

SRI LANKA SOCIAL HISTORY

**PIONEER REBELS  
AMONG THE  
COLOMBO WORKING-CLASS**

**Kumari Jayawardena**

**Sanjiva Books**



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PIONEER REBELS

Kamath Jayawardena



## PIONEER REBELS AMONG THE COLOMBO WORKING-CLASS <sup>1</sup>

Historians of revolutions, peasant revolts and labour movements have tended to concentrate on the leaders rather than the led. Whereas the political and labour leaders of mass movements have usually attracted all the attention, the persons who actually participated in crowd agitation, 'mob' activity or strikes have been relegated to footnotes or appendices, if they have warranted mention at all. However some attention has been paid to the actual composition of crowds by George Rude who has studied 'mob' behaviour and riots in 18th century Britain and France, and by Eric Hobsbawm who has written on groups of rural and urban 'primitive rebels' in a pre-capitalist European society.

This article directs attention to some of the individual workers who came out on strike in Colombo during the early years of the urban labour movement. The period considered is the first thirty years of the labour movement, from the first strike in Sri Lanka in 1893 until the general strike of 1923, which formed the period preceding the emergence of widespread urban trade unionism. During the years before the outburst of 1923, there was neither any sustained labour activity nor the growth of permanent leadership. But there were several strikes

### 1. From the Young Socialist, 1968

among the urban mechanics and craftsmen-including the printers, laundrymen, carters, and railway workers-culminating in a general strike in Colombo in 1923. The material for such a study is limited to police files which often gave biased reports, court proceedings against strikers, newspaper accounts of strikes which usually either ridiculed the strikers or exaggerated their 'wickedness' and reports of government Commission (appointed after strikes) where individual workers gave evidence of their grievances.

This article falls into three phases. During the first of these-the period of the sporadic strikes ending around 1906-information about the strikers is fragmentary and is almost entirely drawn from newspaper reports and court records. During these years, no strong labour movement developed which warranted the opening of official files on working-class agitators. This kind of evidence, which included reports from the Colonial Secretary's Office and police dossiers, becomes available during the second phase, after the strike on the Railway in 1912 and the riots of 1915, when individual strikers and their 'ringleaders' began to be officially identified and carefully observed for the first time. The Government Commission which probed the Railway workers' grievances in 1912 also provides a fruitful source of evidence. The third phase commences with the consolidation of the urban working-class movement under A.E. Goonesinha when continuous official surveillance began.



The Criminal Investigation Department started to follow the movements of the strike leaders, and police constables were present at every meeting, procession and demonstration, observing events and making detailed reports.

A study of the strikes which occurred between 1893 and 1923 among skilled mechanics (especially printers, railway and harbour workers and 'independent' workers (such as carters and laundry men) reveals the existence of militant workers among the ranks, who acted as leaders and spokesmen for the strikers and were usually referred to by the newspapers and police as 'ringleaders'. These 'natural' leaders were defiant of authority, whether it was of the police, government officials or the employers. They were willing to risk taking bold action even though it may have meant loss of employment, and it was this group that decided which members of the bourgeoisie the strikers could appeal to for support. The 'ringleaders' among the urban workers were also literate and responsive to political and semi-political agitation, such as the Buddhist and Hindu revivals of the late 19th century, the temperance campaign and incipient nationalism of the early 20th century. Many workers were readers of the Dinamina, Lakmina, Sarasavi Sandaresa and other papers such as the satirical Kavatakathikaya, and the Buddhist nationalist papers, the Sinhala Bauddhaya associated with Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Sinhala Jathiya edited by Piyadasa Sirisena. These papers were important sources of public opinion among the

working-class. For one, there was a lot of enthusiasm generated by Dharmapala's forceful political writing against the British authorities, Christian missionaries and 'aliens'. The papers also kept people in touch with events such as the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, the Indian nationalist movement and revolutions and rebellions in Russia, Egypt, Ireland, Turkey and China. In addition the Colombo working-class was made aware of the wave of industrial discontent in Britain, India and other countries through accounts of strikes and labour agitation which were regularly featured in the newspapers.

