
1947 GENERAL STRIKE-A FLASHBACK

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Remember the day when the remains of our dear departed colleague Velupillai Kandasamy, a fellow striker in the Health Department, were taken in a massive procession of workers from the General Hospital, Borella, to the Fort Railway Station.

The route along McCallum Road (now Wijewardena Mawatha) was thronged with crowds. Workers from offices, factories and workshops from the capital and its suburbs of Ratmalana and Kollonawa had joined the vast concourse of people to pay their homage to a martyr, a government clerk who hailed from Jaffna. The coffin was borne aloft by strikers. In batches they took their turn as pallbearers. Kandasamy's final journey began on the train to Jaffna. Policemen who were thick on the street during the strike had mysteriously disappeared from sight. There was Walpola Rahula Thero standing tall in a jeep, directing the crowds. It was an unforgettable sight!

Turning to a couple of days earlier -on 5 June a procession of several thousands of strikers, for which permission had been duly obtained, was proceeding with N.M. Perera at its head, when a large force of police barred its passage at Dematagoda and baton charged the strikers. The LSSP leader was knocked down and beaten while on the ground. The police also fired 25 rounds into the demonstration: one killed and 18 injured, including Percy Nanayakkara. (Thereafter he earned the endearment, "Undaya," and had to endure lifelong a pellet embedded in his body. Medical specialists advised against surgery to remove the pellet.) The cruel act of repression by the police had roused the resentment of the working class.

The General Strike of May-June 1947 is one of the most significant events in the history of the working class. It was the biggest strike organised up to that time. At its height fifty thousand workers in the public and private sectors participated. At the head of the strikers stood the Public Services League (PSL), Ceylon Federation of Labour (CFL) and Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF).

Public service trade unions who had been clamouring for full trade union and political rights, and the right of affiliation with trade unions of nongovernment servants, decided to call a mass rally of public servants at Galle Face Green on 29 May 1947. Dr. N.M. Perera, Philip Gunawardena, Pieter Keuneman and G.G. Ponnambalam were among the political leaders who also addressed the meeting. The rally also demanded swaraj immediately, and the recall of the Governor Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore.

The next day saw the colonial government dealing a frontal attack on the right of the labour movement to champion causes on behalf of the workers and the oppressed by interdicting sixteen leading members of the PSL who had signed the notice convening the rally. Workers were quick to react to the government's union busting move by coming out on strike in their thousands. Government clerks also joined the strike under the leadership of the GCSU. This was the first time middle class employees had joined workers in industrial action.

The other demands put forward by the strikers included: amalgamation of the general clerical class and executive clerical class with the initial salary raised from Rs. 840 to Rs. 1440 per year; rent allowance to be increased from Rs. 7.50 to Rs. 20 (married men) and from Rs.3.75 to Rs.15 (bachelors); and absorption of all temporary clerks with two years service and more into the permanent service. A strike bulletin released by the GCSU demanded the immediate withdrawal of the ban on the GCSU and the withdrawal of the letters of interdiction issued to convenors of the rally of government servants on 29 May 1947.

The British Raj was alarmed. The troops were brought out; the Royal Navy paraded the streets. The display of military might was meant to intimidate the working class. It only served to anger the militant workers.

A Public Security Bill giving the colonial government sweeping repressive powers was rushed through the State Council in its

dying days. The Council had been elected in 1936 and had long ceased to be representative of the people.

Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore who was governor of Ceylon (1944-48), referring to these events in a published article on his tenure, states: "In 1946 [sic] an attempt was made by the Clerical Service to engineer a general strike in preparation for the general election under the Soulbury Constitution ... It illustrated the unwillingness of the Board of Ministers to face upto to their responsibilities. Despite the threatening situation, they were conspicuous by their absence. I was in Kandy at the time and Mr. George E. de Silva urged me to take immediate action. I went to Colombo and met the Ministers, who all urged me to declare a state of emergency and exercise dictatorial powers. Somehow or other they had come to know of the existence of such an instrument, though it was highly secret.

"I then pointed out to them that they had full powers to pass legislation of the same character in the State Council and that if they considered the time had come to take such action it was their plain duty and responsibility to take the necessary action themselves. If they did so I would of course support them in every possible way and they could base their legislation on the draft in my possession. Eventually they did so, and indeed provided more severe penalties than in the original draft in my possession. It was quite obviously an attempt to leave me holding the baby if such strong action was criticized." (*British Governors of Ceylon*, H.A.J. Hulugalle, Colombo: Lake House, Colombo, 1983, 232).

In the previous year (1946) the country had witnessed the first General Strike of government workers. It occurred "at the tail end of a stubborn two months old strike of bank workers", a labour historian has recorded.

