

M.G. MENDIS IN HIS HEYDAY

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One of the prominent trade union leaders of the 1940's was M.G. Mendis, who was in the Left movement of the time. As a student at the Buddhist-Theosophist School (Mahinda College) he had been deeply influenced by Indian nationalism and during the second civil disobedience movement in India in 1930, he had discarded his European style-clothes and adopted the 'national' dress. Mendis was also influenced by Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe, an old boy of this school, who in 1931 had addressed the students. Mendis, who became a teacher at a Buddhist school joined the Suriya Mal movement in 1933, and after the formation of the L.S.S.P. in 1935 was the joint Secretary of the party. Following the split in the L.S.S.P. Mendis became the General Secretary of the United Socialist Party, and the editor of the party's English journal, the *United Socialist*.

Communist Trade Union Activity

The most important advance made by the Communists in the early years of the war was in the trade union field, where they succeeded in replacing the L.S.S.P. as the chief political influence on the working class. The Communists were highly critical of the trade union leaders of previous decades. A.E. Goonesinha was criticized for his failure to lead the "class struggle" in Ceylon:

Goonesinha never realized the role and function of trade unions ... (he) merely organized a general labour union of all workers by ... when he saw that genuinely championing the cause of labour meant consolidating strikes struggles, fighting for labours immediate demands and pursuing a policy of class against class, he slowly and steadily retreated so far that today he is the friend of the Imperialists.¹

The trade union activities of the Communists in the early years of the war can be divided into three phases. First, was the formation of a strong union among toddy tappers² The great majority of the toddy tappers were Malayalis, a group of emigrants who had, since the depression of 1931, been subjected to attack and demands for their repatriation to India by Goonesinha's organizations, and also by many of the Ceylon politicians. In December of 1939 and in early 1940, there were a series of disputes and strikes³ involving the toddy tappers and the renters.

Led by the Communists.⁴ The Toddy Tappers Union became the strongest trade union in the non-estate sector, and the success of the strike gave a fillip not only to the Union but also to Malayali workers in urban factories. In 1940, the Toddy Tappers Union and the Colombo Workers' Club combined to form the United Socialist Party (U.S.P.), after the split with the LSSP.

The second phase of Communist activity was the leadership given to the trade union movement by the United Socialist Party in 1940. The war had caused a certain dislocation in employment and a sudden rise in the cost of living, giving the U.S.P. a platform for agitation among the workers of Colombo. At their Congress in November 1940, the U.S.P. urged the workers to "close their ranks, strengthen their trade unions and wage a struggle for security of service, war bonuses, 25% increase in wages, and an eight hour day."⁵ In an article on the need for effective trade unions, M.G. Mendis stated that the war was "radicalizing the workers," because the rise in prices, threats of dismissal and the dislocation of trade and industry had worsened the conditions of the working class; "it is only now that the workers are realizing that it is by combination and combination alone that they can defend their own rights against the encroachments of capital."⁶

The U.S.P. gave leadership to 16 trade unions which had a total membership of 3,300 workers.⁷ The most important of these was the All-Ceylon Toddy Tappers' Union, and the All-Ceylon Harbour Workers' Union. In June 1940, a strike occurred among a section of the workers in the Harbour warehouses who demanded an increase in wages to meet the rise in the cost of living. Under the leadership of the U.S.P. the strikers formed themselves into the All-Ceylon Harbour Workers Union, with Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe as President, and M.G. Mendis and K. Ramanathan as Secretaries. The strike which lasted three days was settled when the main employer, the Ceylon Wharfage Company, agreed to give an increase in wages.⁸

The U.S.P. was also successful in starting the first trade unions among the workers of the large British tea and rubber packing factories in Colombo. These included the British Commercial company, Harrison & Crossfield, Brooke Bonds,

Lipton & Co. Henderson & Co. (100 members) and Mackie & Co. (75 members). The union at Mackie & Co. was successful in getting eleven dismissed workers reinstated in 1940.