Although the Colombo proletariat only acquired a full-time trade union leader (A. E. Goonesinha) during the general strike of 1923, the role of a section of the middle-class in supporting labour agitation in the earlier years, should be kept in mind. Among the middle-class persons considered sympathetic to labour were A. E. Buultjens, Dr. Lisboa Pinto, Anagarika Dharmapala, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Hector Van Cuylenberg, Rev. G. B. Ekanayake, John Kotelawela, Martinus Perera, C. H. Z. Fernando, C. Batuwantudawe, Arthur Dias, D. C. Senanayake, C. Don Bastian and other political figures, religious reformers and temperance leaders who used to advise and guide the unorganised urban workers. The lack of a full-time middle-class leadership was only one of the obstacles faced by the urban workers.

During these years, the workers possessed very few rights; politically they were de-



barred from the franchise by property and educational qualifications; socially they were separated from their British and Ceylonese employers by wide class barriers and economically the workers were at a serious disadvantage as they lived on subsistence wages, ranging from 33 cents a day on the estates to Rs.1/- or Rs.1/50 a day for skilled workers in Colombo. Legally there was no law to restrict the formation of a trade union, but the resort to strikes was a criminal offence under the Labour Ordinance of 1865 which was only repealed in 1921.

During this early phase, to go on strike was an act of exceptional courage. It meant that the workers were not only exposed to instant dismissal, but also sometimes to the risk of prosecution for breach of contract. Since there were no strong unions with funds, striking also meant great personal hardship.

## THE PRINTERS

Who were the workers who were defiant enough to come out on strike against such unfavourable odds? If one had to name the first 'hero' of the urban working class, it would be William, a machine ruler at the printing works H.W. Cave & Company, (a leading publisher and bookseller), where the first important strike in Sri Lanka of 60 printers occurred in 1893 over a dispute on delays in monthly wage payments. Even before the strike, William had drawn attention to himself by going to the manager to demand his wages and also by sending in a written request.

William and five other 'ringleaders' were dismissed during the strike for instigating the trouble and William was prosecuted under the Labour Ordinance of 1865 for leaving work. Under this Ordinance, estate workers, domestic servants or journeymen artificers (skilled workers), who left work without a month's notice or reasonable cause, could be punished with imprisonment or a fine or both. The law, which had been mainly used to prosecute immigrant workers who 'bolted' from estates, had never been evoked against skilled urban workers. When the lower court acquitted William declaring that he was not a "journeyman artificer" under the Ordinance, the Times of Ceylon called for an appeal against 'this extraordinary ruling'. In appeal, Justice Lawrie of the Supreme Court reversed the decision; printers were declared to be journeymen artificers and William was imprisoned for a week.

## THE LAUNDRY WORKERS

The next group of workers to strike were the laundrymen of Colombo who stopped work for three weeks in 1896 in protest against the municipal licensing of their premises, which they feared would result in extortion and blackmail by minor officials. The laundrymen had some middle-class advisers (Rev. G. B. Ekanayake and Hector Van Cuylenberg); but it was the workers themselves who organised the strike, collected funds, held numerous meetings, distributed leaflets, dissuaded potential 'blacklegs' and achieved an almost complete solidarity among Colombo laundrymen. Their 'leaders' made many declarations in favour of direct action and



the Governor's laundryman was reported as saying that they were willing "to suffer anything rather than submit to the fearful cruelty and unmitigated tyranny of registration".

Though the strike failed in its objective, the manner in which it was carried out was an eye-opener for the authorities and the Times of Ceylon expressed concern that the 'bad example' of this strike would have "serious consequences for the community .... if other humble labourers combined to strike at most inconvenient times".

This strike too resulted in a criminal prosecution of a group of laundrymen for intimidation of a non-striker. The accused Haramanis and some of the militant workers from Polwatte were alleged to have assaulted a non-striker and to have thrown coloured water on his washing. Haramanis was fined Rs.25/ and given a month's rigorous imprisonment while the others were acquitted. The defence lawyer, Hector Van Cuylenberg, protested that the trial was a means by which the government was trying to punish the un-registered laundry workers.

