



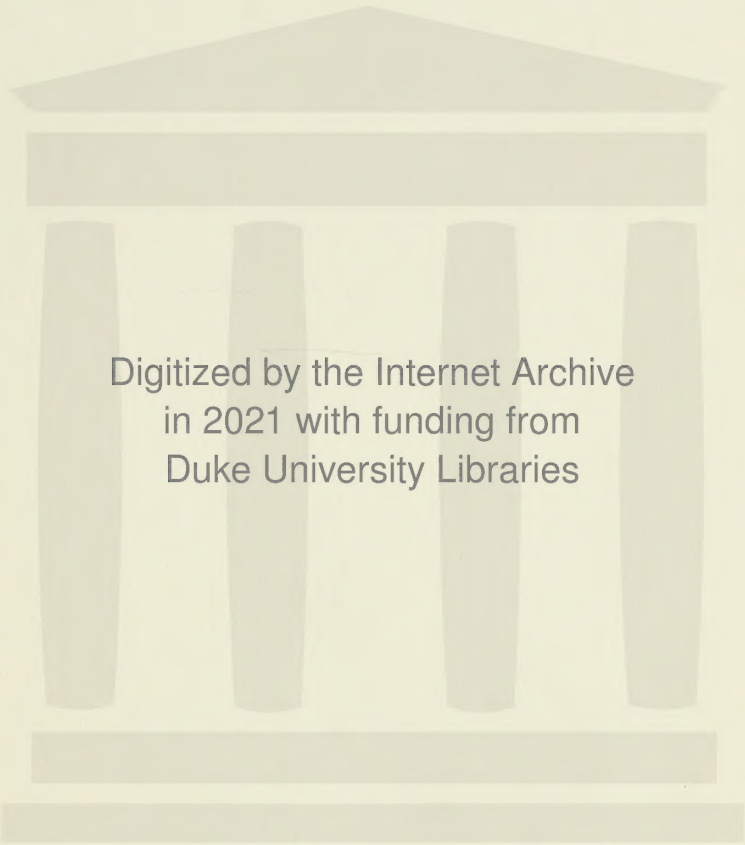
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The Rise of the Labor Movement  
in Ceylon

*To the memory of my father, and to my mother*

# The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon

Visakha Kumari Jayawardena

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## *Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to relate the origin and evolution of the labor movement in Ceylon to changes in the economic and social structure, and to link it with political and religious developments of the period. The basis for the rise of the labor movement was the radical economic change from an agricultural subsistence economy to a plantation market economy—a transformation that led to important social changes. In the preplantation phase, the three main classes in Ceylonese society were the landowners, the peasantry and the administrators, but with the beginnings of capitalist development, new social classes emerged. In the plantation sector there arose a work force of immigrants from South India and an entrepreneur class of British planters. Another result of economic change was the emergence of a Ceylonese middle class whose economic base lay mainly in certain agricultural export crops. In the urban sector, the growth of transport, engineering workshops, and industries geared to the economic needs of the plantations gave rise to a capitalist and managerial class, a group of white-collar workers, and an urban working class of skilled and unskilled workers.

Although the economic center of gravity lay in the plantations, it was the urban sector that was crucial for the development of the labor movement. In the late 19th century there was a nucleus of wage labor in the city of Colombo, but on the plantations the system was one of semiwage labor, with only part of the wages being paid in cash and certain feudal ties being maintained between the workers on the one hand, and the recruiters and planters on the other. The lack of education and political awareness of the immigrant workers, their isolation from the rest of society, the rigid disciplinary controls on plantations, and the migratory, fluid nature of the labor force were contributory factors which delayed the rise of a plantation labor movement. The first signs of labor restiveness appeared among the urban working class, which included literate and militant groups of workers such as

printers, railway and port workers, laundrymen, and carters, who led the agitation against oppressive conditions. Even while urban industrial development was in its infancy, the small group of skilled workers who were concentrated in Colombo had a political and economic importance far out of proportion to their numbers, and they found allies among a section of the politicized middle class. Since the urban workers constituted wage labor in a capitalist sense and were free of feudal bonds and obligations, they were in a position to spearhead agitation against the administration and the employers.

The basic question to be considered here is, how did a labor movement arise in a colonial economy, where the working class formed an underprivileged, exploited segment of colonial society? Economically, the workers lived on subsistence wages, and though no legal restrictions were placed on the formation of trade unions, the resort to strikes was a criminal offense under the Labour Ordinance of 1865, which was not repealed until 1922. Strikes during this early phase were acts of courage and defiance, exposing workers either to the risk of instant dismissal, or sometimes to prosecution for breach of contract. Politically, the workers were debarred from the franchise by property and literacy qualifications, and they had no ready means of influencing either the government or any of the institutions which formed public opinion. The workers were also separated from the foreign rulers, from the employers, and from the indigenous middle class by economic and social barriers.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Ceylon was outwardly the model of a tranquil colony. There had been no warfare between contending European powers in Ceylon since 1796, and no local uprisings since 1848. "Pax Britannica" prevailed and, in contrast to India, there were no nationalist organizations to challenge British rule. The Governors who acclaimed the peaceful progress of 19th century Ceylon regarded the peasantry and the urban and plantation working class as silent spectators who showed no signs of dissatisfaction. But this calm was only apparent, and by the last decade of the 19th century, religious agitation and faint undercurrents of nationalism and labor unrest were beginning to appear. The predominant feature of the urban labor movement during the early years was its close connection with religion and politics. In

colonial conditions, even where the economic preconditions for the rise of a labor movement exist (that is, wage labor on a significant scale working under factory conditions), effective organization of the working class is spurred on by a favorable political climate and a leadership which inevitably comes from the politically conscious elements of the local middle class.

In many colonies, the most important influence on the growth of a labor movement has been nationalist opposition to foreign rule. But where there are serious restrictions to direct political action, nationalism has often been expressed through religious and cultural revival. The Buddhist revival, along with the Hindu and Muslim resurgence that occurred in 19th century Ceylon, followed a pattern characteristic of many African and Asian countries under colonial domination, where reaction to alien rule took the form of resistance to Christianity, a revival of traditional religious beliefs, and the growth of cults and messianic movements. A recent analysis of religious manifestations among dependent peoples has shown that "the birth of cults of liberation deriving from a colonial status provide one of the most startling demonstrations of the close tie between religious life and secular, political and cultural life."<sup>1</sup> The emergence within the Ceylon middle class of a group of Buddhist and Hindu intellectuals who had economic status but were denied any form of political participation was the key impetus to the religious and educational revival. However, the impact of this movement was not confined to the urban intelligentsia, but spread to the rural middle class and to the urban workers.

The Buddhist and Hindu revival movements were more than purely religious crusades directed against Christianity. They were a method by which the newly emergent middle class could challenge British rule without running the risk of sedition—for Christianity was one of the weak links of the colonial hierarchy and was therefore a vantage point for attack. The anti-Christian campaign, which was used at the outset to challenge the social values of the foreign Christian rulers, became a challenge to the whole system of colonial rule as well. It also served as a repudiation of a cultural transformation that may be described as "Christianization," which was not a purely religious phenomenon linked with proselytization

1. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*, p. vi.

and missionary education, but reflected the social behavior pattern and style of life of the Ceylonese middle class. But it must be noted that the strongest social critics of Christianization were people who were essentially "Western" in outlook and were themselves influenced by what were termed "modern," "advanced," and "rational" views. In fact, several Western movements influenced the indigenous religious renaissance and early nationalism. These were the anti-Christian propaganda of European freethinkers and Theosophists (both movements with political overtones), 19th century liberalism associated with various British reform movements, and radicalism as expressed through the British Labour Party and Socialist organizations. The joint influence of the religious revival and Western radical thought was most effective in the schools started in Ceylon by the Theosophists, which provided an alternative to the Christian-biased education imparted in missionary schools. Several generations of nationalist and labor leaders were teachers or pupils of the Buddhist Theosophical Society's schools, where nationalism and radical political ideas figured prominently enough to attract the hostile attention of the police to the Buddhist education movement.

At a time when the workers did not produce leaders from their own ranks and when the colonial government was hostile to trade-union agitation, the leadership of the labor movement was provided by a few members of the middle class who had a background of religious and political protest. A discussion of the leadership of the religious, political and labor movements in Ceylon has necessitated a closer examination of the role of what is broadly termed the middle class of landowners, capitalists and professionals. First, a distinction has been made between the ruling class, which in the 19th century was narrowly confined to senior British officials, and the indigenous middle class, which included the "traditional" and "modern" strata of the local society. Whereas the traditional group, composed of persons with economic power and high status in the agricultural economy, had its roots in the religion and culture of the country, the modern group of capitalists and urban professionals was Christianized, educated in English, and oriented towards Western models of thought and behavior.

The labor leaders of the early years of the movement came from



a segment of this modern strata. This group will be referred to as the "radicals" to distinguish them from the "conservatives" and "moderates" who formed the majority of the modern group. The conservatives were the openly pro-British section of the middle class who had no political ambitions to challenge British rule. The moderates were the forward-looking elements of this class, the land-owners and entrepreneurs who desired to reinvest their surplus rather than use it exclusively for consumption purposes. They were wealthy and educated but lacked political power; hence the movement for self-government, social reforms, racial equality and other democratic rights was led by the moderates. The radicals, who were mainly from the professions, included doctors, lawyers, teachers, and journalists who had received a "liberal" education and had absorbed new ideas from the West. While supporting the moderates, they were more extreme in their demands. The radicals used their links with Europe to introduce trade unionism into the country; they also led the campaign against Christian influences and stressed the importance of indigenous religions, languages and culture. Paradoxically, they were ahead of their time in rejecting what Annie Besant called "the glitter and glamour of Western civilisation," and in identifying themselves with the religion and culture of the majority of the population. This point should be emphasized, as it forms the background to trade-union agitation in its various phases. Under colonial conditions, emphasis on race and religion in certain circumstances served as a weapon against foreign rule, but at other times—especially during periods of economic tension—it could take on a harmful, chauvinist complexion.