Government workers struck on 15 October. The railway strike soon extended to the harbour, the Gas Company, Colombo Municipality and various private firms. According to the official figure, 24,000 had stopped work. But the real figure was about twice as large. The government refused to negotiate. Many establishments were at a standstill. A central strike committee was formed consisting of representatives of the participating unions and parties to give effective leadership. When the stoppage continued the acting governor of Ceylon

on 21 October agreed to meet a deputation of the Government Workers Trade Union Federation (GWTUF). The deputation was permitted to bring along one adviser and the Federation chose Dr. N.M. Perera for this function.

A delegation went to Queen's House to meet the acting governor but refused to come to a settlement in the absence of the LSSP leader Dr. Perera, who had been arrested by the police. It was Pelis Serasinghe, the government factory workers' leader who insisted that the LSSP leader should be released in the first instance. Dr. Perera was released and he along with the workers' deputation negotiated a settlement of the strike.

The government made several important concessions. But some of the promises were not honoured and workers joined the second General Strike the following year.

In the 1947 General Strike the workers held out, but in the end the strike petered out. According to a labour historian, "the strike was not only a defeat, it was a smash up." Thousands of workers in the government and private sectors were victimized.

The General Strike had radicalized sections of the working class. Dynamic young and energetic leaders to spearhead the public sector trade union movement had emerged. It would be invidious to single out a few but some names come to mind: T.B. Illangaratne, Bala Tampoe, who is still with us, G.H. Perera of the GWTUF, Gladstone Amarasekera and A. Chickera of the Customs Union, S.R. Yapa of the Surveyors' Union, K. Vaikunthavasan, A.R. Asirwatham and Geoffrey Gunanayagam of the GCSU, and Jim Mortimer of the Government Stenographers' Union.

Prins Rajasooriya (later secretary of the CFL) who also joined the strike, was then attached to the then Petrol Control Department. He recalled that I. J. Wickrama (who became a leader of the GCSU in the 1950s and 1960s), standing on an office table, addressed the strikers. K.M. Karunaratne who also later became a GCSU president later, was attached to the Puttalam Kachcheri and joined the strike. Last but not least, I would like to mention that Richard Adhihetty, now 86 years old, then attached to the PWD, was also a participant.

Many victimized workers joined the campaign trail during the 1947 elections. They actively supported left candidates. "The wounds of the strike have been healed but the scurs remain," as one leader reflected.

A strong contingent of the left parties was represented in the new parliament. Workers in the constituencies in the western seaboard and on the plantations had voted to elect 18 left MPs. A campaign for the reinstatement of victimised workers in the General Strike figured at the hustings. By the early 1950s workers were on the rise again. They cast off their passivity to

forgo vigorous trade unions. This resurgence was reflected in a shift to the left by the unions.

A makeshift memorial to Kandasamy was erected at the Albion Road roundabout at Dematagoda. But during the violent incidents in the mid-1950s the monument was demolished by communal miscreants.

In a reference to the 1947 incident at Dematagoda, Premier S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike said, "The shot that killed Kandasamy sounded the death knell of British Imperialism!" ■

T.P. Dematagoda was a 22 year old, under-stork at the time of the 1947 general strike. From 1948 to 1967 he served as president of the G.S.S. He rose through the ranks to become an administrative officer (A.S.S.) before his retirement in 1981.

TSUNAMI

"The fountains of the great deep opened up" (Genesis, chapters 6-8)

It's a sunny morning
A new day.

Aftermath.

Kites soaring high in the air
with dazzling wings
borne on trapezes of eddying wind.

At our gate a young boy stands, smiling,
green trap net in his hand
to capture the rebel bird that has escaped
from our neighbour's pet shop

How long will its freedom last,
this leaf camouflaged budgerigar
nestling among the throuling epiphytes
that choke and strangle the rough barked
Bottle Brush tree nosing its torso and
branches with thick, twining lianas
of strong hemp-like ropes.

Will the smiling boy capture the bird?
Will it go back into its prison?
Will the babel of bird cries down the
Single note of piercing grief?

The bird climbs higher and higher,
its tiny wings carry it to the upper
franchas, hidden within the recessed shadows.
Disappears.

"It won't last long on its own,
predators will destroy it," the searchers say.
Frail, vulnerable bird its fate to us humans

unknown, our own instincts for survival,
blunted.

Frail bird, frail children, frail beings,
For some the yawning sea bed a revelation,
a gasp between life and death,
reminders of Israelite exodus when the wall of
waters submerged the dry land, the horses,
chariots, the horsemen, the Egyptian host
all living beings left dead upon the shore

For others, entangled in vast steel nets of
waves it was the hungry oceans abundant
catch, gorged on, ingested, sucked in,
swept away, beyond, beyond, beyond all retrieval

The subtle treason of poetry
deludes our senses, colours, sound, movement:
circare endless metaphors for the sea,
now the azure wave clamps down
clutching with strong tearing talons
the tender flesh cleaving to life,
the strand slipping away
into the breathless seas.