## THE CARTERS

There were several sporadic strikes between 1896 and 1906 of butchers, harbour boatmen, printers and other workers, but the most spectacular was the strike of five thousand carters in 1906 against a municipal by-law prohibiting carters from sitting on



the cart or yoke while driving. The municipality alleged that the carters were careless and often fell asleep while driving, whereas the carters complained that the new law would entail walking long distances and would result in police extortion. The middle-class leader of the strike was John Kotelawala, himself a cart contractor who encouraged the carters to resist. The aggressiveness of the carters was noted by many observers and several government officials speculated that this working-class upsurge was partly inspired by the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 and the influence of Indian nationalism and British trade unionism. A newspaper compared the vociferous "ringleaders" to British union leaders, and referred to "the budding Keir Hardies and Will Crookes among the carters....who took upon themselves the responsibility of conducting the affair, and with a great assumption of superior knowledge were ready to advise and warn in emergencies".

The carters, assisted by other urban workers, challenged the authorities, prevented 'blacklegs' from working and fought the police. It was an occasion for the carters and urban workers to let off steam and defy the police. For example, two carters rode around the Town Hall, one sitting on the cart puffing a cigar and the other 'singing an indecent song'. There were also many incidents of 'mob' activity in the streets; the Pettah was reported to be under the domination of the crowd and the Maha Mudaliyar commented that "mobs collected and the strike

was attended by incidents of a very disgraceful type".

## THE RAILWAY WORKERS

Up to 1912 the record of the background and personalities of the early strikers remains rather blurred and impressionistic. We know that these strikers had to be courageous and daring, that they risked their jobs, faced monetary loss, defied the 'establishment' and even went to prison. We know also that these were skilled workers, as in the case of the printers, or 'independent' workers with group or caste loyalties like the laundry-men and carters; they were therefore more vociferous and truculent than the poorer sections of the working-class.

However, the first detailed information on any group of strikers was compiled after the railway strike of 1912, when grievances over fines and deductions from wages led to a stoppage of work which paralysed the entire railway system. A trade union formed after the strike, known as the Ceylon Workmen's Provident Association had several Buddhist temperance leaders (Charles Batuwantudawe, Arthur Dias and D.C.Senanayake) as office-bearers and the most prominent 'agitators' among the railway workers as committee members. These included four fitters, Marshall Wickremasinghe, H.Valentine Fernando, W.H.Blok and D.John Perera (known as Yakha John) three carpenters, W.Juanis Fernando, P.Pedru Perera and A.L.Pedru Appu (the latter two being head carpenters); a



pattern maker, J. Solomon Perera, and an overseer, Marthelis Perera.

Fortunately there is sufficient evidence available for some assessment to be made about these individual workers whose battle with the authorities began in 1912 with the Railway strike and was continued in 1915 during the Buddhist-Muslim riots. It is important to stress that in Colombo the rioting was due more to economic and political factors than to religious considerations. The sudden rise in prices at the beginning of the First World War caused discontent among the workers and in addition this was a period of a sharp increase in nationalist feeling.

The riots in Colombo in 1915 were led, not as commonly believed by criminals and 'rowdies' but by urban skilled workers, and in particular by the militant workers in the railway locomotive workshops. The government panicked at this 'dangerous' turn of events and not only picketed the railways with Punjabi troops, but also dismissed 140 railway workers and exiled 28 of them to Batticaloa.

During the railway strike of 1912, the police and the railway authorities, who had become keenly aware of the potential dangers of persistent and widespread unrest on the railways, began to keep a watch on the activities of the most militant railwaymen. When the 1915 riots began and spread to Colombo, the 'marked' men of the 1912 strike



were singled out for punishment which included dismissal, imprisonment exile and black-listing.

The 28 railway men who were exiled to Batticaloa were skilled workers, some of them the best mechanics and craftsmen in the department, earning the maximum salaries for their grades. They included fifteen fitters, two overseers, three boiler makers, two head carpenters, two carpenters, one pattern maker and one blacksmith. Nine of the exiled workers were committee members of the Workmens' Provident Association; six had been dismissed for assaulting Indians working on the railways; the majority had been active during the 1912 strike and five of them had given evidence of the railwaymen's grievances at the Railway Commission which was appointed after the strike. Speaking of these skilled workmen, the Inspector General of Police observed that it was unsafe during such "troublous times ... to grant bad characters and evilly disposed persons their liberty", and supported their exile on the grounds that they would then be unable to "influence loyal Railway hands".