In the same year the U.S.P. formed unions among press and hotel workers, domestic servants, shop assistants and the workers on unemployment relief schemes. Small unions of thirty members each were also begun at the India Pipe Company and the Cargo Boat Despatch Company.⁹

The advance of the U.S.P. in the trade union field was due to the success of the Malayali toddy tappers' strike in early 1940. These workers spread the news of their success to other Malayali workers in Colombo firms. The Labour Department reported, "the U.S.P. exploited the situation fully and captured Malayali labour and organized them in trade unions ... Malayali labour, buffeted hither and thither by racial animosity and stern employers found a platform in this new party, to ventilate their grievances."¹⁰ The majority of the U.S.P. trade union members and many of the union officials were Malayali, and during the first years of the war, they formed the backbone of Communist support in Colombo.

Of the three other Union leaders who were active in 1940, P. Kandiah was a graduate in Oriental Languages from Cambridge, where he participated in Communist politics during his stay there from 1936 to 1939. On his return to Ceylon, Kandiah became a lecturer at the University, joined the U.S.P. and devoted a great deal of his time to organising trade unions. A. Vaidyalingam, a graduate in mathematics of the Ceylon University, went to Cambridge in 1936 on a Government Scholarship and did the Mathematical Tripos; he too was actively involved in left politics while in Cambridge and also became interested in the organisational problems of trade unionism. Returning to Ceylon in 1939, Vaidyalingam joined the Colombo Workers' Club and later the U.S.P. and concentrated his efforts on trade union work.

K. Ramanathan was a journalist who had been a member of the L.S.S.P.; he was active during the Toddy Tappers strike and edited left-wing newspapers in Tamil and Malayalam. In the formation of the U.S.P., he worked in organizing trade unions in Colombo.

The Ceylon Trade Union Federation

The third phase of trade unionism which was the most important advance in trade union activity by the Communists, was the formation of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation. The trade unions which had been formed by the

United Socialist Party existed in isolation; the need to unite these unions into one trade union body was recognized by the U.S.P., and on the 14th of December 1940, the Ceylon trade Union Federation (C.T.U.F.) was formed. The founders of the new union were the leaders of the U.S.P., - Dr. Wickremasinghe, M.G. Mendis, P. Kandiah, A. Vaidyalingam and K. Ramanathan. A Buddhist monk, the Rev. Saranankara was elected first President of the C.T.U.F. Others associated with formation of the C.T.U.F. were several skilled workers from engineering and tea and rubber packing factories who had been active in the U.S.P. trade unions T.W. Pedrickhamy, Marshall Perera, P.D. David, L. Kulatunga, D.C. Hettiarachi, B.H. Peiris, and A. Gunasekera. Other prominent members were A.D. Charleshamy, who had been an active supporter of A.E. Goonesinha's Union, and Ariyaratna, an ex-L.S.S.P. executive committee member. The Malayali founder members of the C.T.U.F. included P. Shankar, a full time U.S.P. trade unionist (who had organized the toddy tappers), and several Malayali workers.

The Harbour Strike of 1941

The most important labour dispute that took place during the early years of the war was the strike of harbour workers in July 1941. This strike marked the appearance of several trade unions in the port led to important wage increases being granted to these workers. The strike also caused concern among the government and military authorities about the danger of strikes dislocating vital work in the harbour during the war, and resulted in the government proclaiming the harbour an essential service under the Defence Regulations. The Harbour Strike was also the last major strike supported by the C.T.U.F. before its change in policy towards strikes consequent on its later support of the war effort.

The repatriation of many Indian harbour workers in 1939 and the reduction of unemployment during 1941, had led to a shortage of labour among the permanent labour force in the Colombo harbour.¹² The work available was at irregular intervals because ships came in convoys during the war, leading to periods of intense activity and intervals when no work was available. The burden of this fell on the permanent labour force, as the casual workers did not have the experience or the stamina to work at great pressure, and the wages paid to the workers varied with the total output of a work gang.¹³ The reduction of the wages of the permanent labour force that resulted, led to great discontent.