There was division between the moderates and the radicals on questions regarding nationalist politics and labor agitation. The moderates, who advocated gradual political change through constitutional methods of agitation, dominated the Ceylon National Congress. In contrast to India, the Ceylonese nationalist movement did not have a popular base, and direct methods of action and weapons such as noncooperation and passive resistance were never used. The constitutional reforms that were granted to Ceylon in 1912, 1920, 1923, and 1931, provided for increasing degrees of self-government, and these changes were made without violent upheavals or mass agitation. In contrast, the radicals, influenced by

Indian nationalism, advocated the use of more direct methods of action against the British and formed a small but vociferous pressure group within the Congress. Although their political line met with no success, the leadership of the militant labor movement came from the radical political leaders who were conducting a campaign against both British rule and the cautious policy of the Ceylonese moderate politicians. The moderates also made efforts to give leadership to the workers, but were never able to capture the support of the working class, who at every stage preferred militant leaders.

The reasons for the weakness of the nationalist movement and its "reformist" character are probably accounted for by the lack of serious conflict between the various powerful economic groups such as the traditional landowners, the British planters, the Ceylonese planters, and property owners. Their economic "spheres of influence" were clearly demarcated and there was little encroachment. The agricultural economy had not been disrupted by the plantation sector to the point where it created a class of Ceylonese landowners hostile to British rule. Moreover, the interests of the British planter "raj" were not at variance with the Ceylonese planters who had a monopoly of coconut production. Unlike the Indian situation, there was no class of local industrialists who were in competition with the British. There was a relatively harmonious pattern of relationships between the groups which held economic power which left no scope for a nationalist movement based on the economic discontent and aspirations of the local middle class.

Although religious awakening, political agitation, and trade unionism can be viewed as three independent movements, each with its own attributes, the dividing line between religion and politics was blurred, and labor agitation was often linked with both political demands and religious protest. There were several areas of overlap. In 19th century Ceylon, religious revival was a movement with important political and social implications, and before there was any organized nationalist activity, religious agitation had become a means of expressing political discontent. The temperance movement, for example, used religion as a convenient facade to disguise political activity, and even rioting and disturbances which were ostensibly religious had strong political motives.

Moreover, the religious revival spurred on demands for political and economic reforms, and nationalists began to show concern about economic issues. The activities of the middle class clearly demonstrated this interconnection—the same people often dominating more than one of these three movements. In the early years of the labor movement (1893–1915), the leadership of the urban working class came from Buddhist Theosophists, temperance and social workers, and political reformers. From 1915 onwards politics predominated, and in the 1920's the urban labor movement was controlled by the most radical political figure of the decade, A. E. Goonesinha, who was also active in Buddhist causes. He not only conducted an aggressive campaign on behalf of the urban workers but at the same time was a nationalist who challenged British rule and denounced the Ceylonese moderates. Under his leadership labor branched out as an independent political force. The leader of the Indian plantation workers in Ceylon during this period, K. Natesa Aiyar, was also primarily a nationalist and a strong antagonist of British imperialism.

This study deals with the years between 1880 to 1933—a period of important economic, political, and social change. Labor, which in the 19th century was unorganized and economically and legally in a disadvantageous position to bargain with employers, was able to seriously threaten the commercial life of the capital during the general strike of 1923, the militant strikes of 1927 and 1928, and the violent tramway strike of 1929. The urban workers, whose first hesitant attempt at trade-union activity in 1893 was branded as sedition, had by 1928 signed a collective agreement with the most powerful group of urban employers in the private sector. From being politically inarticulate and unrepresented in the legislature in the 1890's, the urban working class began to be politically vociferous in the 1920's, obtained universal suffrage by the reforms of 1931, and transferred their hopes to the political leadership of the Ceylon Labour Party, formed in 1928.

The period under consideration has been divided into two phases. The earlier extends up to 1915, a period during which capitalist methods of production took root in the urban sector and wage labor began to assert itself. The second phase of the labor movement, from 1915 to the early thirties, was a period of great

trade-union upsurge marked by fluctuating economic conditions and important political changes. During these years the urban working class, led by a section of the middle class, was able to obtain certain important concessions and extend its support for the movement for political and democratic rights of the middle class. On the plantations, the slow emergence of the work force from its semiserf status, along with the general economic, social and political advances, enabled these workers to unionize under middle-class leadership in 1931. The years around 1930 were an important turning point for labor. The economic depression had set in and the strong labor movement of the 1920's collapsed. In addition, the Donoughmore reforms were implemented and a State Council was elected under universal suffrage in 1931, a political event which marked a significant breakthrough by the Ceylonese middle class into parliamentary politics. The early thirties also form a turning point in the sphere of the labor movement, for between 1931 and 1933 a new group of Marxist political leaders appeared on the scene to challenge the labor organizations of the 1920's and to take over the leadership of urban labor.

The formative years of the political and trade-union movements have influenced the pattern of events of later years, and a study of the early period may therefore aid in understanding the more recent history of Ceylon.

Part I

Labor, Religion, and Incipient Nationalism,  
1880-1915



## Chapter 1

# The Rise of the Labor Movement: The Economic Background

*Ceylon cannot be expected to be untouched by the wave of discontent among the proletariat of the world, especially when local reasons were not wanting—the dissatisfaction of the workmen with their wages, the unsympathetic treatment, and the cumulative influence of many little grievances which must exist where large masses of men are employed.*<sup>1</sup>

Ponnambalam Arunachalam, 1913

A labor movement, as distinct from peasant uprisings, riots and other spontaneous forms of protest, arises with the growth of capitalism and wage-labor relationships. In 19th century Ceylon, the implantation of capitalist forms of production on the traditional economic base of rice cultivation led to major changes in the class structure of the country. The growth of the plantation and urban sector gave rise to an upper and middle class of British and Ceylonese planters, entrepreneurs, and professional men; it also led to an expansion in the lower middle class of white-collar workers in government offices and mercantile firms. The two important changes in the composition of the work force were the emergence of a plantation working class of Indian immigrants, and an urban proletariat of skilled and unskilled workers. This chapter will be concerned with the growth of urban wage labor and plantation semiwage labor, the economic conditions of these workers, the methods used to express grievances, and the legal obstacles and other limitations faced by the unorganized workers in a pre-trade-union period.

During the early decades of British rule, government revenue

1. Railway Commission, rider of P. Arunachalam, *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*, p. xiv.

was derived mainly from the grain tax, the cinnamon and salt monopolies, and the pearl fisheries. But a radical change took place in the 1830's with the introduction of extensive coffee cultivation. In the 1880's a disastrous coffee blight forced planters to turn to tea planting, and in later years, rubber and coconut cultivation also provided important export products. The rapid expansion in the economy between 1885 and 1915 is reflected in the value of the total exports of the country which rose from about Rs.34 million in 1885 to Rs.266 million in 1915 (£1. was equal to Rs.13.). Ceylon acquired a typical colonial export economy supplying the world market with a few primary products and importing consumer goods.<sup>2</sup>

The total population of Ceylon in 1911 was 4.1 million, which included 2.7 million Sinhalese, .5 million Ceylon Tamils, .5 million Indian Tamils, .25 million Muslims (known as "Moors"), 27,000 Burghers and Eurasians (persons of Dutch, Portuguese or British descent), 13,000 Malays, and 7,600 Europeans. Of the working population, which in 1911 was 1.7 million, or 41 percent of the total population, over a million workers were described in the Census Report as nonagricultural wage earners. This high proportion is accounted for by the plantation population of 400,000 immigrants. The rest included 191,000 "industrial workers," defined to include small craftsmen, workers in cottage industries and service industries; 136,000 traders; 105,000 "general laborers"; 67,000 domestic servants; 37,000 government servants; and 53,000 workers in transport. However, for the purpose of this study three categories of the working population will be considered: the urban skilled and unskilled workers, including those persons working in certain independent trades; the clerical workers in government and mercantile employment; and the immigrant workers on the plantations.

### The Urban Proletariat

The economic changes of the 19th century created activity ancillary to plantations, which included urban economic develop-

2. Of the main export products, the value of tea, which was about Rs.3 million in 1885, reached the figure of Rs.122 million in 1915; the value of rubber exports in-



ment and the growth of transport facilities linking the plantation areas to Colombo. Whereas the total population of Ceylon between 1901 and 1911 had increased by 15 percent (from 3.5 to 4 million), the population of Colombo rose from 154,000 in 1901, to 200,000 in 1911, an increase of 30 percent which was described as one of the "most remarkable features of the [1911] census."<sup>3</sup> The urban economy was essentially a colonial one, with agency houses, commercial banks, insurance firms, transport agencies, and all the concomitants of the export-import trade; in addition there were factories which processed and packed the plantation produce, engineering workshops, retail shops, service industries, and certain light industries. There were also a few industrial workshops geared to the maintenance of transport and repair of machinery to serve the plantation sector.

An important aspect of these early capitalist developments was the emergence of new class relations. On the one hand there was an employer class of entrepreneurs and heads of government departments, and on the other hand there was wage labor, working under factory conditions and subject to the discipline and regulations of factory life. The working population of Colombo, which consisted in 1911 of about 75,000 persons, or 4.4 percent of the total working population, was composed of 19,000 "general laborers," 17,000 "industrial workers" (craftsmen and mechanics), 17,000 small traders, 17,000 domestic servants, and 5,000 public servants.<sup>4</sup> Among the urban proletariat there were no racially exclusive occupations, but the Sinhalese workers monopolized the skilled better-paid jobs whereas the immigrant Indian workers formed the bulk of the unskilled labor force. Though the Sinhalese urban workers were predominantly Buddhist and the immigrant workers were Hindu, there was a small minority of Sinhalese Christians, especially among the skilled craftsmen of the coastal areas.

The broad division in the urban labor force was between skilled and unskilled labor. By the early 20th century there was a nucleus

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creased spectacularly from a mere Rs.1,000. in 1895 to Rs.83 million in 1915; the value of coconut exports, which was Rs.5 million in 1885, reached Rs.41 million in 1915. H. A. de S. Gunasekera, *From Dependent Currency to Central Banking in Ceylon*, p. 95.