## THE EXILED WORKERS

A study of the police dossiers on these workers and the evidence given by the workers before the Railway Commission of 1913 affords an impression of the more assertive of the exiled workers. The most active 'agitator' during these years was Marshall Wickremasinghe, known as Marshall Appuhamy, a fitter who worked on the railways from 1912 to 1915 earning

Rs. 1,37 a day. He lived on the premises of the Young Men's Buddhist Association and was described by the police as a 'creator of disturbances'. Though not much is known about his background, police records show that he was the leading working-class agitator of the period. In 1912 his name headed the signatures on a petition of railway workers' grievances; he also led the 1912 strike and was an active committee member of the Workmens' Provident Association. When the riots broke out in May 1915, Marshall Appuhamy was arrested as a dangerous trouble maker and jailed and exiled to Batticaloa.

Another activist John Solomon Perera, a Christian (aged 41 with 25 years service on the Railways in 1912), was a skilled pattern maker, producing wooden patterns for cast iron or brass casting. Like many of the skilled workers, he came from Moratuwa and belonged to a family of railway workers. His father had also been a pattern maker, his father's brother was a foreman in the carriage works and his grandfather had been a head carpenter. Perera who earned Rs. 3 a day, travelled to work daily from Moratuwa. He constantly complained to the authorities about working conditions and was a leading figure in the 1912 strike and union activity.

When the government set up a Railway Commission in 1913 to inquire into the workers' grievances, Perera gave detailed evidence and boldly reiterated his grievances on questions of wages, fines, conditions of work, favouritism and the employment of cheap Indian



labour. He spoke of the difficulties of the workers, "It is hard to make ends meet. There is a great difference between the cost of living now and the cost in former times. Some men's wages have been reduced and the price of the necessities of life has more than doubled". On the question of fines for absence from work Perera expressed the prevailing discontent, "If I am absent I am the loser. I lose Rs. 3 a day". Perera was also quite forthright about his role as spokesman for the other workers and said "I do not speak only for myself, I speak for the rest of the workmen". That Perera was a marked man from the 1912 strike onwards was evident during the sittings of the Railway Commission when H.G.Unsworth, the Locomotive Superintendent said "The man, Solomon Perera, is the man who is making all the trouble".

Another worker who attracted attention was K.L.George Silva, a Buddhist from Kelaniya who was described by the police as "an agitator of the worst type". In 1912 he was 28 years old and had served 14 years on the Railways. He was a fitter earning Rs. 1.25 a day and had been fined for idling and punished for assaulting Indian workers. He was a committee member of the Workmans' Provident Association and his manner of giving evidence before the Railway Commission had been fearless. He answered questions relating to the wages and hours of work of all classes of labour in the workshops, showing how closely in touch he was with skilled and unskilled labour; he gave a long list of the workers' grievances and referring by name to the locomotive superintendent said, "All these evils have



grown worse since Mr Unsworth was appointed".

On the question of fines, he complained about the foreman and expressed the prevailing resentment over the system of fining workers for absenteeism and other offences. "Sometimes we are fined without any reason, and it is simply marked 'fine'. Whenever we go to find out the reason we are driven off. Some workmen were fined for going to the office to inquire". George Silva described the hardship of railway workers: "Provisions are very dear now. We have to come a long way to our work. We cannot go to see our parents even once a year. We have no money to go".

Yet another committee member of the Provident Association who was exiled was Marthelis Perera, an overseer with 22 years service earning Rs. 4 a day, the maximum pay for his grade in 1912. The locomotive superintendent had praised Perera highly and described him as "the best man we have got .. he is what I call our model man .... a good timekeeper, and good at his work".

Some information is also available about P. Pedru Perera, a Christian who was 55 years old and had by 1912 served 36 years on the railway. He earned Rs. 3 a day as a head carpenter and often did special work such as making railway saloon cars for the Prince of Wales and Governor. Perera was a union committee member and gave evidence before the Railway Commission. He showed his discontent about not getting the maximum pay for his grade and protested about the low wages of other workers under him: "I speak

for them, and I say they are not sufficiently paid. All the best work is done by the men who work under me. If they are properly paid the work will be done much more quickly and more skilfully. There are many men working under me who have one meal a day. Their work suffers through their want of nourishment".