The strike ended after nine days when the Unions accepted the Government's offer of a Commission Inquiry by the Controller of Labour and an interim award within a few days;

The Controllers interim report clearly brought out the urgent need for an all-round increase in wages, and recommended an increase of Rs 3/- per 1,000 bags of rice going to the contractor or overseer.¹⁴

The C.T.U.F. took the initiative in the renewal of the strike and issued leaflets stating, “we cannot be patient any longer, we have got a splendid opportunity let us avail ourselves of it, workers, do not come to work today,”¹⁵ The strike was illegal as the harbour had been declared an essential service in July 1941, and eight C.T.U.F. leaders (including M.G. Mendis, K. Madavan, K. Edwin and Lionel Kulatunga) were arrested and charged with inciting workers to strike. The government appointed the controller of Labour, F.C. Gimson to report on the strike and decided to publish the Gimson Report immediately and thereby secure a return to work by the strikers. The strike was called off on 27th November after the workers had been assured that the Report would be implemented. The employers resisted the minimum wage recommendations (Rs 30 for a married man and Rs 25 for a bachelor per month) and the 25% increase of wages to workers on coal cargo. The Governor, finding that the employers “refused to accept voluntarily certain vital recommendations”¹⁶ used his authority under the Defence Regulations to declare particular services in the harbour to be “essential work” which made it obligatory for the employers to accept the decisions of the Commission appointed by the government.

The harbour strike was a major victory for the C.T.U.F., and represented the first important trade union success in Sri Lanka since the twenties. The strike demonstrated the fact that the workers were in a strong position to obtain concessions; the revival of trade and the growing shortage of labour, combined with a sudden rise in the cost of living increased the bargaining power of the workers; further, at a time of crisis (because of the war) the government was anxious to avoid industrial discontent and was willing to make concessions. But the harbour strike which illustrated the potential strength of the labour movement was also the last major strike of the war years. From 1942 until 1945, the opportunity for militant industrial action, was foregone, and the workers were restrained by the C.T.U.F. which by 1942, changed its policy towards labour agitation.

The Inflationary Conditions 1942–45

After 1942, the Ceylon economy was geared to the war effort, and government intervention in economic matters increased. Agreements signed between Ceylon and the British

government provided for the sale of Ceylon’s total output of tea, rubber, plumbago, copra and coconut oil at fixed prices.

The Communists, who had from 1940 onwards worked in the Colombo Workers’ Club, the United Socialist Party and the Ceylon Trade Union Federation, came into the open with the formation of the Communist Party. The leaders of the party were composed of the older group of L.S.S.P. members of the thirties, (namely Dr. Wickremasinghe, M.G. Mendis, Saranankara Thero and T. Duraisingham), re-inforced by two groups of university graduates, from the Ceylon University and from Cambridge.

The years 1945 to 1947 formed the period of the greatest upsurge of trade union activity in the history of the Sri Lanka labour movement. The economic uncertainties of the post-war years, and the restraint on labour activity during the war, were partially responsible for the outburst; but the main factor that caused the labour unrest was the political ferment of these years when the issue was self-government and the end of colonial rule in Ceylon.

The C.T.U.F., claiming to represent 25,000 workers, sent a petition to the State Council in September 1945, urging the government to provide better employment opportunities, and it was suggested that this could be achieved through industrialization as “we do not think we can solve our problem by ‘back to the land’ policies of peasant agriculture or by being a feeder of raw materials for the imperialist market.”¹⁷ The demand was also made for the repeal of the ban on strikes; “now that fascism has been defeated ... strikes are one of the chief weapons of the working class and we are not prepared to give up the right of its use any more”.¹⁸ Other demands included an 8 hour day in all trades, a bonus of three months pay to workers in essential industries, a national minimum wage, pension rights, full trade union rights for government workers, the release of a worker imprisoned for sedition,¹⁹ and the reinstatement of an active C.T.U.F. worker dismissed for union activities.²⁰

In September 1945, the C.T.U.F. organized a march of workers to the State Council to present the petition. Led by M.G. Mendis, over 10,000 workers joined the procession, but were prevented by the Police from approaching the State Council and the Board of Ministers refused to meet the C.T.U.F. leaders. The workers then held a meeting in Price Park at which Mendis said that because the Ministers had refused to listen to the workers’ demands, they had to make use of the strike weapon which had been discarded during the war. In spite of strikes being illegal, a token half-day

strike was called in September 1945 and 8,000 workers on the tramways, the commercial firms,²¹ the municipality²² and harbour²³ workers joined the strike; three of the tramway workers who were active union members, were dismissed for being ‘ringleaders’ of the strike.²⁴ The result of this action was a further strike among all tramway drivers and conductors and sympathy strikes by workers at the Municipality, the tea and rubber packing stores, and the harbour and engineering firms.

