

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Capitalist Offensive in India.

By M. N. Roy.

The strike in the textile industry of Bombay, which in the closing days of January developed into a general lock-out throwing over 150,000 men, including 30,000 women out of work, took the form of the decisive battle in the offensive of the Indian capitalists. The causes that led to the strike and the preliminary stage of the struggle have been dealt with in a previous article. At the time of writing this, no news of the termination is at hand.

On Feb. 1, the strike had been almost general. 81 out of 83 mills were closed; and the strikers numbered more than 150,000. The owners flatly refused to consider the demand of the workers. The demand was the continued payment of the annual bonus, amounting to a month's wages, which had been suspended. The Millowner's Association gave an ultimatum: if the strikers would not resume work unconditionally on Feb. 4, all the mills would be closed down for two weeks. The leaders made frantic efforts to induce the men to give up their resistance. The strikers were in a fighting mood and took up the challenge of the owners, contrary to the advice of the leaders.

As far as the leaders were concerned, the situation was very awkward. Neither side would listen to them. The employers rejected all proposition of compromise; the workers, on the other hand, were determined upon a fight to the finish. Consequently, there was no new development for several days. On top of this came the release of Gandhi. The petty bourgeoisie, whose sense of justice had been somewhat outraged by the attitude of the capitalists, found a new diversion. They went wild with the rejoicings and thank-givings over the release of the Mahatma. The strike was almost forgotten, except to offer the workers occasional injunctions to remain non-violent. Sankerlal Banker, a rich mill-owner of Ahmedabad (the second largest textile centre where six months ago the workers had been beaten down) and the chief lieutenant of Gandhi, appeared on the scene and advised the strikers to take to the primitive spinning-wheel, to earn their living and to follow the command of the Mahatma.

The situation, however, was too grave to be forgotten or to be tided over with such quaint suggestions. The froth and foam of petty bourgeois rejoicing over their hero, clouded the situation for a few days only. The "public sympathy" for the strikers abated; the determination of the latter continued unflagged. Some of the leaders adopted new tactics. In the beginning, they did not dare to oppose the demands of the workers. Now, thinking that the workers' power of resistance would be nearing its end, some of them began dwelling upon the illegality of the bonus system and advised the workers to be "reasonable".

All the time the employers had a thoroughly sinister scheme up their sleeves. Their intention was to attack the wages as soon as the workers were beaten down in the fight over the bonus. The workers felt instinctively that they were engaged in a decisive battle. The resistance they put up disquieted the owners, who evidently did not expect such a stiff fight. The talk of over-production was all nonsense. Indian mills are far from supplying the needs of the local market. In a few days there was a run on the slender stock and the prices hardened. In another week or so, the godowns would be empty, and if the mills failed to supply the market, foreign competitors would gain ground which would be very hard to recover. Therefore the prospects of a continued lock-out were no more welcome to the owners than to the workers. The Union leaders, who in India stand much closer to the capitalists than to the workers, sensed the situation, and approached the Governor with the request to intervene. He, of course, expressed his desire to remain neutral in the dispute between capital and labour, notwithstanding the fact that from the very beginning the police and the military had been gratuitously placed at the disposal of the former. Anyhow the Governor took the hint, and invited the Committee of the Millowner's Association for an informal talk. The nature of this talk was not intimated to the public; but it is generally believed that the Governor advised the owners to seek "an honourable and satisfactory settlement". He also advised them to make a declaration to the effect that, within the next twelve months, no wage-reduction would be made. The Committee expressed its inability to say anything definite without consulting the Association. The Governor let it go at that.

The position within the camp of the employers became very interesting. There developed two hostile tendencies. This was the first victory of the workers. They succeeded in creating discord in the enemy camp. The enormity of this victory is appreciated when it is remembered that the ignorant, largely illiterate, unorganized workers have been fighting without leadership and without a strike fund. The so-called leaders were trying their very best to sabotage the fight. The public sympathy was waning and an opinion decidedly hostile to the workers was crystalizing all around. Nevertheless, the first victory of the workers was quickly followed by a second one.

The strike had commenced the second week of January. Nearly 130,000 men had been two weeks on strike before the lock-out was declared. The wages for January were due just on the day the lock-out order was issued. The employers refused to pay any wages for the strike-period. After the interview with the Governor, an influential section of the Committee of the Millowner's Association recommended a revision of the position. Pending consideration of the Governor's request for the declaration about future wages, the owners issued a notice that if the men would resume work at the end of the lock-out period, the January wages would be paid within two days.

On the question of future wage-cuts, however the majority of the owners remained obdurate. The minority, led by Sir Fuzulbhoj Currimbhoj, pleaded for a compromise. They went so far as to recommend the payment of 50 per cent of the bonus. They contended that the dead-lock was causing more loss to the industry than otherwise, and they were correct. But the die-hard majority were prepared to sacrifice a portion of the amassed profit in order to break down the resistance of the workers.

