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EVIDENCE-IN-CHIEF

OF

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJAN CHETTIAR

BEFORE

THE IMMIGRANT LABOUR COMMITTEE.

INDUSTRIAL TRUCE

The Industrial Truce is well displayed by the strike in our Presidency. As many as 35 Mills are out of production for the past over a month, in these days of yarn and cloth scarcity. Statements have been issued by Government, Mills and Labour, all defending their attitude. The Public is silent. There stands the matter.

Obviously the Government is responsible for the present unhappy situation. It gave no serious thought to a "report" that was highly inflationary, and was bound to produce serious repercussions. The strikes by the noble profession—teachers—and by the loyal servants—N.G.O.—were undoubtedly the outcome of this august report. The present strike, however, is entirely due to the fact that Mills have been unjustly forced to give effect to the increased wages and dearness allowance long before the recommended work load had been fixed. The Government has no power now to force Labour to abide by the decision of the Tribunal. This trouble would not have arisen if Industry and Labour had been asked to give effect to the report wholly and simultaneously.

Comparative figures are often interesting. A Mill in U.S.A. with 12,000 spindles, spinning an average count of 24^s employs only 50 hands, while U.K. 75, Japan 100, but South India as many as 260. Are not these figures striking, even allowing for the better working condition prevailing in the countries mentioned above? The Committee has now recommended only a reduction of 10% from 260 hands, and yet Labour is challenging even this.

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INDUSTRIAL TRUCE

by

Karumuttu Thiagarajan

The Mills in our Presidency were losing and they fought long for an increase in prices. The increased price today is more than offset by the increase in price of cotton and in cost of production. The living index is going up every month and the Dearness Allowance payable in Madura to Labour today is Rs. 38-10-0 per head against Rs. 18/- paid by Government. That is only a little over 100 percent! Are not thanks due to Government for having placed Industry in the happy position of welcoming nationalisation?

MADURA, }
26—2—1948.

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJAN.

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COLOMBO,

7th March, 1918.

16497

EVIDENCE-IN-CHIEF

OF

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJAN CHETTIAR

BEFORE

THE IMMIGRANT LABOUR COMMITTEE.

QUALIFICATIONS:

I was a member of the Subject Committee of the 32nd Indian National Congress. I am the Secretary of the Madras Presidency Association, Madura-Ramnad branch. I have proposed resolutions affecting the lower classes at several public conferences. I have published three pamphlets on "Indian Emigrants on Ceylon Estates", and one on "Ceylon Quarantine Regulation Difficulties". I have also spent three years in studying the present question and made sure of the facts by personal investigation.

INTRODUCTORY:

The present system of recruiting Indian labour and its management on the estates is based on fraud and maintained by force. It has caused enormous suffering; it has broken up families; it has driven men to crime and women into lives of shame; it has resulted in frightful mortality. It is virtual slavery.

I shall consider the subject under four heads—the Recruiter, the Planter, the Government and the Labourer.

I. RECRUITER :

Fraud is the Recruiter's strongest weapon. He is paid 10, 20 or even 45 rupees (vide page 40 of Sabaragamuwa Commission Report) for a single labourer. Therefore, he tries by hook or by crook to get into his clutches as many labourers as he can. The recruiter does not represent the true lot of the labourer on the estate, but entirely misrepresents it, by holding out to him golden prospects—false, of course. I say, therefore, that the stream is poisoned at the source.

(All the labourers, without any exception at all, examined by the Sabaragamuwa Commission bitterly complained that they were all absolutely misled. Further, this charge is admitted by 30 out of 35 planters examined by the same Commission).

II. PLANTER :

Not a few planters neglect and illtreat their labourers. The death rate and particularly child mortality are abnormally high. In 1913, the death rate on a certain estate was 238 per thousand. In 1914, the average for all estates was 42.3 per thousand, while it was only 27.4 per thousand in Colombo. In 1916, the rate of infant mortality on estates varied from 182 to so much as 450 per thousand in some districts, and the general average was 256. The rate in the whole Colony was 194 per thousand. When we consider the fact that epidemics on the estates are unknown, these figures are striking, and point conclusively to insanitary conditions of labour and lack of satisfactory medical aid.

The planters seem to have the right of private arrest, as if the labourers were actual slaves. They also reserve the right of punishing, fining, caning etc., and they use it with impunity.

They make use of corporal punishment—which is sometimes very severe, going so far as to cause grievous hurt and bleeding, for such trivial reasons as disobedience, absence from the estates without leave, etc.

III. GOVERNMENT:

The Courts attach no weight to the statement of the labourer. If the labourer reports to the Court the illtreatment of himself by his master it punishes him for having made a "frivolous" complaint (vide "Ceylon Observer"—31—1—1918), justifying the illtreatment of the labourer on the ground that it is necessary to maintain discipline. If the victim appeals to the Supreme Court his case is thrown out as "very suspicious" (vide "Times of Ceylon" 10—3—1917). Perhaps the Court wonders how a labourer manages to approach it!

The law sentences the labourer to imprisonment with hard work for such trivial offences as negligence, impertinence, and drunkenness. If the intending emigrant were only aware of this law he would not come here at all, however ignorant and resourceless he might be.

IV. LABOURER:

The labourer is absolutely misled. He does not at all realise the conditions of the new life before him. Nor does he start with the deliberate intention of making for himself a home in the new country. He goes because he is uncomfortable at home. He may have quarrelled with his parent and left home in pursuit of work. Many are not recruited in their villages. The recruiter picks up the loiterer and induces him to emigrate by relieving his immediate wants, and setting splendid prospects before him.