The manner in which these skilled workers were willing to publicly criticise their superiors during the Railway Commission was very striking. Pedru Perera was critical of J.H.Bird, the foreman of the saw mill, whose policy, he alleged, was to reduce rather than increase wages. "It is impossible to please him. . . . I was fined the other day by Mr. Bird. I was taken ill and did not go to work...and was fined for absenting myself". Bird, denied that Perera had been fined for absence, but made a revealing statement about his being fined for other offences. "I have had to find fault with him two or three times. Once for disobeying my orders.... I had given orders to make alterations, but this man was trying to work on the same lines as he had always done.

W.Juanis Fernando, a carpenter, was also a committee member of the railway workers union. A Christian aged 35, with 23 years service (in 1912) he could read and write English. Fernando claimed that he did the work of head carpenter and should have received Rs. 3.50 a day but only got the pay of an ordinary carpenter (Rs. 1.87). Of himself Fernando said "I am a good workman. I understand carriage building very well, and I understand appliances. I order all the materials



for carriages".

## THE EXILED WORKERS

These skilled workers - Marshall Appuhamy, Solomon Perera, George Silva, Marthelis Perera, Pedru Perera, Juanis Fernando and twenty two other railway workers spent six months in exile in Batticaloa. Their plight in Batticaloa and their subsequent hardships were described by Ponnambalam Arunachalam in a speech made in 1921:

In June, 1915, when the government had worked itself into a panic and was engaged in the blind administration of Martial Law, these men were suddenly arrested without charge or inquiry, deported to a remote province among the people with whose language and customs they were unfamiliar, and they were left to shift for themselves while their wives and children in Colombo were starving. At the end of that period they were brought back to Colombo and refused employment, and kept under Police supervision. In September 1916, they were given certificates of discharge by the Government Railway. I hold in my hand a copy of one of them, in which the man is stated to have been discharged on the 24th of June, 1915. He is stated to be a "very good fitter" with service of 13 years 3 months and 12 days (in some of these cases the service is 40 years), pay Rs.1.75 a day, "attendance: good." Cause of discharge: "services no longer required". The certificate concludes: "This workman should not be employed in Government service without reference to the Head of this Depart-



ment". This is the excellent example set by Government to employers in this country.

The victimisation of these workers did not end until twelve years after the riots of 1915. As a result of constant petitioning supported by the Ceylon Workers Federation and the Ceylon Labour Union, the bar on the re-employment of all except two of these workers was lifted by the government in 1925. Several of the others had died or were unfit for work by this date.

One civil servant compared the case of the exiled railway workers to that of the more influential persons detained during the riots who had subsequently been granted an amnesty. "The grounds on which they (the workers) were deported were the same grounds on which D.B.Jayatilleka, D.S.Senanayake and W.A. de Silva were imprisoned during the riots .... This is the only remaining grievance in connection with the riots and if there is no redress, the memory of the riots will be kept alive". However, the General Manager of the Railways refused to re-employ D.John Perera (Yakha John) because he was an active supporter of the labour leader of the twenties - A.E.Goonesinha. The bar on the re-employment of D.John Perera and George Silva was only lifted in 1927. In 1937 D.John Perera sent a petition to the Government asking that the railway workers' 6 months exile in Batticaloa and ten years bar on their employment be counted towards their pensions but this was refused.

## THE STRIKERS OF 1920

The severe penalties imposed on the militant railway workers after the 1915 riots caused a temporary set back in working-class agitation, and for five years there was no major labour disturbances in Colombo. But some of the political reformers of the time (P.Arunachalam, C.H.Z.Fernando and Martinus Perera) formed a Workers Welfare League in 1919 and the Ceylon Workers Federation in 1920.

A change came in 1920 when the post-war rise in the cost of living and sudden shortage of rice led to strikes in the railways and harbour. During the railway strike, the Ceylon Workers Federation intervened as conciliators but refused to assume leadership of the strike. As a result, some militant members of the working-class assumed a role of vital importance.