On Feb. 11, the Association adopted a resolution to the effect that the question of future wage-reductions did not enter into the present dispute, and that it had not been considered therewith. Sir Fuzulbhoj moved an amendment which sought to guarantee the existing scale of wages for the current year. The amendment was defeated by 571 votes against 405. So, although the first round ended in but a partial victory for the workers, it caused a serious schism in the capitalist camp. Had the workers been endowed with a consciously revolutionary leadership, this initial victory could be pushed very far. But as it is, the odds are overwhelmingly against the workers. An instinctive sense of class solidarity, and a small and partially developed vanguard, are the only weapons at their disposal. At any rate, these weapons they are wielding admirably. India had seen other great strikes, but this one is unparalleled in that it has practically repudiated the leaders hailing from the capitalist camp, and has thrown up the rudimentary elements of class leadership. It may fail to win all its immediate demands, but consciousness is awakened and the experience gained will never be lost. On the contrary, it will be a valuable asset for the entire proletarian movement.

The growth of a class-leadership has been such a remarkable phenomenon that the nationalist papers, which at first gave a sort of half-hearted support to the strikers, are talking disapprovingly of the "few extremists" who are holding the men back, in spite of the fact that a majority of them are not prepared to go to the bitter end." The appearance of the "few extremists" is the principal feature of this strike. Obviously it is the influence of these "few extremists" that has liberated the workers from the unholy domination of the "leaders", in league with the capitalists and the government. There has not been one strike meeting in which a number of the strikers did not speak, and this in order, to oppose the compromise propositions of the "leaders". The nationalist *Bombay Chronicle* reports: "The men are intelligent enough to understand their own interests, and there could be no better proof than their rejection of Baptista Kaka's (Joseph Baptista, a rich lawyer with Fabian leaning, a former president of the Trade Union Congress) inopportune advice to resume work unconditionally. The operatives know that while they are losing in the shape of wages, the millowners are not gaining either."

In view of the fact that mere spirit, however undaunted, cannot overcome economic disabilities, and that 30,000 women with children are counted among the locked out workers, it cannot be expected that the struggle will end in a clear victory. The offensive of the capitalists is very sweeping and will not be warded off so easily, although it is clear that the corner has been turned. The Bombay men will not be so totally beaten down as their comrades of Ahmedabad. While the issue is being fought out in the heart of the industry, strikes have been won

in the secondary centres of Cawnpur and Nagpur. It is very likely that the Bombay fight will end in a compromise. The men would accept a reduced (50 p. c.) bonus plus a declaration against wagecut. This would be the best that could be expected under the circumstances. In fact, the possibilities of the struggle ending in results still worse for the workers are not inconceivable. The "labour well-wishers" are busy with their nefarious efforts and the men cannot hold out indefinitely.

Now, what effect will a victorious capitalist offensive have upon the British proletariat? This question is very easy to answer. If the capitalists can reduce their wage-bill, they will be better equipped to face British competition. English cotton fabrics will, therefore, have to be either partially withdrawn from the Indian market or sold cheaper. This will mean either increased unemployment or wage-cuts in Lancashire. The English cotton trade has been experiencing a slump for some time; of late, the talk of a lock-out is to be heard. On the other hand, a victory of the Indian workers will strengthen the position of the Lancashire operatives. But the Labour Government is totally oblivious to this chance of giving protection to the Indian working-class, not as a charity but in the interests of the British proletariat. The leader of the Lancashire cotton operatives, Tom Shaw, is a partisan of excise duty on the Indian cotton industry; he does not know that this does not solve the problem. It ultimately falls on the bent back of the Bombay workers, and the effect rebounds upon the Lancashire men, as is shown by the present situation.

*

According to news received since the above was written, the lock-out was extended for another two weeks, because the workers refused to go back unconditionally on Feb. 18, on which date the second lock-out period expired. Even at the present time of writing the struggle continues. That means, that the lock-out has been on 40 days, while the strike broke out another two weeks before. This prolonged resistance on the part of the Indian workers is almost unbelievable, when their economic condition is taken into consideration. Naturally enough, the solidity of resistance is weakening. In order to take advantage of this weakening, notices were posted up by the owners announcing that the mills would be opened from March 8 for the workers willing to resume work unconditionally, and that January wages would be paid to such workers two days after. The suffering of the workers has reached its limit. Several deaths are reported from starvation. Nevertheless as a body, the strikers still would not permit blacklegging. Attempts were made to set fire to mills which posted up the above notices. Conflict with the armed police guarding the mills occurred, and so far three strikers are reported killed and several wounded.

The government remains indifferent to the suffering of the men. It refuses to shoulder the responsibility of feeding so many people. It is said that if the millowners will not, the public must undertake the duty. We have heard much of the "responsibility" of ruling India. The Labour Government has also voluntarily shouldered this "responsibility". Will the British proletariat demand that the MacDonald Cabinet shall not remain sublimely indifferent to the responsibility it owes to the Bombay workers?