3. E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911*, p. 125.

4. "Occupational Statistics," in *Census of Ceylon, 1911*.

of skilled labor in Colombo whose ability to cope with heavy machinery was commented upon in 1903:

Both Sinhalese and Tamils are good artisans, witness the role of workmen in the government Public Works and Railway Factories of Colombo and the Colombo Iron Works, where ocean-going steamers are repaired, as well as a great variety of machinery is turned out, such as steam engines, water motors and tea, coffee and oil preparing machines.<sup>5</sup>

It was the rapid expansion of transport, which included road, railway and port facilities, that led to the creation of a class of skilled mechanics. The most important development in transport was the construction of railways, the first being the Colombo-Kandy line completed in 1865. Soon after, the key plantation regions were linked by rail to the commercial port of Colombo, and by 1911 there were 700 miles of railways in the island. From the point of view of the labor movement, the importance of railway building lay in the establishment of workshops with modern equipment and the employment of skilled industrial labor at a single place of work which made it physically possible for workers to combine and agitate. There was a quick growth in the railway labor force between 1901 and 1911, the number of workers rising from 5,800 to 9,500, representing an increase of 64 percent. In 1911, the nine railway locomotive workshops had 2,800 workers (mechanics, blacksmiths, carpenters, fitters, and boilermakers) employed in assembling engines, building carriages and doing heavy repairs. The Way and Works Department of the Railway, which was responsible for civil engineering, including the maintenance of railway tracks, bridges, and railway buildings, had 4,300 workers; and the Traffic Department employed 2,000 workers in 1911.<sup>6</sup>

Road-making and port construction were also important by-products of the plantation economy. In 1912 there were nearly 4,000 miles of roads connecting the important commercial regions of Ceylon to the capital, and for the construction, maintenance and repair of roads the Public Works Department had a labor force composed of 21,000 skilled and unskilled workers.<sup>7</sup> With the

5. J. Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1903*, p. 58.

6. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 476. For an account of the growth of railways, see G. F. Perera, *The Ceylon Railways*.

7. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 476.

growth in exports and imports and the resulting need for shipping facilities, large extensions of the port were also carried out, including breakwaters completed in 1878 and 1906. A graving dock for the cleaning and repairing of ships, which was built in 1906, employed skilled labor, and the Colombo Ironworks (located in the harbor), which coped with disabled steamers and did salvaging and heavy repairs to plantation machinery, employed 1,000 local workmen supervised by 30 British engineers.<sup>8</sup> Skilled workers were also employed in several British-owned engineering firms, including Colombo Commercial Company and the Eastern Produce Company. In addition, the skilled labor force was composed of craftsmen and workers employed in enterprises in the city, such as retail shops, printing presses, small factories, tramways, textile mills, and other workshops. For example, in Colombo in 1911 there were 2,800 carpenters, 2,300 blacksmiths, 1,800 masons, 1,600 salesmen, 950 compositors and bookbinders, 648 goldsmiths, and 180 tramway workers. Certain innovations after the turn of the century gave rise to new occupations such as chauffeurs, car and bicycle mechanics, electricians, waterworks and drainage workers. The skilled urban workers, being more technically competent and better educated than the rest of the working population, were persistent in demanding the redress of their grievances and were the earliest group of workers in Ceylon to form trade unions and go on strike.

The urban labor force also included the unskilled workers—many of them Indian immigrants—employed in the Harbour, Railways, Public Works Department, Municipality and in other government and private enterprises. They were poorer and less educated than the skilled craftsmen and did not readily resort to strikes in the early years of the labor movement. In Colombo there were also several groups of independent workers, among them (in 1911) 17,000 domestic servants, 3,600 rickshaw pullers, 2,300 carters, 1,450 tailors, 1,320 laundrymen, 492 barbers, 320 bakers, 269 shoemakers, and 235 butchers. Of these, the carters played a vital role in the economy, for in the days before the widespread use of the motor lorry, road transport of goods was done by bullock carts. In the early years of the labor movement there were several

8. Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1903*, p. cxxvi.

strikes among carters, butchers, laundrymen, and other independent workers, mainly in protest against local government regulations which had placed some restrictions on the free exercise of these occupations.

The urban working class at the turn of the century, unrepresented either in the legislature or by any trade-union organization and unprotected by legislation, was at the mercy of the employers' whims and the "inexorable" economic laws of supply and demand. The development of urban industries had occurred in a haphazard way, without government restrictions or controls, and this laissez-faire policy was also applied to the urban workers in respect of wages, working hours and conditions of work. Between 1880 and 1915—the heyday of imperial rule—the tag about the Empire being one over which the sun never set and wages never rose was broadly true. During these years, employers were generally unrelenting on the question of wages, and every excuse was found to keep wages stationary, even during periods of rising living costs. Although no detailed cost-of-living surveys are available, some indication of the rise in prices of the principal necessities of life can be seen from reports made in 1904 and 1911. For example, the price of bread rose by 100 percent (6 to 12 cents) between 1894 and 1904, and a survey made in 1911 revealed that rice, bread, and sugar showed a 9 to 17 percent rise, and fish, vegetables, coconuts, and curry stuffs a 50 to 100 percent rise in price between 1906 and 1911.<sup>9</sup>

In Colombo, the rates of pay varied considerably between the government and private sectors and between skilled and unskilled workers. One of the pioneers of trade unionism in Ceylon, Dr. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, referred in 1893 to the distress among urban workers "at our various offices, factories and shops . . . [who earn] miserable salaries which barely reach an average of Rs.20. a month."<sup>10</sup> Of the skilled workers, the compositors at the Government Printing Press earned an average of Rs.30. a month in 1893, but Dr. Lisboa Pinto charged that their counterparts in a private press in Colombo only earned an average of Rs.11.50 a month.<sup>11</sup> Evidence of stagnation and even a decline of money wages among skilled workers can

9. See *Sessional Paper 51 of 1905*, p. 17. Also, Public Record Office, London (PRO), Despatch 433, 12 July 1911, C.O.54/744.

10. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, "Ceylon Workmen's Unions," *Ceylon Review*, Oct. 1893.

11. *Ceylon Blue Book 1893*; Lisboa Pinto, *ibid.*

be seen from the wage rates in the railway workshops. Between 1882 and 1912 the average wage for fitters declined from Rs.1.57 to Rs.1.30 a day and the carpenters' average wage fell from Rs.1.17 to Rs.1.05 a day.<sup>12</sup> The daily-paid workers had a five-and-a-half-day week and were only paid for the days on which they worked. If a worker took casual leave or sick leave this meant a loss in wages. The fall in money wages and the rapid rise in the cost of living during the first decade of the century meant a decline in real wages, which in turn led to a great amount of discontent and agitation among skilled workers in Colombo and culminated in a railway strike in 1912.

During this period, however, the position of the unskilled labor force improved. Whereas unskilled workers on the railways received between 16 and 50 cents a day in 1897, the rates had risen to 42 to 75 cents a day in 1912.<sup>13</sup> The reason for this was the prevalent shortage of unskilled labor. When the wages of daily-paid labor were considered by the Salaries Commissioners in 1912, skilled daily-paid workers were refused increases in pay, but an exception was made for unskilled workers, not because of the rise in cost of living, but on the ground that the "fundamental economic law of supply and demand" made it impossible to "get good coolies at 50 cents."<sup>14</sup> Of the urban workers, the lowest paid were women and children who were employed in unskilled work and received lower wages than the men. In 1908, nearly 4,000 women and girls who were employed by the Public Works Department for metal breaking and road work received between 12 and 36 cents a day.<sup>15</sup> The wages of workers in independent trades also varied. In 1898 carters were paid around 85 cents for a load, and even by 1906 carters complained that they only earned Rs.12. to Rs.15. a month.<sup>16</sup> Another large group of independent workers were the domestic servants, who numbered 67,000 in 1911. This class of worker, usually

12. *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*, appendix C, p. 146.

13. Ceylon National Archives (CNA), Labour Advisory Committee, Statement (showing rates of pay of artisans), 1897, File R.O.PF.2899C. *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*, appendix B, p. 146.

14. General Manager of Railways, letter, in "Report of the Committee . . . prospects of the Public Service," *Sessional Paper 25 of 1912*.

15. PRO, Director of Public Works to Colonial Secretary, letter 25 June 1908, C.O.54/718.

16. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 25 Jan. 1898; *Ceylon Independent*, 14 Aug. 1906.

the lowest paid drudges of society, made relative progress during these years. Whereas the 19th century servant in a Ceylonese household was often a near-slave who in return for his work received food, clothing, and an occasional present, by 1906 it was estimated that clerks had to pay Rs.3. a month for a cook, a boy, or an ayah (with food), the rates rising to about Rs.5. each in 1911. The servants working for British or wealthy Ceylonese received considerably higher rates.<sup>17</sup>

The classic study of poverty that Seebohm Rowntree carried out in 1899 in the city of York, Great Britain, revealed that more than 40 percent of the wage earners and their families in that city were living in poverty. Rowntree defined poverty as the inability to buy "the minimum of food, clothing and shelter needful for the maintenance of merely physical health."<sup>18</sup> A similar estimate of the proportion of the Ceylon working class living under subsistence levels cannot be given in the absence of a detailed study of the extent and nature of poverty among urban workers in the early years of this century, but a rough description can be attempted. For example the Railway Commission of 1913—to which many workers gave evidence of their grievances—provides a vivid picture of the poverty and hardship even among the better-paid skilled workers. The evidence before the commission revealed that many workers who were over fifty years of age, with thirty-five years service on the railways, were drawing the same salaries they had started on—usually around one rupee a day. Even when increases were given, the pernicious practice existed whereby fines were imposed or wage levels reduced for offenses such as absence, loitering, or "impertinence." Workers who were absent through illness got no relief and indebtedness was rampant. Treatment at the place of work was uniformly harsh: the railway workers complained of the general unsympathetic attitude of the railway authorities towards the employees, and protested that they were subject to punishments such as fines and were often the victims of assaults by foremen and engine drivers. There was no workers' compensation

17. PRO, Despatch 433, C.O.54/744. In 1911, servants of British residents received about Rs.25 a month, probably without food but with "rations" of tea, sugar, and bread.

18. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*.

scheme, and those who sustained injuries during the course of work were given neither compensation nor sick pay.<sup>19</sup> Hours of work of urban workers tended to vary between government and private firms. In government undertakings such as the Railways, Harbour Works, and the Government Factory, workers had a nine- or ten-hour day, whereas in private firms longer hours prevailed and the twelve-hour working day was not uncommon.