Again the most active leader during this railway strike was Marshall Appuhamy who had led the 1921 strike, and had been dismissed from the railway and exiled during the riots of 1915. Although Marshall Appuhamy was the 'outside' leader in 1920, a committee of railway workers was also formed which included William Singho, popularly known as 'Hamban' William, a carpenter, described by the police as "the ringleader of the railwaymen", Thomas, a boilermaker also called a "ringleader and spokesman" and Sam, whom the police alleged went forward as spokesman among the men and aired his views "on the



cost of living and the general condition of the railway workmen". On 'Hamban' William's initiative, this committee asked two lawyers (Clement de Jong and E.B.Weerakoon) to present the case of the strikers to the authorities.

In 1920, the Criminal Investigation Department reporting on 'Hamban' William said "He is a gentleman who will repay watching for the future and the Maradana police may be informed". The police were not wrong in recognising 'Hamban' William as a potential leader and by 1923 he had become the main working-class supporter of A.E.Goonesinha.

### THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1923

The dividing line between moderate and militant trade unionism came in September 1922 when A.E.Goonesinha, Victor Corea and a group of radical nationalists belonging to the Young Lanka League (which had led the anti-poll tax agitation and the opposition to the Prince of Wales' visit) formed the Ceylon Labour Union in order to give effective leadership to the urban workers, and combat what is called the 'slave mentality' of the Ceylon Workers Federation. Five months later a general strike involving almost all the working-class of Colombo, took place in February 1923. According to usually conservative police estimates this spectacular event involved over 20,000 Sinhalese, Tamil and Malayalee workers from the railways, Port, Government Factory, municipality, engineering firms, export and import companies, hotels,

bakeries, textile and oil mills.

As in previous strikes and unrest in Colombo in 1912, 1915 and 1920, the agitation of 1923 began at the railway locomotive workshops on an issue of wages and fines. After the strike had begun, the workers invited A.E.Goonesinha to lead them, and during this strike Goonesinha emerged as the first full time middle-class leader of the urban proletariat. A radical in politics, A.E.Goonesinha's bold, assertive personality and his willingness to challenge the employers and the government in a determined way, made him a popular hero almost overnight; "I would rather be marched to jail than come back to work under the present circumstances" he declared when the railway workers began their strike in 1923. This was the kind of militant leadership the urban workers had been waiting for and the response was immediate; the urban workers had found their leader and he was to dominate trade union activity until the economic depression of the early 'thirties'.

### THE WORKERS WHO SUPPORTED THE CEYLON LABOUR UNION

Not unexpectedly, the victimised workers of the earlier strikes, provided the main support for Goonesinha. Of these the best known was Marshall Appuhamy who became the first secretary of the Ceylon Labour Union. D.John Perera (known as Yakha John) who had been in the 1912 strike and had been exiled in 1915, also supported A.E.Goonesinha,



along with Podisingho of the Government Factory and Kandasamy and Kuttan of the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills. But the worker whom the police closely watched and described as Goonesinha's "right hand man" was 'Hamban' William who had led the earlier railway strike in 1920. In a confidential report to the Colonial Secretary the Inspector-General of Police wrote:

The Railway authorities inform me that the names of those no longer required for service will be posted up, including Hamban William, Goonesinha's right hand man in the Railway Workshops. He may give trouble. I have instructed the C.I.D. to prepare a statement of his record. It amply justifies his discharge from government service. He has been convicted twice, for running a gambling place and murder by shooting a man in the back because he petitioned against him. He was let off in the Supreme Court.

'Hamban' William, who was reputed for toughness was clearly a forceful personality who made his presence felt during the general strike of 1923. He spoke at most of the meetings of strikers, organised processions and demonstrations in Colombo and was active in urging other groups of workers to strike. At the beginning of the general strike, he described the hardships that would result and said he was prepared to eat grass in order to continue the strike, adding that

the humblest scavenging workers and even the birds would be going on strike. William alleged that he had been offered a bribe to take the workers away from Goonesinha, but said he would rather shoot himself than betray the workers. He also announced that though he had been dismissed from the railways, he himself would "never go and work under the whites". William on many occasions during the strike thanked Goonesinha, proclaimed his loyalty to him and urged the Colombo workers to join the Ceylon Labour Union.

