitalist interests the workers were forced to accept starvation wages and wretched labor conditions. But inasmuch as the above victories accrued to the proletariat from the experience of the struggle, their power and will to resist capitalist attack grew. Badly organized, treacherously led, culturally backward, materially unequipped for a revolutionary struggle, as they were Indian proletariat, nevertheless, ceased to be the submissive "dumb millions" who could be coerced by demonstration of brute force or deceived by counter-revolutionary hypocrisy of a Ghandi. This transformation was evidenced particularly by the resistance of the Bombay textile workers to accept a further wage-cut "to help the premier national industry out of depression." Thanks to the services of nationalist labor leaders, two successive cuts, amounting to nearly 30 per cent of the starvation wages, had previously been enforced annulling the raise granted during the period of boom caused by the war. The net profit made during that period of several years was more than double the total capital invested in the entire industry. Nevertheless, when the inevitable depression came the workers were attacked. The final determination and ability of the workers to put up a stubborn resistance to this capitalist greed created the situation which was bound to develop into the present barricade fight in Bombay and is bound to develop further.

The power and will of the proletariat to fight, evidenced during the bitter struggle lasting for months and months, frightened the bourgeoisie, who clamored for repressive measures. After five months the lock-out was ended on condition that wages and labor conditions should not be altered pending the inquiry by an "imperial committee." This was a decisive victory for the workers, who urgently needed a respite in the bitter struggle with superior forces of the enemy. But the employers broke the truce no sooner than it was made. Lower wages and worse working conditions were introduced in individual mills. The employers thought that the workers were exhausted, and tried to take advantage of this exhaustion to beat them down. They were, however, mistaken. Determined resistance was put up from all sides, and the entire industry was thrown into a chronic state of chaos and idleness. In the course of the inquiry it became further evident that

the workers were no longer a mass of semi-human animals to be driven by capitalist whip. They had to be met as a class, conscious of their class interests and determined to defend and further these interests under revolutionary leadership. Hue and cry were raised against the Communist leaders, whose blood was, of course, demanded. The capitalist press in a chorus deplored the fact that the workers have fallen for the Communist propaganda of class-war. Neither the British imperialists nor the Indian capitalists had been accustomed to see workers from the mills appear before the Strike Inquiry Committee, not apologizing for their existence, but after exposing the plans of veiled wage-cut to declare: "It is for the capitalists to make whatever rules they like and impose them upon the workers. But it is for us to obey these rules or not." The implication of such statement is clear enough. It is declaration of class-war.

Not only were the employers alarmed by such development of the situation. Not a few of the self-appointed reformist labor leaders, who had been disowned and denounced by the workers in course of the struggle, publicly deplored the ways the labor movement was taking, and practically appealed for measures arresting such unwelcome development. Reviewing the situation, one of them said:

"These strikes (on the railways, in the iron and steel industry and in Bombay) are the outcome of the policy of direct action advocated by the Communists, who believe in strike as the first step for the redress of economic grievances; settlement is only sought after the strike is declared. They also believe in the policy of class-war or the promotion of hatred between the workers and the capitalists." (F. J. Ginwala, in an article in the organ of Bombay mill-owners, "The India Daily Mail," Dec. 20.)

Another, B. Shiva Rao, protege of the British Independent Labor Party, entrusted with the organization in India of a branch of the Labor Bureau of the League of Nations, observed:

"It is no use disguising the fact that Communist elements are gaining influence and aim to capture the movement. Genuine trade unionism does not believe in strikes as a means for building it up, and wholly disapproves the policy of promoting class-consciousness by fomenting industrial unrest. The Indian Trade Union Congress is being exploited in the name of the workers by a few interested groups, and must be radically reorganized to prevent the movement from going into wrong hands."

Encouraged by such frankly anti-Communist pronouncements of the reformist leaders, the Bombay mill-owners openly demanded the suppression of the labor movement. The Bombay Chamber of Commerce, in a memorial to the government, asked for speedy enactment of the Trades Dispute Bill, which is the Indian replica of the British Trades Union Act. A deputation of the Millowners' Association waited upon the governor to draw his attention "to the alarming outlook and to urge timely measures." Justifying these open demands of the cotton magnates for the suppression of the labor movement their press organ,

"The Indian Daily Mail" (Dec. 19), wrote: "Violent counsel seems to be gaining ground among the workers, and there has recently been an outbreak which is unprecedented in the history of Bombay industry."

But all these threats failed to frighten the workers, who persistently resisted the attack upon their already very low standard of living. Obviously, in consultation with the government, the employers then devised another means of fighting the workers. Suddenly there appeared in Bombay swarms of strikebreakers from the distant northern parts of the country. These men have never had any connection with modern industry. They are inhabitants of very backward hilly tracts. Consequently they are religious and less susceptible to the revolutionary propaganda of class-struggle. Coming from the regions of primitive agriculture they are used to a much lower standard of living. Industrial wages, even at the reduced rate, were a great inducement for them. The introduction of this new factor in the situation was a provocation for the workers. They bitterly resented it; and, instead of submitting, as was expected by the government and the employers, went ahead forging new weapons of combat to meet the new situation. Under Communist leadership the trade unions began to organize "Workers' Squads," which in a few days enrolled thousands of determined fighters. The situation became acute when the religious fanaticism of the strikebreakers was fanned by a hidden hand. The result is the outbreak which demonstrates what a tremendous power and determination to fight the Indian proletariat has acquired during the last two years of incessant struggle. It demonstrates the immense potentiality of mass action organized and led by a revolutionary vanguard. It brings out the proletariat as the only class capable of defying the armed forces of the state. The outbreak in Bombay may be crushed by superior forces; but the spirit it represents will spread, and it has been demonstrated by it that when such outbreak will take place throughout the country there will be no power to crush it. Their martyrdom will be another proof that the proletariat is the only leader of the revolution.

The historic significance of the heroic struggle of the Bombay proletariat becomes evident, when it is seen as the most characteristic indication of the whole situation. This struggle points out the driving force behind the radicalization of the nationalist movement. A month before the outbreak in Bombay, 25,000 workers of Calcutta marched into and occupied the pandal of the National Congress against the wishes of the bourgeois leaders. That was a symbolic demonstration which augured the routing of the bourgeoisie from the leadership of the national revolution by the proletariat. As against the beggarly program of self-government within the British empire advocated by the nationalist bourgeoisie, the revolutionary proletariat raised the red banner of "The Independent Socialist Republic of India." The demonstration of Calcutta can be compared with the Insurrection of June 2, 1793, when the Parisian proletariat forced the Jacobins to stiffen up their backs, and assume firmly the leadership of the revolution. What was accomplished in Paris has not been done in Calcutta; but objectively the demonstration had similar significance. This is proved by the heroic action of the Bombay proletariat. The proletariat is proving its fitness for the leadership it bid for through the Calcutta demonstration.