With the growth of industries and the increase of opportunities for urban employment, working-class housing became a necessity, but neither the government nor the employers regarded this as their concern and pockets of tenements and slums sprang up haphazardly in the industrial districts of Colombo. These hovels usually consisted of one or two small rooms in which the whole family and other dependents were cramped, and rents ranged from Rs.3. to Rs.10. a month. The hardships of urban workers were further aggravated by the fact that the average size of the family tended to be large, many wage earners having to support six to ten children. Dr. Lisboa Pinto, who practiced in Colombo, described the health hazards in the slums "where sanitation and hygiene were unknown and impossible" and where there was constant danger of "outbreaks of pestilence [sweeping] away these poor creatures wholesale." On the inadequate housing facilities among printers, he wrote that "dozens of our Colombo printers live in wretched houses about 15 feet by 8 feet, some of them scarcely of the dimensions of a stable. I often find one such room occupied by the bread winner of the household, his wife and children . . . one door to the house and no windows; all the smoke from the fireplace filling the room."<sup>20</sup>

However urban workers who had land or some means of subsistence in rural areas preferred to live outside Colombo. The fact that these workers were not exclusively committed to urban life and had not severed their connections with the land created several problems. One of these was the question of transport to place of work. Dr. Lisboa Pinto referred to the hardships of such workers: "I know scores of men who walk from Cotta and other distant

19. *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913.*

20. Lisboa Pinto, "Ceylon Workmen's Unions."

places, 5 or 6 miles every morning and back every evening, and work 8, 10, 12 and more hours a day."<sup>21</sup> The evidence at the Railway Commission of 1913 revealed that the majority of the workers in the carriage sheds lived in Moratuwa, which was 12 miles from Colombo. The close ties that urban workers retained with their villages also led to frequent long leave being taken either on festive occasions or when workers had accumulated some money. This ever-present problem of absenteeism was combatted by a system of fines, which caused great resentment among the workers, who, not being used to the industrial routine, felt that they had the right to stay away from work as they pleased.

The beginnings of capitalist relations of production gave rise to new social conflicts and the first manifestations of organized working-class agitation. The early unrest was associated with the complete change from the agricultural pattern of life to factory work under urban conditions. Semifeudal relationships in the village were replaced by wage labor relationships, and conflict between labor and capital was therefore bound to arise. Adjustment to the new pattern was not easy and many of the grievances of the working class of this time arose out of this inability to accept innovations and industrial discipline. Moreover, the urban workers had to cope with low wages and a high cost of living in Colombo, factors which, combined with unsanitary living conditions and harsh treatment by employers, increased their discontent.

### Clerical Workers

Since the city of Colombo was both the administrative and commercial capital of the country, the urban clerical workers in government departments and in the mercantile sector formed an important part of the working population. The clerical service, which was one of the by-products of a colonial system of administration and a colonial export economy, was the earliest way in which the English-educated sections of the local population entered the "modern" economic structure. The expansion of the economy in the 19th century created the need for clerks in com-

21. *Ibid.*



mercial banks, export and import firms, and other business houses, and with the increase in the Government's administrative functions a class of clerical servants was needed to deal with routine office work. In 1860, James Emerson Tennent, a former Colonial Secretary, described the government clerks as a "meritorious body of men by whom the whole machinery of government, from the department of the Colonial Secretary to the humblest police court, [was] put into action under orders of the civil officers."<sup>22</sup> According to the 1911 Census there were 5,400 clerks in government service and 7,200 in the mercantile sector; 1,650 of the former and 4,000 of the latter worked in Colombo.

A white-collar job, whether in the government or mercantile sector, meant not only a break from agricultural work and village life, but also a breakthrough into the urbanized middle-class pattern of living. An elementary education in English and the adoption of European dress gave the clerks a "respectable" status in society at a time when these two symbols of westernization were "accorded due honour by the population at large."<sup>23</sup> There was said to be an "aroma of undefined respectability" associated with clerical service, especially in government departments, and this preoccupation with status was remarked upon by many contemporaries. A monthly journal, complaining that white-collar occupations were considered more honorable than manual labor, deplored "the mistaken notion that change of dress and the status of a clerk" compensated for reduction in salary.<sup>24</sup> Reporting on the Census in 1911, E. B. Denham noted that not only did the prosperous small landowners and cultivators believe that with education their sons would become clerks, but also that the younger generation sought escape from rural life, "from manual toil, from work they regard as degrading, in an education which [would] . . . lead to posts in offices in the towns . . . which entitled the holders to the respect of the class from which they believe they [had] emancipated themselves."<sup>25</sup>

In the first half of the 19th century, the clerical service was al-

22. Sir James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon* 2:156.

23. Ralph Pieris, "The Sociological Consequences of Imperialism with Special Reference to Ceylon," p. 408.

24. "Is Ceylon Progressing?" *Ceylon Review*, Sept. 1893.

25. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 399.

most entirely manned by Burghers and Eurasians. This predominance altered after the economic expansion during the latter half of the century, when Sinhalese and Tamils became clerks, but as P. Arunachalam in the Census report for 1901 pointed out, the Burghers formed "the backbone of the clerical service and until recently held practically a monopoly of the highest posts in that service." Although the Burghers and Eurasians in 1901 only formed seven percent of those employed in government service, one in four of this community of 23,000 persons was dependent on government service, whereas the proportion of Sinhalese and Tamils was about one in a hundred.<sup>26</sup> William Digby, commenting on this feature, wrote that "the greatest ambition of a Burgher lad is to get into government service . . . because of the pension and the respectability of government employ . . . [which] is to the educated Burgher almost what the Army, Navy and Established Church are to the sons of 'good families' in England."<sup>27</sup>

There was also, however, constant self-criticism by the Burghers that they were not venturing into more profitable avenues of employment and were living beyond their means in trying to keep up a standard of life they had once known. For example, in 1903 a Burgher complained that clerks were "parasitic growths upon agriculture" and that whereas agriculture and manufactures were among the sources of wealth, the Burghers had been "merely picking up the crumbs that fell from the table."<sup>28</sup> Another factor resulting in economic hardship was what Dr. Lucian de Zilwa has called "the usual thriftlessness and open hospitality of Burghers."<sup>29</sup> This was also often remarked upon by the journal of the Dutch Burgher Union, which claimed that the fondness for luxury had ruined many Burgher families, forcing them "to run hopelessly into debt."<sup>30</sup> Of course, the tendency to attach undue importance to white-collar jobs was not confined to the Burghers. One notable critic of this trend was Anagarika Dharmapala, who in 1909 deplored the fact that the Sinhalese "sons of the soil" were abandon-

26. P. Arunachalam, *Review of the Census Operations of 1901*, pp. 83, 199.

27. William Digby, *Forty Years in a Crown Colony* 1:34.

28. Letter to the editor, *Ceylon Independent*, 14 Jan. 1903.

29. Dr. Lucian de Zilwa, *Scenes of a Lifetime*, p. 4.

30. *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union*, March 1908. "It is a painful fact that there are such people in the community who are extremely poor but yet respectable, and who although suffering great privations, were yet too proud to beg." *Ibid.*

ing agriculture and other professions to "join mercantile firms and work like galley slaves for a few rupees a month."<sup>31</sup> While losing their monopoly of the higher government service posts, the Burghers held on tenaciously to their semi-European pattern of life, whereas the Sinhalese and Tamil clerks who had newly risen into the ranks of the middle class tried to follow the standard of living set by the Burghers. Thus, the financial difficulties of both groups were particularly pronounced in view of their common social aspirations.

Some information is available concerning the salaries, family budgets and demands of clerical workers because this group constantly petitioned and agitated about their hardships, though never in radical ways. In contrast to the grievances of urban and plantation workers, the problems of the clerks were well publicized during the 19th century. Writing in 1879, William Digby found clerks to be "miserably underpaid [and] in a cronic state of indebtedness . . . in an effort to procure the bare necessities of life."<sup>32</sup> This same theme was developed nearly twenty years later by the *Ceylon Examiner*, which claimed that clerks were "between the devil of debt and the deep sea of privation."<sup>33</sup> The differences between the conditions of government and mercantile clerks often gave rise to comment, for on questions of wages, hours of work, holidays, overtime, pensions, and security of service, the government clerk was at an advantage. The salaries of clerks in government service varied, the chief clerks in the Secretariat in 1893 receiving Rs.290. a month and the most junior clerks, Rs.60. to Rs.80. a month. In mercantile firms the rates were considerably lower. In 1897, a newspaper correspondent making a plea for the raising of the salaries of mercantile clerks spoke of the "great hardship and even positive privation" they were undergoing; he claimed that a clerk in one of the leading mercantile houses received Rs.80. a month, but that in spite of the "utmost care and economy" his monthly expenses were Rs.115. (which included house rent, Rs.25.; servants and laundry, Rs.15.; food, fuel and light, Rs.65.; and clothing, Rs.10.).<sup>34</sup>

The grievances of the clerks and their constant grumbling did

31. *The Mahabodhi*, Oct. 1909.

32. Digby, *Forty Years*.

33. Editorial, *Ceylon Examiner*, 14 Dec. 1897.

34. "A Word for the Mercantile Clerks," *Ceylon Examiner*, 14 Dec. 1897.

not lead to any drastic protests, although in 1897 a newspaper correspondent predicted that just as a spark could set a forest ablaze, similarly "two hungry clerks under the stress of necessity [might] put their heads together and raise a great heat in the city."<sup>35</sup> But the clerks—more concerned about their status and pensions—were not intent on raising a "great heat" either by strikes or other means of direct action. However, in the 1880's they did "put their heads together" to form Friendly Societies which were schemes of self-help to encourage thrift and alleviate distress. Even though unions were formed by the government clerks in 1920 and the mercantile clerks in 1928, these unions never became strong and militant like their working-class counterparts.

### Plantation Workers

The largest concentration of resident labor in the country was in the plantations (referred to in Ceylon as estates). The British planters who opened up coffee, tea, and rubber plantations in Ceylon recruited their labor from the landless peasants of South India because of the unavailability of Sinhalese labor. The reluctance of the Sinhalese to become a part of the resident labor force was due neither to the indolence of the Sinhalese nor to their pride and distaste for plantation work, as is sometimes believed, but was connected with their possession of land. There was no large landless proletariat from which the planters could draw their labor supply, but a plentiful supply of labor was available in the famine-prone areas of South India. From 1825 onwards there was a continuous recruitment of Indian workers to Ceylon. The number of immigrants and dependents increased from 235,000 in 1891 to around 500,000 in 1921 and reached the figure of nearly 700,000 by 1931. Despite a long history of exploitation, the beginnings of a trade-union movement among this resident work force did not occur until the third decade of the 20th century.