The C.T.U.F. which claimed that there were 30,000 workers on strike, encouraged the strikers to take direct action, and members of the Communist Party and the C.T.U.F. (including Hedi Keuneman) prevented the trams being run by ‘blacklegs’ by sitting down on the tramlines. There were scuffles with the police, and M.G. Mendis and other trade union officials were arrested. The strike assumed serious proportions, for many of the workers in essential services had stopped work. The government decided to refer the dispute to arbitration, but the strike was settled through the intervention of the Mayor of Colombo. The three dismissed workers were reinstated and the strikers agreed to resume work.

This strike, which had lasted six days, was an occasion for the C.T.U.F. to make its impact as a ‘fighting’ trade union organization. During the war years militancy in the form of strikes had been kept at a minimum through the activity of the C.T.U.F. but immediately the war was over, the C.T.U.F. was determined to assert itself in the trade union field. The settlement of the strike was acclaimed by M.G. Mendis as an “outstanding victory”²⁵ and a victory procession of workers went round the streets of Colombo. The Communist weekly *Forward* reported: “it is the C.T.U.F. and the Communist Party who are now known as the undisputed leaders of the working class of Colombo”.²⁶

M.G. Mendis was perhaps the “undisputed leader” and most prominent trade-union activist of this militant period in the urban trade-union movement. His active participation continued in the 1950s when he was involved in several notable struggles. In later years too, he was a prominent activist in the Communist Party and a member of parliament. He is remembered today as a courageous fighter for the rights of the working class of Sri Lanka. ■

Footnotes

¹ *The United Socialist*, 19 Nov. 1940. “Trade Unionism in Ceylon” by M.G. Mendis.

² Tappers were employed in climbing coconut trees and extracting the juice from the coconut flower which was made into an intoxicating drink.

³ A threatened strike of the toddy tappers in Dec. 1939 led to an agreement being made between the renters and the Union on increased wages and improved working conditions. The failure of some renters to abide by the agreement led to strikes of tappers in Kandana on Feb. 1st and in Kandy on Feb. 5, 1940. A settlement of the dispute was reached after further negotiations between the Toddy tappers Union and the renters with the Deputy Controller of Labour acting as arbitrator. This agreement represented a great success for the Union as nearly all demands were conceded by the renters.

⁴ The Secretary of Toddy Tappers Union (M.G. Mendis and its President, (K. Ramanathan) were members of the dissident section of the L.S.S.P. who broke away from the party in 1940.

⁵ *The United Socialist*, 19 Nov. 1940. Trade Unionism in Ceylon by M.G. Mendis.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Labour Dept. File T 18, Part I.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Labour Dept. File, T 18, Part 1.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹² CDN, 25 Jan. 1941.

¹³ CDN, 6 August 1941. Report of Controller of Labour on Harbour Strike.

¹⁴ CDN 6 August, 1941.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ CGA. File C.F. A112/40. Letter of Governor to Sec. of State. 8 Dec. 1941.

¹⁷ CGA. File CFA/112 1940 CTUF Petition of 16 Sept. 1945.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* “The dismissal of D.P. Jayawardena, Factory Sec. of Hayley & Kenny is a definite case of victimization and an attempt to destroy trade unions ... an organized attempt to hit at the rights of the working class.”

²¹ Mackwoods, Harrison & Crossfield, Hayley & Co. Vavasseurs, Ceylon Cold Stores, Adamjee Oil Mills, Hoare & Co. British Commercial Co., Ceylon Commercial Co.

²² Hulftsdorp scavengers, Maligakanda Water Works, Municipal Workshops.

²³ Workers of Wharfage Co. Cargo Boat Despatch Co., Narottam & Pereira.

²⁴ File CFA/112/6 loc. Cit.

²⁵ File CFA/112/6 loc. Cit.

²⁶ *Forward*, 26 Sept. 1945.

Kumari Jayawardena is the author of *Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon*.