

AGAINST COLONIAL OPPRESSION

Indian Proletariat Awakens!

By Tom Bell.

India has always been regarded by the British bourgeoisie as the brightest jewel in the crown of the British Empire. With a territory of 1,900,000 square miles, embracing a population of 322,500,000, India is indeed a rich "prize" for bourgeois exploitation and imperialist robbery. That is why political events in this great centre of British imperialism occupies so much the mind and politics of British capitalism. An independent proletarian and peasant republic of India means the death-knell of British imperialism. This rich "prize" obtained, buttressed and maintained by force must be preserved at all costs. Be it bribery, espionage, police, bayonet or bomb — nothing must stand in the way of preserving India for the British bourgeoisie.

From the days of the great Indian Mutiny of 1857—58, there have been many revolts and struggles against British domination. Time after time the hunger-ridden millions of peasantry have revolted in desperation and despair. But the machine gun, bribery and corruption of native chiefs, and leaders have always succeeded in defeating the aims of the masses. Supplementary to the open forceful methods, fraudulent parliamentary gestures of democratic institutions have been made in the hope of quelling revolutionary tendencies.

But the events of recent months have a deeper significance compared with anything in Indian History. The British bourgeoisie is being faced with a real proletarian movement under the leadership of the town workers, a movement which marches under the slogan of "An Indian Soviet Republic". The British bourgeoisie tries to persuade itself it is all a Communist conspiracy, and pretends to the workers in the metropolis that this is so. Its press campaign has been conducted along these lines. But the following facts will make clear what is behind the present situation.

Early last year the great steel works of Tata Ltd. were undergoing a process of rationalisation. Large scale dismissals of staff took place and bonus schemes introduced for the workers which were tantamount to reduced wages and speeding up. The workers went on strike and remained out for five months. Almost simultaneously the textile workers of Bombay went on strike and remained out for over five months. At Lillooah the railway workers employed by the East Railway Co. were locked out for over four months and an attempt of the management made to bring workers from the Punjab to "scab" on the workers locked out. But promises of extra food, extra pay and police protection were not successful. As soon as the imported workers learned there was a dispute on they demanded their fares to go home.

In the monthly circular of the London Labour Research Department (July 1928) we get the following description of the actual conditions of the railway and textile workers.

"On the railways, employing about three-quarters of a million Indian workers and 20,000 Europeans and Anglo-Indians, the difference of wages between natives and non-natives is most clearly marked. For example the monthly rates for drivers are £12 to £24 for Europeans and Anglo-Indians, and £3 7s. 6d. to £6 7s. 6d. for Indians; for shunters £10 10s. to £11 5s. for Anglo-Indians and £1 13s. to £3 for Indians; for firemen £7 10s. to £9 for Anglo-Indians and 25s. 6d. to 31s. 6d. for Indians."

"In the textile factories hours are limited under the Indian Factory Acts of 1911 and 1922 to eleven a day and sixty a week. Children between 12 and 15 years of age are employed as half-timers and their hours are limited to six a day. The usual practice is to work the full sixty hours in six days of ten hours"...

"The average daily earnings, as returned by the Bombay Government, show 1 6d. to 2 2d. for men, for women 7d. to 1s. 2d. and for children 4' 6d. to 7d." (But the Textile Labour Union protests that these figures are too high.)

The Indian workers, particularly in these disputes, have shown remarkable solidarity. Their pickets have been smashed by the police, arrests made, and shootings, but the workers remained firm. The Government quickly brought forward a Public Safety (Removal from India) Bill. Under this Bill, so-called agitators not British-Indian subjects, or the subjects of Indian States can be expelled by administrative order without trial. If permission is granted to enquire into any case before the order becomes operative, the evidence supplied to examining judge by the Government has to be kept secret. This measure is specially directed against British workers in any way assisting the Indian workers to build up their trade unions and labour organisation. When this measure, last summer, was brought before the Legislative Assembly the voting for and against was level, and the President casting his vote against it, the Bill was held up. But it was reintroduced last month and so far has had the needed majority.

But if the Indian workers had any satisfaction in this, they were soon to be disillusioned. On March 20th, the Government took decisive action and carried out a series of wholesale arrests and raids on labour union and press offices in five important towns, Bombay, Calcutta, Poona, Allahabad and Lucknow. The action was taken under Section 121 of the Indian Penal Code which reads: "Whoever within or without British India conspires... to deprive the King of the Sovereignty of British India or any part thereof, or conspires to overawe, by means of criminal force, or the show of criminal force, the Government of India... shall be punished with transportation for life or any shorter term, or imprisonment... to ten years."

The Government carried out its plans with extreme secrecy. The magistrates were warned two days before the 20th to hold themselves in readiness. The British and Indian Infantry and armed police were mobilised before daybreak as a precautionary measure. In Bombay, the police and troops were stationed in strategic places. The mills were placed under armed guard. (This, however, did not prevent 30,000 workers in twelve mills from walking out in protest); 120 search warrants issued, the offices of the Labour Unions and the League of Youth (seven miles out of town) were raided, and all literature confiscated. Three Labour leaders were arrested.

In Calcutta, 35 houses were visited, among the arrested being the English trade union worker Philip Spratt; the offices of the Peasants' and Workers' Party, the Young Comrades League, the Bengal Trade Union Federation, the Calcutta Scavengers Union and the Jute Workers' Union being gutted out, and secretaries arrested. In Poona, Thangdi, a former President of the Trade Union Congress was arrested; the President of the Poona League of Youth' house was searched and all papers confiscated. In Allahabad, Joshi, the secretary of the Peasants' and Workers' Party and of the League of Youth was arrested. Wholesale searches and confiscation of literature being carried out by a large force of police.

Thus from Bombay and Poona in the West to Calcutta and Dacca over one thousands miles in the East, taking in Allahabad and Lucknow hundreds of miles to the North, hundreds of houses were searched and arrests made.

It is apparent from the decisiveness and radius covered by the government, and the centre of its attack that we are dealing here with no mere electioneering stunt, though the bourgeois Parties will not be slow to utilise it in the forthcoming elections in England. The fact that the blow is directed against the workers' organisations and particularly the revolutionary elements of the labour movement, stamps the whole proceedings as being a definite political counter-attack upon a growing revolutionary political movement led by the growing class conscious proletariat of the towns.

The British imperialists have taken well to heart the lessons of the Chinese revolution. At the same time the defiant and heroic mood of the workers is evidence that the imperialists are up against an entirely new situation — a situation in which the time worn methods of bribery, corruption, and religious provocation, will not suffice. The Indian workers are marching under the banner of an Indian Soviet Republic. Long live the free and Independent Soviet Republic of India!