The method originally used by planters for recruiting labor from South India was through the "kangany" (or overseer). Before the advent of railways, the immigrants had to walk long distances

35. Letter to the editor, *Ceylon Independent*, 20 Dec. 1897.

to the Indian coast and about 150 miles from the Ceylon ports to the hill-country. In the malaria-ridden areas, the sick were left to die on the roadside and many of the survivors who reached the hills succumbed to the unaccustomed cool weather. The planter gave the kangany a sum of money for every worker he brought to Ceylon, (head money) and he was also paid a daily bonus for each worker who turned up for work on the field (pence money). In the early years of Indian immigration, the kangany's duties included the issuing of rice to workers, settling family disputes and sometimes running a shop. But the most important role of the kangany was his powerful position as intermediary between the plantation management and the workers. The need for direct recruitment by the kangany disappeared when the Indian workers became permanently resident, but the patriarchal role of the kangany and his position as moneylender and shopkeeper continued.

The bond between the kangany and his gang of workers arose out of the workers' indebtedness. According to the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour, Indian workers in Ceylon were "born in debt, lived in debt and died in debt."<sup>36</sup> The kangany was often the sole creditor of the estate, borrowing money directly from the estate and lending in turn to the workers. If the kangany ran a shop on the estate, the workers were the victims of all the evils of the "truck system," including high prices and indebtedness to the shopkeeper who provided loans at high rates of interest. A witness at the 1908 Labour Commission said it was probable that some kanganies did not tell the workers what their debts were from year to year, and the Commissioners reported that "in many instances the labourer was made the victim of more or less deliberate fraud."<sup>37</sup> The method of wage payment in the early years was of paying one month's wages to the workers and one month's to the kangany to be set off by him against the worker's debt, a system which increased the opportunities for the swindling of illiterate workers. Another objectionable feature of plantation life was the development of what was known as the "tundu" system. The kan-

36. Statement of T. Reid, former Controller of Labour in Ceylon, in *Report on the Working of the Indian Emigration Act, by the Agent of the Government of India in Ceylon* (1932), p. 18.

37. *Report and Proceedings of the Labour Commission, 1908* (Colombo), p. 226 (evidence of L. C. F. Van Rooyen), and para. 9.

gany, during periods of labor shortage, would transfer a group of workers from one plantation to another if the new employer paid the amount of the debts due to the kangany. This made the worker perpetually in debt to the kangany, who could transfer him from plantation to plantation and enrich himself in the process.

Several attempts were made through legislation to combat the worst effects of the Indian worker's indebtedness. In 1909 the worker was made immune from arrest in civil cases, and the "tundu" system was abolished in 1921. However the kangany was able to use all kinds of dubious extra-legal methods to recover debts. These sometimes included the detention of the debtor's family or goods and trumped up prosecutions for theft. The discharge certificate was also used by planters as a means of preventing the excessive mobility of labor; it was issued to a worker when he left the plantation, and by an agreement between planters, no plantation would employ a worker without such a certificate. The effect of this system not only restricted the workers' freedom of movement, but also enabled the kangany to get superintendents to withhold discharge certificates until workers' debts had been paid.<sup>38</sup>

One of the most glaring injustices was the issue of wages. The methods used to exploit plantation workers varied. Planters in the 19th century sometimes failed to pay wages regularly, handed the workers' wages to the kangany, or made deductions from wages. One planter admitted that "if coolies did not do what was considered a fair amount of work, *they were either put absent, or half a day in the check roll, or kept out at the working place, not at work, till it was dark.*"<sup>39</sup> The wages paid to the immigrant men, women and children employed on the plantations were lower than those of the lowest paid unskilled urban workers. Even up to 1927, when the first minimum wage legislation was introduced in Ceylon, the average wage of plantation workers had stagnated, in spite of the rise in the cost of living and increases in urban wage levels. The lack of bargaining power of these workers, their political isolation from the rest of the community, and the tight discipline main-

38. *Report . . . of the Agent of the Government of India in Ceylon* (1932), p. 16-17.

39. P. D. Millie, *Thirty Years Ago*, chap. 15, emphasis added. See also *Planters Association Year Book 1908*, p. 116: "When I came to this Island in 1873, coolies were never paid more than four times a year, generally three times and sometimes only twice."

tained by planters enabled wages to be kept at a constant low level even during periods of labor shortage. The determined policy of keeping wages down was described in 1908 by a planter: "I have been 14 years in Ceylon and I understand it was a matter of honour that I was not to give more than 33 cents [daily for men] and 25 cents [for women]."<sup>40</sup> Although rice was supplied to the workers by the plantation at a price around 14 percent lower than the open market rate and the workers were provided with free housing and vegetable plots, these were benefits which kept the workers tied to the employer in a semifeudal relationship.

The health conditions of plantation workers were reflected in the high death and infant mortality rates of these workers compared to the rest of the population. The reasons for the high mortality rates were sickness, debility through malnutrition, harsh working and living conditions, neglect of the sick by the planters, and the lack of adequate hospital facilities. The usual practice was one of "no work—no pay," which meant that there was pressure to work even when sick. In 1884 a Medical Officer wrote, "the coolies have no property and are thus dependent on daily labour for subsistence; if they fail to work through sickness or otherwise, they become destitute, and a charge on their relations and friends." The death rate was startling enough to warrant a Mortality Commission being appointed in 1893. This report revealed that between 1883 and 1891 the average mortality of all races in hospitals was 7.42 percent whereas the comparable figure for estate workers was nearly 21 percent.<sup>41</sup> After the Commission report, plantation dispensaries were established and an attempt was made to improve health conditions. But as late as 1920 the death rate of Indians on plantations was 52 per thousand compared to 27.6 for the total population, and the infant mortality rate in 1920 was 224 per thousand births, whereas the island rate was 182.<sup>42</sup>

The conditions under which the Indian immigrants worked varied with the plantations and the districts in which they were employed. There was no legal regulation limiting the hours of

40. *Report and Proceedings of the Labour Commission, 1908*, p. 38.

41. *Principal Civil Medical Officer's Administration Report for 1885*; District Hospitals Mortality Commission, *Sessional Paper 2 of 1893*.

42. *Administration Report of the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour for 1925*, p. 13.

work. The usual practice was for work to begin at 6 A.M. and cease about 4 P.M. In 1893, a doctor described the "long hours, perhaps 10 to 11 without food, prejudicial to the cooly who [was] not physically strong."<sup>43</sup> In 1914 the harsh treatment of plantation workers in the Sabaragamuwa Province came to the notice of the government when the District Judge reported that a large number of workers had complained to him of starvation and neglect. In this province, between October, 1913, and March, 1914, seven workers were found dead and six were found lying ill on the road near the Nivitigala estate, and inquiries by the Government Agent revealed that in 1913 there were 227 deaths on this plantation, representing 24 percent of its labor force. In the same district, in October, 1914, workers who left the Pinkande estate on the grounds of ill-treatment, and insufficient food and wages, were prosecuted under the Labour Ordinance for leaving service. The magistrate acquitted the workers because of their "sickly and emaciated condition," and referred to the neglect of sick workers, the inadequate supervision of the labor force by the superintendent, and to the hardships caused to the workers because of insufficient wages. Even in 1924, 19 percent of the deaths among Indian immigrants was attributed to debility and in 1925, 55 percent of infant deaths on plantations was due to debility, while the comparable island figure was 20 percent.<sup>44</sup>

Another factor accounting for the low cultural level of plantation workers was their widespread illiteracy, which also tended to keep them docile to the kanganyes and employers. The 1911 Census revealed that the literacy rate, which was 26.4 percent for all races—40 percent for males and 10 percent for females—was lowest among the Indian immigrants, where the figure was 12.3 percent—20 percent for males and 1.5 percent for females.<sup>45</sup> In 1904 there were only two government schools and a few missionary and privately-run schools on plantations. The lack of estate schools became an issue in 1903 when the matter was raised in the House of Commons. But the Chairman of the Planters Association, when

43. Evidence of Dr. Griffin, *Sessional Paper 2 of 1893*.

44. *Report of the Commission to Inquire into the Conditions of Immigrant Tamil Labourers in Sabaragamuwa 1914*; *Report of the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour for 1925*.

45. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 401.



asked to report on this by the Colonial Secretary, claimed that the "time was not ripe for compulsory education among the cooly class."<sup>46</sup> Whereas education had made rapid advances in the rest of Ceylon, it lagged far behind on the plantations, and it was only in 1920 that an Education Ordinance was passed making it compulsory for estates to provide an elementary vernacular education for children. Even after this date, however, education on estates remained far behind the national standard. The degraded social status of estate workers was another factor accounting for their subservience. They belonged mainly to the Marawa, Pallan, and Paraya castes, among the most depressed castes of South India, where caste hierarchy was rigidly observed.

In spite of the high rate of exploitation and other grievances, the real obstacle to the development of trade unionism in the plantation sector was the semifeudal nature of economic relationships. The worker was not a free agent in the capitalist sense, whereby he could sell his labor on a competitive labor market. In fact, certain aspects of the plantation labor system were compared to slavery. For example, in 1847 the Superintendent of Police in Kandy referred to the "exceedingly arbitrary and cruel treatment" of plantation workers as being worse than Negro slavery; and in 1908 a planter stated, "the kangany system is slavery, I will call it nothing else. He will not allow . . . a cooly to leave his force if he can help it—and if the Superintendent does not interfere then that is slavery."<sup>47</sup>

Plantation labor in many respects was semiwage labor. By means of certain "feudal" practices such as part payment in rice, housing tied to employment, the estate or kangany-owned shop ("truck" system), ties of indebtedness, and limitations on mobility, the freedom of these workers was severely restricted. Another factor making for the absence of agitation among Indian immigrants was that they were never a settled labor force until the 1930's. The plantation worker maintained connection with India through pe-

46. *Planters Association Review* 1904, p. xxiv.