The labourer, however, realises the difficulties by and by. He is first unnecessarily detained at Mandapam. What is worse, as long as he is kept there, he is illfed.

When he reaches the estate, he finds things absolutely different to what the Kangany has portrayed them to be. He is compelled to live in a very small room 10 x 12 feet with three others. He is forced to work 10 hours continuously, without break for a mid-day meal. Very poor wages are paid, only 33 to 40 cents to men, and 25 to 30 cents to women. The wages paid on rubber estates are somewhat better. Even when the labourer is ill he is driven by the Kangany to the field for work, as otherwise the Kangany will lose the commission of 6 cents which he gets for every day a labourer works. When he is too ill to work he is often neglected. His children are generally deprived of all education; they are all fated to live and die as ignorant coolies. The men who come to Ceylon are more numerous than the women—a disproportion not calculated to improve the morals of the labourer.

The labourer may be shifted from one estate to another, but he cannot return to India. The Kangany has put on him a heavy debt which binds him with chains from which he cannot free himself. The average debt of a labourer is said to be Rs. 700, and sometimes from 200 to 300 rupees. Time only increases the debt. It cannot be repaid or even reduced. The debt of the deceased or the run-away relation is added to it. The debt puts him in a hopeless condition. It converts him into an actual slave under the tyranny of the Kangany. The law is very favourable to the labourer in this respect. A debt of this character is not recoverable in any Court of law in Ceylon or in India, so says the Labour Commission that sat in 1908. But aside from the fact that this leniency of the law is not usually known to them, "the high

standard of honour which generally prevails amongst these people" as that Commission rightly observes, does not allow them to repudiate the debt.

On account of personal suffering, however, every year thousands of labourers try to get back to India, sometimes, perishing with cold and hunger on the way, if they were not caught and taken back to the life from which they are fleeing. In 1915 the number of "bolters" from Federated Estates alone was 8,894. Labourers do not run away for mere pleasure, or out of wickedness. This is a standing witness against the system for all time.

In a word, a will-o'-the-wisp created by the Kangany lures the labourer out of India, and sets him where he is illfed, hard-worked, under-paid, laden with a heavy debt, and practically bound as a slave for life.

OTHER SIDE:

I will now turn to the argument which is usually adduced in favour of the present system, namely, if the system is so bad how is it, thousands of labourers go back to India and then return to the estate? The reason for this is, that they have been compelled to leave in Ceylon part of their family as security, for the heavy debt contracted, before leaving and naturally they return to recover them (vide page 155 Sabaragamuwa Commission Report).

REMEDIES:

It is rather difficult for one person to suggest suitable remedies for abuses on such a large scale. I, therefore, propose arbitration, consisting of a committee of two representatives for the labourers and two for the planters with a

neutral member as judge, who shall be accepted by both parties, to decide the question. My own present views are, however, as follows:—

ROOT OF THE EVIL :

As the real remedy lies in bettering the condition here, I shall first treat this before going to recruiting.

I. WAGES :

“Cheap labour is dear.” The present wages are insufficient to attract labourers to emigrate. Therefore, the wages should be increased to 60 to 75 cents for men and 40 to 50 cents for women. These would be fair wages for those who leave their country and go abroad to better their economic condition. Further, to make labourers stick to one estate for sometime without constantly changing, they may be given a bonus. In the first year, they will have received free passage. In the second year, the bonus may be 20 rupees, with an increase of 5 rupees for each successive year of service up to a maximum of 35 rupees.

The commission of 6 cents paid to the Kangany for every day a labourer works should be abolished. Instead of the Kangany, have Supervisors who will be paid a monthly salary.

II. TASKS :

Labourers should not be worked for more than eight hours a day, not including two hours interval. No child should begin work until his fourteenth year.

III. LIVING :

Each family should occupy a separate room. A certain proportion in sex ratio should be maintained. The restriction on the quantity of rice should be done away with. The

labourer should be given the quantity he requires, since he pays for it.

The law about sanitation, medical aid, education and the like should be strictly observed.

IV. PROTECTORS :

There should be an Indian Protector in each district to see to the interests of the labourers. There should be also Indian representatives in the Legislative Council for safeguarding labour interests.

V. RECRUITING :

The Kangany and the commission system should be totally abolished. Instead, labour bureaus may be formed in important centres in India. They should have salaried men to recruit labourers. The labourers should be persuaded to emigrate only by the offer of terms. A booklet giving all possible details, including exact figures of wages should be handed over to the intending emigrant before he emigrates. The labourer recruited should get a pass from the Headman of the village, counter-signed by the Magistrate of the Taluk. The labourer should be given free passage. If he leaves his estate within one year the cost of passage might be recovered from him.

ABOLITION OF "SLAVERY":

Before things are put on a new basis, the present labourer should be assisted by Government to wipe off their debts. It is manifestly unfair to both planter and labourer to expect the latter to pay his debt under prevailing conditions.

There is no necessity to return to the same
the matter being settled. This should be
the business of the State.

The Government and the people should for the most part

be satisfied with the present position of the
the Government regarding the matter.

The Government should on the one hand
be satisfied with the present position of the
the Government regarding the matter.

In the history of humanity and the world
the Government should be satisfied with the
the Government regarding the matter.

(2) KARUNATHA THIRAKALAI
The Government should be satisfied with the
the Government regarding the matter.

Madurai,
2nd September, 1910.