It is also of interest that some of the workers involved in the 1923 labour upsurge had been abroad as soldiers during the First World War. For example the police noted that one of Goonesinha's supporters was a seaman named R.B. Albert Silva who had not only served in the War but had also been active in a strike in Britain. The chairman of the Port Commission also commented on this in a letter to the Colonial Secretary on the 1923 strike:

"The strike seems to have been entirely due to the influence of an agitator and some of the bad characters in the department, some of whom were men who had been employed on various fronts during the war and had therefore assimilated advanced notions".

## MASS MEETINGS

The period 1893-1923 also marks the beginning



of mass group activity by the urban proletariat. During the Buddhist revival, Bhikku Gunananda, Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala had used the mass meeting as a means of demonstrating popular feeling on religious issues, and at the turn of the century, the urban and rural masses were drawn into mammoth temperance meetings and demonstrations which had a distinct political content.

However, the first organised meeting of workers was held during the printers strike in 1893, at which a Printers Union was formed. The crowd estimated at four to five hundred printers and other urban workers, was watched over by five police inspectors and twenty constables. Dr. Lisboa Pinto, A.E. Buultjens, Martinus Perera and H.J.C. Pereira addressed the meeting. A contemporary description of this meeting said "The idea was certainly novel, startling, and to some, it almost seemed daring, for it was the first occasion in the history of this island that the labourers were going to stand up for their rights.

There were also numerous meetings of the working-class during the strikes of laundrymen, carters and railway workers in Colombo. At the time of the 1912 strike, there was a new spirit of assertiveness among the railway workers. One newspaper spoke of the 'jaunty spirit' of the strikers and added that after a mass meeting of workers, a Sinhalese song was sung in chorus and a 'holiday feeling' prevailed. The most important meeting held during the 1912 railway

strike was at the grounds of the Vidyodaya Pirivena, Maligakande, where the strikers were addressed, among others, by Walisinha Harischandra and Anagarika Dharmapala. A large crowd of enthusiastic workers participated at this meeting and cheered Dharmapala when he described strikes as "unmistakable proof of the national spirit among the Sinhalese".

But it was not until the 1923 general strike that the systematic use of mass meetings, processions, demonstrations, picketing, street corner and factory meetings was widely popularised by A.E. Goonesinha and the Ceylon Labour Union.

Among the several factors which emerge from this brief survey of working-class activity during the early phase of the labour movement is the assertiveness of the skilled, better-paid workers over the unskilled lesser-paid group. Second is the willingness of a section of working-class to assume leadership of the organised workers and direct operations during strikes. The third factor is the defiance of authority among these 'ringleaders', which, in a period before an organised labour movement inevitably resulted in victimisation and personal hardship. It is understandable that the technically superior workers would be more conscious of their grievances and therefore more articulate. But the militancy of these workers in encouraging and leading strikes, thereby challenging the police, the government and the employers in an unequal struggle



without the benefit of recognised, full-time, middle class trade union leaders, affords us another example of the radical potential of urban workers even in the early stages of capitalist development. The names of William of Caves, Haramanis the laundryman and the railway workers - Marshall Appuhamy, Solomon Perera, George Silva, 'Yakka' John, and 'Hamban' William and factory workers - Kandasamy and Kuttan and many others deserve an important place in Sri Lanka's social and political history, for they were the pioneers of labour agitation and the trade union movement.

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The material for this article has been obtained from the Report of the Railway Commission (Sessional Paper I of 1913), from police reports at the Ceylon Government Archives, contemporary newspaper reports and Speeches and writings of Sir. P.Arunachalam. (London 1928). This material was subsequently published in Kumari Jayawardena's 'The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon' (Duke University Press, Durham N.C. 1972)

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**SANJIVA BOOKS**  
(Publishers in English, Sinhala and Tamil)

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- The Rise of the Labour Movement in Sri Lanka  
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Designed by Wheel Graphics  
Printed at the Centre for Society & Religion,  
281, Deans Road, Colombo 10 - SRI LANKA.