47. The comment by the Superintendent of Police is quoted in Michael Roberts, "Indian Estate Labour in Ceylon During the Coffee Period (1830-1880)," in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (March 1966), p. 4. The reference is from Enclosure of 18 Jan. 1847, C.O.54/235. For the planter's comment, see the letter of A. H. Thomas, *Labour Commission Report of 1908*, appendix 10.

riodic visits, and his aspiration was to accumulate enough to enable him to return home and set up as a small landowner. The plantation population in Ceylon was also deliberately kept isolated from the mainstream of political and trade-union developments in the rest of the country. A strict surveillance was maintained on plantations and trespass laws prevented "outside agitators" from having access to the labor force at its place of work. On many plantations, labor was kept under control by watchers who prevented workers from leaving and seized suspected absconders. Discipline was also maintained by a system of fines, imposed for a variety of reasons, including bad work and neglect of duty. The practice of using corporal punishment on workers was not unknown. The 1914 Commission on Immigrant Labour referred to its use on plantations: "Some superintendents are averse to the practice, but others have admitted that castigation was resorted to whenever the occasion demanded it."<sup>48</sup>

These restrictive features of plantation life inhibited the rise of trade unions or any form of independent organizational activity among the workers. The first labor legislation in Ceylon was framed to cover the plantation sector, however. In the early years of immigration, the government adopted a totally laissez-faire policy towards labor, but this was short-lived. It has sometimes been claimed that the intervention by the Ceylon government to control and regulate immigrant labor was due to the growth of humanitarian ideals, for which officials were prepared to defy both the current laissez-faire ideology and planter hostility. But even in Britain by the 1850's, this ideology had been replaced by an awareness that state intervention in certain spheres was beneficial rather than harmful to entrepreneurs. In Ceylon, the acute shortages of labor that occurred periodically, the need for regulating contracts of labor, the problem of labor losses through deaths on the route to the plantations, and the high sickness and mortality rates, made government intervention necessary in order to ensure an adequate supply of labor. Laws were therefore passed to regulate steamship travel from India and to build and improve roads and sheds along the route to the plantations which the workers had to traverse on

48. *Report of the Commission to Inquire into the Conditions of Immigrant Tamil Labourers in Sabaragamuwa 1914.*

foot. In 1841 and 1865, labor (Master and Servant) laws governing the terms of contract of labor were enacted, but these were pro-employer pieces of legislation which gave little protection to the workers. In 1872, the Medical Ordinance made provision for rudimentary medical facilities in plantation districts, and in 1889 the Estate Labour Ordinance regulated the employment of immigrant workers with respect to contract of service, payment of wages and allied matters. All these were basic measures which were intended to ensure a regulated, healthy supply of labor. The more humanitarian labor laws came at a later date when the Indian government began to put pressure on Ceylon and when local social service organizations started campaigns of protest. For example, an Education Ordinance was passed in 1920 providing for compulsory elementary education on plantations, and in 1927 the first minimum wage legislation was introduced. Provisions of the Labour [Master and Servant] Ordinance of 1865, whereby a breach of contract was punishable with imprisonment, were repealed in 1922, and the worst features of the workers' indebtedness were also ameliorated by legislation in 1909 and 1921. Eventually, agitation on behalf of plantation labor culminating in a trade-union movement was the result of the intervention of politicians who were influenced by Indian nationalism.

### Methods of Protest and Self-Help in the Pre-Trade-Union Phase

It has been held that caste and religious beliefs are important factors retarding the growth of trade unionism in a colonial, traditional society. The basis for this view is that where society is rigidly divided on caste and class lines, even if some mobility can occur between the classes, there can be none between castes; those born into a particular caste remain in that caste whatever their position or wealth. Such a system was held to foster an attitude of reconciliation to a person's place in society. Linked with this is a fatalistic interpretation of the Hindu and Buddhist belief in "karma," according to which low status, misfortune, and poverty are the results of actions of a past birth against which there is no redress. A relation-

ship between karma and labor agitation was claimed in 1892 by D. B. Jayatilaka, who stated that the belief in karma not only enabled a Buddhist "to bear the vicissitudes and diversity of fortune with equanimity and fortitude," but also made the people of the East "less disposed to quarrel with their surroundings as the sole cause of their troubles." Consequently, he added, the unequal distribution of wealth, which in Europe had erupted in conflicts between capital and labor, and the growth of socialism, anarchism, nihilism, and "revolutionary movements against the existing order of things," had not caused social disorder in Ceylon and the East.<sup>49</sup> This theme was also discussed by Max Weber in *The Religion of India*, where he claimed that Hinduism promised rebirth in a higher social status "to the artisan who in his work abides by prescribed traditions, never demands over-pay, never deceives as to quality"; Weber held that so long as "the *karma* doctrine was unshaken, revolutionary ideas or progressivism were inconceivable."<sup>50</sup>

In the Sinhalese village during the 19th century, the traditional occupational or ceremonial functions of the various castes had ceased to be the only basis of social stratification, although certain caste tabus remained very pronounced in the case of domestic matters, and in the observance of social distance such as deferential behavior to persons of high caste. In the Tamil regions of Ceylon where the caste divisions corresponded more closely to the South Indian pattern, caste divisions were more rigid. But with urbanization and the creation of an urban proletariat there was a loosening of caste bonds. As in India, urban workers often adopted the approach of "class for the city and caste for the village." A recent study of a group of Indian city workers shows that "a worker adjusts willingly and easily to the demands of city life and he readjusts with equal ease to the demands of village life when he returns there."<sup>51</sup> In Ceylon, the villagers, whose pattern of life and behavior had been bound by considerations of caste, were subject to a new set of influences in the towns. Where workers were grouped together in factories and worked and lived in proximity, the symbols of social distance based on caste tended to disappear. In many cases

49. D. B. Jayatilaka, Article on disturbed Europe in *The Buddhist*, May 1902.

50. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, p. 122-23.

51. Michael M. Ames, "Modernisation and Social Structure," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number (July 1969).

workers in towns passed into higher castes, and if names were changed there was no means of ascertaining the caste of fellow-workers. There was a willingness not only to work and be supervised by people of other castes, but also for workers of various castes to join together in demanding the redress of grievances. Hence, it appears that under urban working conditions caste differences did not retard trade unionism. In fact, with the development of the labor movement, the caste of the labor leaders became irrelevant, and situations arose where there was wide caste disparity between the leaders of trade unions and their members. For example, it was possible for urban workers to accept trade-union leaders who belonged to castes which were considered inferior in the traditional hierarchy, and for plantation workers who belonged predominantly to the depressed castes to have Brahmin leaders.

In the absence of trade unions, the role of the government in protecting the working class has to be considered. The legislation which governed the working class in 19th-century Ceylon was in many ways less liberal than the laws prevailing in other colonial territories such as the West Indies and Mauritius.<sup>52</sup> The legal position of workers in Ceylon was governed by the Labour [Master and Servant] Ordinances of 1841 and 1865, which had been passed primarily to regulate conditions of service and contracts between planters and Indian immigrant workers. Although these laws were supposed to afford some measure of protection to the workers in their relations with the employers, in effect they served mainly to limit desertions from plantations by fixing penalties for breaches of contract. The laws were drafted to apply not only to plantation workers, but also to include domestic servants and urban skilled workers (called "journeymen artificers"), but in practice the majority of the Court cases that came up dealt with plantation workers.

By the Labour Ordinance of 1865, a breach of contract by a worker was a criminal offense, and disobedience, insolence or leaving service without a month's notice or reasonable cause was an offense punishable with three months' imprisonment, or a fine of Rs.50., or both. But if an employer owed one month's wages at the end of the succeeding month, the worker could refuse to work or

52. Michael Roberts, "Indian Estate Labour in Ceylon During the Coffee Period, 1830-1880," Part II *Indian Economic & Social History Review* (June 1966), p. 125.

leave after giving two days' notice. This ordinance was mainly enforced in cases of "bolting" from estates, but no mention was made in the legislation of the legal implications of cessation of work due to strikes. This was because, at the time the laws were drafted, strikes were not considered to be a serious or imminent danger in Ceylon. The result was that when the first strike occurred among Colombo printers in 1893, the authorities, who were taken unawares, felt that severe measures had to be adopted against such "illegal" actions. Even though there was no legislation governing trade disputes, in 1893 the Supreme Court decided that not only could printers be defined as journeymen artificers under the Ordinance of 1865 but also that a worker who went on strike committed a breach of contract and could be imprisoned.<sup>53</sup> When considering this retrograde approach to labor activity, it must be remembered that the British Master and Servant legislation had been equally repressive. The workers in Britain before 1867 were subject to severe penalties for breach of contract and as G. D. H. Cole has pointed out, "the law was grossly unfair and was based on the conception of compulsory servile labour . . . [coming down] from a time when the inequality of masters and servants had been taken for granted."<sup>54</sup> This "inequality" was also taken for granted by the authorities in Ceylon. But the difference was that whereas trade-union agitation in Britain led to the repeal of these harsh laws and the granting of a legal status to unions by the Trade Union Act of 1871, twenty-two years after this date a Ceylonese urban worker who went on strike could still be imprisoned for a criminal offense.

Although the law offered no protection in the years before the development of an organized labor movement, dissatisfied groups in the community resorted to certain methods of protest in order to express their demands, and evolved some means of self-help. The violent methods of protest took the form of riots directed against the authorities or physical violence directed against harsh supervisors. The nonviolent methods included the expression of de-

53. See below, chapter 5.

54. G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement*, p. 198. "Workers [were subjected] to severe penalties for breach of contract and for leaving work unfinished. . . . For such offences, the worker was liable to imprisonment on the verdict of a single justice, who might himself be an interested employer. . . . An employee could not give evidence against his employer or in his own defence." *Ibid.*, p. 197.

mands through petitions to the employer or the government, the formation of clubs and societies to protect workers from the worst effects of poverty, and, in the case of plantation workers, escaping from the place of work.

As the staple food of the country was rice, shortages or increases in the price of this commodity often led to violent demonstrations of protest. In 1866 a failure of the Indian rice crop, on which Ceylon depended, led to a serious rice shortage in the island resulting in rioting in the capital,<sup>55</sup> and in 1897 a sharp increase in the price of rice led to rioting in Chilaw between the shopkeepers and customers.<sup>56</sup> Another economic cause of riots was the imposition of taxes, which had always been a major source of discontent in Ceylon. In 1901, a local tax for sanitation led to riots in Ambalangoda during which the police killed two and injured several demonstrators. These riots were attributed by the government to "agitators . . . who were actuated by the demagogues' love of power and contempt for established authority."<sup>57</sup> Noneconomic riots in Ceylon were sometimes inspired by religious conflicts, although often economic and political causes, aggravated by religious animosity, led to such rioting. The tensions between Buddhists and Christians increased after the militant Buddhist revival in the 1880's and led to religious riots. In 1883, a riot occurred in Colombo between Buddhists and Catholics, and in 1903 there was rioting in Anuradhapura by Buddhists in protest over the prevalence of churches, taverns, and butcher shops in the sacred city. The most serious riot, which took place in 1915 between Buddhists and Muslims, had both economic and religious motives, and in Colombo was spearheaded by the urban working class.<sup>58</sup> Another violent method of protest, which cannot be ignored, was the resort to physical assaults on minor supervisory staff and foremen. This was more frequent on the plantations where other forms of protest were almost nonexistent. Violence sometimes erupted not only between rival gangs, but also against particularly vindictive or oppressive planters, kanganies, and minor staff.

