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Research Paper

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**RESPONSE OF THE COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY TO STRIKES IN MADRAS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The pronounced bias of the Government of India and that of the Government of Madras in favour of the interests of “white capital” become manifest from the late years of the nineteenth century (**G.O. 1243, judicial. 6 July 1892**). This bias became more pronounced in the post war period, when the Madras government, fearing the outbreak of labour strikes in the B and C Mills in Madras, requested the Home Department of the Government of India to issue a special notification under the Defence of India Act 1915. The notification was sought to ban strikes in the mills to keep the production of war materials undisturbed for the successful prosecution of war. (**Home Poll. Dept. Political (A) Progs. File Nos 242-49, March 1919, NAI**).

**KEYWORDS:** labour strikes , materials undisturbed.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Department of Commerce and Industry, after some delay, issued a notification disregarding the sensible views of C. Sankaran Nair, a member of the Executive Council in the Government of India. The Indian member pointed out:“consequences of such a course if it is intended to apply this notification to the case of Mills. So far as Railways are concerned there can be no doubt of our moral right to interfere, as Railways are or ought to be, public property. In the case of Mills it will be said we are advancing the interests of capital as against labor. (**Home Progs Dept of Commerce and Industry, Nos 1 to 9, July 1918**).

Moreover, one official’s request for the institution of an inquiry into the condition of labourers in the mills was put in the cold storage as it was considered “premature” and “unacceptable to the employer” in the prevailing situation in Madras. This protective attitude of the government was in immediate response to the B and C Mills’ request for a notification by the Government of India to circumvent the possibility of a strike due to the activities of the MLU, on the ground that the B and C Mills were employed on war work. Antagonism against the MLU was clearly manifest even in the official reports of the Madras government, when the first strike took place in November 1918, nine months after the formation of the MLU.

The mill authorities and civil servants considered the strike to be the outcome of political maneuvers rather than of genuine economic interests. Endorsing their views, Mackenzie of Messers McNeill and Company and Josh and other representatives of the Calcutta Jute Mills opined that the question involved was really not a “labour question at all”. They claimed that the workpeople engaged in the B and C Mills were “better cared for and better housed than the workpeople at any other mills in India”. They also claimed that Wadia’s objective was to carry on agitation against the European employer without any real regard for the interests of the workpeople; their final

conclusion was that "the agitation was a political one carried on with the object of injuring foreign control of industries and with the object of exciting disaffection against Europeans in this country." Civil servants shared this view broadly. One official felt that the strikes were "motivated by their [Home Rulers] hatred of Europeans and their desire to get rid of European enterprise so that they may use it as a political weapon," but he doubted the Home Rulers' capability to mobilize strength, for firmness of purpose and unity of action are not characteristic of Indian". S.R. Higneli, Secretary in the Department of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, observed in the same vein:

"There seems little doubt that Mr. Wadia and his friends are exploiting Indian labour in Madras for their own purpose. I regard this movement as one of the most sinister of those we have to face at the present moment." As regards methods to combat strikes, discussions among civil servants underlined differences of opinion within the bureaucracy. Home Department Secretary, J.H. DeBoulay, expressed the opinion that "strikes are not unlawful, nor is it unlawful to instigate a strike". In his view, "so long as in their methods these people (strikers) abstain from incitement to violence, they cannot be touched by the law", but he pleaded ignorance as to "how law could be devised to meet the case". He noted the ineffectiveness of any law to declare a strike unlawful. He said":

"For it is not the question to make a strike unlawful. Condition is not likely to be helpful... The underlying notion is racial hatred. We have clearly people animated by racial hatred appealing to ignorant people only inflamed by greed."

On the other hand, in the opinion of another civil servant in the Department of Commerce and Industry, political unrest in the shape of labour conflicts called for drastic steps; he recommended strong repressive measures amounting to the "prosecution of men of Wadia's stamp," if the artificially worked-up strikes were to be prevented. But since he could not handle such issues, he felt it was a matter for the Home Department to tackle and devise suitable methods to combat strikes.

On the question of legislation for setting up machinery by which labour disputes could be resolved, there was no agreement among officials. The civil servants debated over whether an Act similar to the British Conciliation Act 1896 could be legislated for India but had no intention of passing it, because in the view of one civil servant. In 1896 an Act was passed in England to make better provision for the prevention and settlement of trade disputes, the title of which is the Conciliation Act of 1896.

This Act provided that "where a difference exists, or is apprehended between an employer and workmen, the Board of Trade may (a) enquiry into the causes of the difference; (b) take steps for the purpose of enabling the parties to the difference to meet together and (c) appoint a person to act as conciliator or as a Board of Conciliation and on the application of both parties to the difference appoint an arbitrator" (**Home Dept Poll. Deposit, Progs. File No.29, March 1919**).

It was contended by the officials that the passing of an Act might encourage disputes rather than tend to lessen them. Brief less vakils would very probably secure the opportunity of using work people to apply for the appointment of a conciliator in hopes of creating business for themselves, and the work people would be likely to acquiesce as they would feel sure that failure before the conciliator would not result in a reduction of wages.

The official's line of thinking coincided with that of British employers and their representative body, the Madras Chamber of Commerce. It had sent a telegram to the Department of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, drawing its attention to the atmosphere of simmering discontent, which, in its view, affected Railway workshops, tramways and cotton mills in Madras. It attributed the deplorable situation to Home Rule politicians who enticed labour into politics, and urged that immediate steps be taken to prevent "inflammatory" speeches at labour meetings.

Similarly, the Madras Trades Association sent a telegram to the Government of India complaining, "The present labour unrest is inimical to industrial development and calculated to lead

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to breaches of peace". To this telegram, the Home Secretary responded sympathetically by noting that:

"Home Rulers are undoubtedly endeavoring to exercise a sinister influence on labour and it is natural enough for the Madras Trades Association and Chamber of Commerce to come running to the Government of India for the support." **(Dept of Commerce and Industry File Nos 101-12.1918, NAI)**

These general views on the labour situation reflect the concern bureaucrats felt for the European groups as well as the approach they would adopt towards the strikes.

The bureaucrats in Madras too thought on similar lines; one official even suggested the prosecution of B.P. Wadia on account of his reported speech in *New India* of 20 November 1918 criticizing the Anglo-Indians and their alleged links with the government. **(G.O. No.63 (conf.) Public, 12/2/19, TNA).**

The organization of the British employers, Madras Chamber of Commerce, argued that if the bill was passed the persons seeking its protection would obtain all the privileges of the Trade Unions Act, while accepting none of its disabilities, the Act would soon become a dead-letter and the adjustment of trade disputes would become still more difficult as there would be no recognized registered body to negotiate with. This was to some extent strengthened in the absence of statutory provisions obliging the managements to recognize unions at least for purposes of negotiations in the formative period. The outright rejection by the managements of the trade union leaders for discussion on any matter characterized the evolution of industrial relations in that period **(M. Lakshmanan, Industrial conflict in Madras city).**

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