

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Industrial Strife in India.

By M. N. Roy.

India stands on the eve of a fierce industrial conflict. The textile workers of Bombay have been given a notice of a lockout if they do not accept a wage-cut from Sept. 1. More than 150,000 workers, including 35,000 women and 15,000 children, will be thrown out of work. The Indian workers are badly organised. This is especially the case in the textile industry of Bombay. The Union is weak, and has no funds. Therefore, from the day after the mills are closed, the workers, — men, women and children — will have starvation staring them in the face.

In spite of this gloomy perspective, the workers are unwilling to give in before the capitalist offensive. They have declared their determination to put up a resistance. They have rejected the demand for wage-reduction and are prepared to go on strike to resist it. The workers will be all alone in this fierce struggle. The British Government will, of course, be on the side of the mill owners (mostly Indian) as on previous occasions, and will readily place at their disposal troops armed with tanks and machine-guns to terrorise the workers and to shoot them down, if necessary. Nationalist sympathy will be all on the side of the employers. Even the so-called labour leaders are against the workers resisting the proposed wage-cut. They support the argument of the employers that continued trade depression warrants lower cost of production, without which Indian industry will not be able to compete with the goods imported from Britain and Japan. Since the workers have resolved to strike, in spite of the "leaders", the latter are doing their best to prevent the strike, and will sabotage it, if it breaks out. They acted in the same way during last year's lockout, which lasted nearly three months, and when the workers did not return to the mills until women and children had actually died in the streets of starvation.

The history of the imminent struggle is as follows. In the beginning of 1924 the owners of the Bombay cotton mills locked out over 150,000 workers to enforce a 30% wage reduction. After a heroic struggle, which lasted nearly three months, the workers were defeated. Presently, the payment of a yearly bonus equivalent to a month's wages, was also discontinued. Hardly a year was over, when the employers declared that wages should be further reduced. Their argument was that, owing to British and Japanese competition, the Indian textile industry was a losing concern. The original demand was for a 30% cut. The employers were divided on the issue. One section held that the workers would never give in to that exorbitant demand; and consequently there would be prolonged stoppage of production in India, which would give the British and Japanese the opportunity of flooding the Indian

market. At last the moderate counsel prevailed, and a 11.5% reduction was decided upon, to be enforced from Sept. 1.

Now, some facts about the state of the industry will expose the cold-blooded nature of this demand. The interruption in the import of British manufactures during the war, together with the change in the economic policy of British imperialism, gave a tremendous impetus to the Indian textile industry. So much so, that a number of mills made a profit of 200% in the post-war boom period of 1920—21. Naturally that abnormal prosperity could not be permanent, and a period of comparative slump followed. Immediately the employers attacked the wages which had risen only 80% above the pre-war level.

The average wages in 1914 were seven pence and 13 pence daily for unskilled and skilled labour respectively. They rose to 11 pence and two shillings in 1922. During the same period, the prices went up by 250%. So the **real wages** hardly increased at all. Since 1922 wages and prices have both been on the decline. Last year wages were reduced by 30%, and 8.5% were added to the reduction by the abolition of bonuses. On the other hand, the prices are still 155% above the pre-war level.

On the top of this, wages are to be cut by another 11.5%. If the owners of the textile industry in India succeed in beating down the Indian workers continually in this way, the disastrous effects will not be limited to India alone. They will affect the textile workers in other countries, particularly in Britain. The imminent industrial conflict in Bombay should, therefore, be made an international issue, and the Indian workers must be given international aid in their struggle against the combined forces of national and imperialist capital.

In spite of the policy of British imperialism to obstruct the growth of modern industry in India, Bombay already before the war threatened to be a dangerous rival of Lancashire. Cheap and unorganised labour compensated all the disabilities imposed upon Indian capitalism in the interest of imperialist monopoly. Then, Japan cannot be dislodged from the place she acquired in the Indian market, taking advantage of the break-down of regular transport during the war. The Cheap labour of Japan and the coolie labour of India made a large hole in British monopoly in India. In order to recover the lost ground, British capital decided to exploit Indian labour directly. Of late, British capital is being invested in Indian textile industry. This new situation has brought about a change in the economic policy of Imperialism. Already during the war a tariff of 11% was granted to the Indian cotton industry. This protection was not granted in fairness to Indian capital. The object was to exclude Japan, on the one hand, and on the other, to prepare the ground for the export of British capital to be invested in Indian textile industry, based on coolie labour and secured by a high tariff wall.

The Bombay millowners, however, still chafe under one remaining disability. It is the Excise Duty of 3.5% imposed upon the textile industry. They vigorously condemn this tax as being responsible for the ruining of the Indian mills. The struggle which has raged around this issue for years is nearing its end. The Government of India has admitted, on principle, that the Excise Duty should be abolished. Two weeks ago, after the lock-out notice had been given, a deputation of the millowners was received by the Secretary of Commerce and Industry, who promised a sympathetic consideration of the millowners' case. The latter, on their part, declared after the interview that the Excise Duty would be abolished soon. This concession to the Indian capitalists is obviously due to the pressure of British capital already invested and ready to be invested in the Indian cotton industry.

The capitalists are united in their scheme of exploitation. This united front should be met by the united resistance of the working class all over the world. A joint action of the workers of Bombay and Lancashire is of immediate necessity. The leader of the Lancashire operatives, Mr. Tom Shaw, all along supported the British imperialist policy of obstructing the growth of Indian textile industry by placing it under various disabilities. He has been an ardent advocate of the Excise Duty on the Indian cotton industry and demanded the strict application to India of the principles of Free Trade, which meant British monopoly of the Indian market. What will he do now that British imperialism is forced to abandon the old policy? Will he resist the sinister capitalist design by rallying the textile workers of Britain to the support of the Bombay

workers, who are standing with their backs to the wall before the combined forces of British and Indian capital? Will he pledge the International Textile Workers' Federation, whose President he is, to come to the aid of the Bombay workers in case they are locked out or if they strike to resist the wage-cut?

If the Bombay workers are again beaten, the consequences will be very far-reaching. Defeat of the Bombay workers will be inevitably followed by the defeat of the workers in other Indian textile centres. In consequence, not only Japanese but Lancashire fabrics will be gradually driven out of the Indian market. The result is easy to imagine. The Indian workers possess the will to fight, but without international support, they are sure to be beaten, in spite of their capability of carrying on a struggle for months with stark starvation staring them in the face. Given adequate international support, the Bombay workers can be trusted to put up such a resolute fight as would not only win them a victory in the economic struggle on the question of wages, but would signify a long step forward in the great political struggle against imperialism.