55. Quoted in *Ceylon Independent*, 15 Aug. 1906.

56. *Ceylon Examiner*, 30 Dec. 1897. There was "free fighting in the bazaar between a hundred of each party armed with clubs and brickbats . . . boutiques were stormed and entered and all the stores emptied into the streets . . . empty bottles, tins, packing cases, clubs, etc. flying in a thick cloud over the assailants."

57. PRO, Despatch 511, 14 Dec. 1901, C.O.54/682.

58. See below, chapter 7.

Of the methods of nonviolent protest, the most commonly used form was the right of petition. In 1908 it was estimated that the government received an average of 4,000 petitions a year. In that year the Governor, Sir Henry McCallum, called the right of petition "a valuable safety valve for the ventilation of grievances,"<sup>59</sup> and a Ceylonese journalist referred to it as "the very Magna Charta of the masses . . . and one of the greatest aids to the administration of justice."<sup>60</sup> The petition writer played an important role in towns and villages, and because of his knowledge of English he was often the sole means of communication between workers and employers, or between government officials and the population. He was as a rule well-grounded in local ordinances and skilled in the use of lavish honorifics and flattery. The petition writer was often a fearless person prepared to write against anybody and on any subject. "When some cause of oppression or injustice has to be brought to the notice of the higher powers [he is] a ready and willing advocate . . . instances have been known in which he has risked jail on a charge of contempt."<sup>61</sup> In the years before the formation of trade unions, the petition was the most widely used method for the workers to express their demands. For example, the clerks in government service petitioned regularly about their pay and conditions of service. In 1842, a petition seeking an increase of pay and promotion was presented by the government clerks, and again in 1858 Unofficial Members of the Legislative Council presented petitions for higher pay and promotion on behalf of the government clerks. In 1885, when a petition containing the grievances of the clerks of the General Post Office was presented to the Legislative Council by P. Ramanathan (the Tamil Unofficial member), the Colonial Secretary condemned the petition as "a grave breach of discipline."<sup>62</sup> Even the relatively less secure workers used to send individually signed petitions to their employers. An instance of this was seen in 1897, when the workers at the Harbour fitting-work department complained that they worked a ten-hour-day for five and one-half days' wages a week, whereas the workers in comparable government

59. Legislative Council of Ceylon, "Minutes of Sessions 1908-9," p. 16.

60. *The Un-British Administration of Ceylon by Argus Zelanicus*.

61. *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union*, Oct. 1908.

62. *P. Ramanathan: Brief Sketch of a Brilliant Career*.



departments and private firms worked nine hours a day with six days' wages.<sup>63</sup> It will be noted in later chapters that many strikes were caused by the failure of the authorities to inquire into grievances that had for many years been expressed in the form of petitions. Trade-union officials also used the petition as a means of expressing the union demands to the employers, especially during the years before the recognition of trade unions.

On plantations, individual workers who had disputes with the planter or kangany, or found conditions intolerable, often had little choice of action except to "bolt," an offense punishable under the existing law. The kangany also was able to move his labor "gang" around if he was dissatisfied with conditions on a plantation. For example, in 1896 the *Times of Ceylon* reported a "strike" on Fordyce estate where a kangany had ordered seventy workers to stop work because of the refusal of the conductor to pay one of the workers.<sup>64</sup> But such incidents reflected not the independent activity of the workers but their dependence on the kangany, who in periods of labor shortage would move workers from one plantation to another for a cash inducement.

In almost all countries, groups of workers have used guilds, clubs and provident societies (or friendly societies) as methods of mutual insurance. In Ceylon, systems such as the *seetu* exist among the poor, whereby contributions are regularly made to a common fund and each member has access to the whole amount in turn. The first provident associations in Ceylon, which were formed in the late 19th century, were dominated by Burgher clerks who adopted the British model of benefit societies which provided relief in cases of distress, sickness, and death. The background to the formation of the first provident association in Ceylon was the serious depression in the coffee industry around 1880. The resulting cuts in government expenditure, the failure of several Agency Houses, and

63. CNA, Petition of 28 July 1897, File R.O.PF.2889C.

64. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 21 March 1896. The practice of crimping labor was described by the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour in his *Report for 1925*, p. 6: "A Superintendent, generally an incompetent one or one employed by a second class company or proprietor, whose estate and methods do not naturally attract or retain Indian labour, approaches a kangany or other subordinate of a neighbouring estate with a bribe, and the kangany and his gang suddenly break their monthly contract and leave without giving the month's notice required by law."

retrenchment among clerical workers in both government departments and mercantile firms led to a great degree of economic uncertainty among clerical workers. The initiative to form a provident society came from the government clerks, who in 1883 combined to form the Public Services Mutual Provident Association. The objects of the Association were to promote thrift, to give relief to members in times of sickness, to aid them when in financial difficulties, and to make provision for their widows and orphans. Members contributed 2.5 percent of their monthly salary and the benefits from the Association included interest-free loans during sickness or distress, ordinary loans at 1.5 percent interest, and payments to members' widows and orphans.<sup>65</sup> Provident societies also became popular among clerks in the private sector whose wages and conditions of service were worse than those of government clerks. In 1884, sixty-three clerks from Colombo mercantile firms (of whom forty-six were Burghers) met to discuss their financial difficulties and formed the Mercantile Mutual Provident Association on the lines of the existing government clerks' friendly society.<sup>66</sup> The popularity of the provident societies can be seen from the expansion of membership that took place, and from the formation of similar societies in the provinces. The Public Services Mutual Provident Association increased its membership from 203 in 1883 to 624 in 1893, and in 1893, Rs.37,000. was given in loans and advances, the profits for that year being Rs.3,800.<sup>67</sup> In the Southern Province, a Mutual Provident Association was formed in 1885 and in the same year the Puttalam Mutual Provident Society was formed "to promote thrift and alleviate distress."<sup>68</sup> In 1890, several clerks in Colombo who had been active in the government and mercantile provident societies took the initiative in forming the Ceylon Family Benefit Association, a kind of funeral club which was not restricted to clerks but open to anyone over 18 and under 50. Members had to pay an entrance fee and Rs.1. a year, and on

65. "Rules of the Public Service Mutual Provident Association," Colombo Museum.

66. *Weekly Ceylon Observer*, 27 Sept. 1884. In 1893, of the 10 committee members of the Public Services Mutual Provident Association 9 were Burghers; the same year in the Mercantile Mutual Provident Association, the figure was 11 out of 17.

67. *10th Annual Report of the Public Service Mutual Association*. Available Colombo Museum Library.

68. *The Ceylon Blue Book*, 1890.

the death of a member the next of kin received a sum of money equivalent to the number of members calculated at Rs.1. per member.<sup>69</sup>

The provident society movement was the first organized attempt by a significant group of workers to cope with the problems of financial need and it was in this sense a forerunner of the trade-union movement. Although the white-collar workers in Ceylon were the first to form provident societies, they were reluctant to organize into trade unions. The provident societies of this period were essentially thrift clubs run by Burghers. This does not mean, however, that the movement was totally unconnected with the development of trade unions. On the contrary, the formation of the various mutual provident associations offered the skilled worker an example of the benefits of coming together for a common economic purpose—it is significant that three committee members of the first trade union to be formed in Ceylon (in 1893) were members of provident societies.<sup>70</sup>

This chapter has dealt with the composition and conditions of employment of the working class and the discontent that existed at the turn of the century. From the point of view of the average worker, the period was one of rising prices, stationary wages, long working hours, harsh conditions at work and very little prospect of redress of grievances by appeals to the employers. There was not much hope for relief through government intervention at a time when the existing labor laws, far from protecting the worker, were so interpreted as to restrict working-class agitation. The following chapters examine the religious and political background in which labor unrest grew, and the emergence of a middle-class leadership of the labor movement.

69. "Rules of the Ceylon Family Benefit Association, 1892." The initiative in forming this Association was taken by clerks from both Mercantile and Government Service. Its Chairman, J. Weinman (the Chief clerk of the Audit Office) was also ex-officio the Treasurer of the Public Services Mutual Provident Association; the Secretary (E. Ondatjee), and Treasurer (C. W. Schumacher), were both clerks of the Treasury; two Committee members of the Mercantile Mutual Provident Association, 1893, (W. S. Christoffelsz, and M. D. Cockburn) were also Committee members of the Family Benefit Association.

70. Three members of the Mutual Provident Association, D. J. Caspersz, J. G. Fernando and J. M. Perera, were Committee members of the Ceylon Printers Union. See "Rules of the Mutual Provident Association, 1893."

## Chapter 2

# The Rise of the Nationalist and Labor Movements: The Religious Background

*The Sinhalese are realising that the Buddhist schools are their own national schools [where] the education offered is in harmony with the national spirit . . . while they look on Christian schools as foreign missionary agencies for conversion.*<sup>1</sup>

A. E. Buultjens, 1893 (founder of  
the first trade union in Ceylon)

*The Theosophist [teachers are] influencing the younger generation to a blind hatred of everything European. . . . The fact of Europeans advising them in this way makes [the Ceylonese] think that there really is something in these ideas of home rule, self-government etc.*<sup>2</sup>

Herbert Dowbiggin, 1915,  
Inspector-General of Police

Religious agitation against Christianity was a popular means of challenging the colonial power in 19th century Ceylon, and the growth of nationalism was connected with this movement. Whereas open political agitation and demands for self-government by the middle class would have attracted the attention of the authorities to the dangers of “sedition,” it was quite legal for the non-Christian members of this newly affluent class to challenge the Christianization of the elite and to conduct an aggressive campaign against the missionaries. The colonial bureaucrats in late 19th century Ceylon—a period during which Christianity was being denounced as un-

1. *The Buddhist*, 6 Jan. 1893.

2. Ceylon National Archives (CNA), Confidential Paper No.14502 of 1915.

scientific by atheists and freethinkers in Britain—were not fanatical in their religious attitudes. Missionaries were supported for their educational activities but the Governors and civil servants, many of whom were perhaps only nominal Christians, were not crusaders concerned in converting the “heathen.” If the Ceylonese were law-abiding and loyal, this was enough; if any of them had these qualities but were not Christian, it mattered little to the bureaucrats. From their point of view, allegiance to British rule was the first requirement and loyal Buddhists, Hindus or Muslims were preferable to disloyal Christians. But in fact, the first signs of discontent and resistance came from a section of the emergent middle class; these were the “disloyal” non-Christian members of the intelligentsia who had acquired economic prosperity but were deprived of political representation. By attacking Christianity, they were indirectly trying to challenge the existing political structure of the country. The impact of Christianity on Ceylon and the revolt against Christianization will be discussed in some detail, in order to show the political importance of the revival of the indigenous religions. This revival provided the leadership of the early labor movement and created a favorable climate for working-class agitation. In this connection the role of the Theosophists, British rationalists, and Liberals, and their political influence on the Ceylonese nationalist and labor movements, will be considered.

In Ceylon, as in many other territories of Asia and Africa, revolts against imperialism began under the guise of religious movements which were anti-Christian and anti-Western, the reason being that “if the indigenous way of life has been subject to misery, persecution and other adversities, the people seek relief from their frustrations and sufferings in religious ways—in many cases even before attempting to do so by political means.”<sup>3</sup> For example, in Muslim countries under colonial rule, the earliest movements of political resistance were linked with religious revival. In North Africa, French political domination and its “civilizing mission” were combated by a vigorous regeneration of Islam; in the Sudan, a religious prophet, the Madhi, led a revolt in 1885 that was crushed by British forces. In Indonesia, the revival of Islam and the frequent proclamation of the Holy War (Jihad) against unbelievers were

3. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*, p. 4.

some of the earliest methods of protest against Dutch rule, and several messianic figures were active in Java and Sumatra. Examples can also be taken from China and India. In China the mystic sect known as the Taiping, which was active from 1850 to 1864, was both anti-Western and against the Manchu dynasty. After 1860, the wave of violent opposition to Christians in China resulted in riots and attacks on missionaries accompanied by the growth of antiforeign feeling and the rise of nationalism. In India, there was a *sannyasi* rebellion in North Bengal in 1773, and the revival of Hinduism in the 19th century was linked with Indian nationalism. The Hindu revival was associated with such societies as the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, and personalities like Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, who tried to give the Hindus a sense of pride and self-reliance which would enable them to withstand Christianity and the Christian powers. In Ceylon, there were two aspects to the religious revival. First, there was a religious and cultural renaissance among Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims that led to an awakening of national feeling; second, the climate of political opinion created by the religious movements facilitated not only the dissemination of ideas concerning nationalism and trade unionism in the country but also the spread of Western radical thought.

### The Challenge to Christianization

The advent of Christianity led to considerable changes in the existing religious divisions in Ceylonese society, but by the end of the 19th century the racial and religious composition of the Ceylonese had become more or less stratified. The predominant religion in Ceylon was Buddhism, which in 1911 was professed by 60 percent of the total population of 4 million. Of the other religious groups, the Hindus formed 23 percent, the Christians 10 percent, and the Muslims 7 percent of the population. Over the centuries, the inroads of Christianity led to defections of around 9 percent of Buddhists and 12 percent of Hindus to the new religion. The Sinhalese, who formed 68 percent of the population, were 91 percent Buddhist and 9 percent Christian. The Ceylon and

Indian Tamils, who collectively formed 25 percent of the population, were 88 percent Hindus and 12 percent Christians. The other minorities were religiously homogenous, the Moors (5 percent of the population) being exclusively Muslim and the Burghers (0.6 percent) being Christian.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam underwent a severe decline under the rule of successive European powers. The Portuguese, who ruled parts of Ceylon between 1505 and 1656, deprived the local religions of their previous status and gave various forms of inducements to converts. Public religious worship other than Catholicism was prohibited in the Portuguese-ruled domains. In addition, the order of one Portuguese King to his Viceroy "to discover all the idols and reduce them to fragments," was vigorously carried out in Ceylon, where the destruction and plunder of Hindu and Buddhist temples was a matter of official policy. Along with these repressive measures, attractive prospects were held out to converts, including privileged positions in government service, exemption from some taxes, and lenient treatment in the law courts.<sup>5</sup> Education was the most important means of proselytization and the schools started by the Jesuit, Franciscan and Dominican priests became the means by which both the religion of the Europeans and a Western form of education were first imparted to Ceylonese. The religious policy of the Protestant Dutch who succeeded the Portuguese and ruled maritime Ceylon from 1658 to 1796 was not so harsh and uncompromising because the Dutch were more interested in commerce than in religious conversion. Nevertheless, the Dutch Reformed Church took over the existing Catholic schools and also established a network of schools which helped in spreading Protestant Christianity and creating a class of converts who would be loyal to the Dutch. Concern over the question of loyalty also influenced the British, who displaced the Dutch in Ceylon in 1796. Though in the early days of British rule the East India Company had no proselytizing ambitions, Governor North revived the Dutch schools for fear that if the converts reverted to Buddhism they would become hostile to British rule. The Evan-

4. E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911*, p. 196.

5. T. Abeyasinghe, *Portuguese Rule in Ceylon*, chap. 9. I am grateful to Dr. Abeyasinghe for his comments on this section.

gical revival in Britain during the late 18th century led to missionary activity in Asia and Africa. The Baptist mission began work in the island in 1802, followed by the Wesleyan Missionary Society in 1814 and the Church Missionary Society in 1818. The Kandyan Kingdom, which had remained unconquered by either the Portuguese or Dutch, was the stronghold of Buddhism. After the Kandyan provinces came under British rule in 1815, the new rulers were content to ensure peace by preserving the status quo on religious matters. By the Kandyan Convention of 1815 the Governor replaced the Kandyan King as protector of Buddhism, assumed the duties concerning the appointment of *Nayaka theras* (chief monks) and took over the custody of the historic *Dalada Maligawa* (Temple of the Tooth). The connection between the Government and a "heathen" religion naturally annoyed the missionaries, who urged the government to sever its links with Buddhism.

By the latter part of the 19th century, education was the most important aspect of Christian activity in Ceylon. The government, which had established its own schools, also gave grants to missionary schools which provided a good education. There was no restriction on religious instruction, and in both government and missionary schools there was strong emphasis on the teaching of Christianity. The Baptists openly admitted in 1854 that in their schools conversion was "the first and paramount object," and in 1850 Bishop Chapman, stressing the importance of Christian indoctrination, claimed that it was "mere fallacy, the worst self-delusion, to teach reading and writing alone in a heathen country."<sup>6</sup> Until 1880, all the schools in the island were run by either the government or the various Christian missionary bodies, the exceptions being one or two Buddhist schools run by individuals. At the time the Buddhists and Hindus did not possess the organization or the funds to establish schools, and as a result, Buddhist and Hindu children attended missionary or government schools. In 1880 there were about 400 government schools with 24,000 pupils and nearly 840 missionary schools with 61,000 pupils. By 1899

6. Quoted in K. M. de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organization 1840-1855*, p. 144.



there were over 1000 missionary schools with 90,000 pupils, and 490 government schools with 47,000 pupils.<sup>7</sup> The missionaries were often keener on making rapid conversions than encouraging a critical interest in the doctrines of Christianity. Since many of the missionaries were fundamentalist, believing in the literal interpretation of the Bible, their religious zeal was naive and they tended to be ignorant of the religious culture of the country. Moreover, the missionaries were especially unpopular with Buddhists because of their provocative methods of conversion and their equation of Buddhism with ignorance. For example, in 1868 the Church Missionary Society bewailed “the terrible position of the perishing heathen” and denounced Buddhists as “adversaries of truth.”<sup>8</sup> In 1899 the Wesleyan Appeal warned that “the forces of the enemy” were spreading all around and that Buddhism was “multiplying its agents and activities in opposing the progress of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> In a searing comment on missionary activity in the colonies, Frantz Fanon has referred to the “triumphant communiques” from missionary organizations as a “source of information concerning the implantation of foreign influences in the core of the colonised people.”<sup>10</sup> Such revealing communiques were frequent in Ceylon, as can be seen from the following observations made in 1904:

There have been 37 baptisms . . . one of the converts was baptised under the name of Rebecca. . . . Unfortunately she is married to a Buddhist husband. Not only is he a heathen but he is also an uneducated and uncivilised man. One of his favourite ways of preventing her going to church is to give her a lot of work to do on Sunday . . . but she finishes the work quickly and runs off to church with a happy face feeling it a joy to go into the House of the Lord. Another man from Kegalle goes about the village telling everybody about the Lord Jesus. Please pray for this man that he may become a great blessing as he lives in a very dark heathen district. In Kegalle, 65 children, all Buddhist, attend the children’s service. One boy, asked by his mother to work on Sunday said

7. See Sydney Wanasinghe, “Private Sector in Education,” Part I, *Young Socialist* 4, no.3, (Nov. 1968).

8. Extracts from “Jubilee Sketches of the Ceylon Missionary Society 1818–1868,” quoted in *Mahabodhi*, Dec. 1909.

9. “Wesleyan Appeal 1899.” Quoted in *Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Buddhist Theosophical Society*.

10. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 34.

"as I now believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it would be a sin for me to work on Sunday."<sup>11</sup>

After several centuries of foreign rule and aggressive proselytizing, Christianity came to be looked upon as "the government religion." A Baptist missionary, the Rev. J. Davies, complained that "prodigious numbers" of nominal Christians who were heathens called themselves "Christian Buddhists" or "Government Christians," and many people, when asked about their religion replied, "We are of the government religion." This was not surprising since all legal marriages had to take place in church and baptism was considered to be a government regulation. On this question of baptism a former Colonial Secretary, James Emerson Tennent, stated that, as it had been declared honorable by the Portuguese and had been made profitable by the Dutch, "The natives . . . after three hundred years of familiarity with the process, were unable to divest themselves of the belief that submission to the ceremony was enjoined by orders from the civil government."<sup>12</sup>

One result of continuous Christian activity from the time of the Portuguese arrival in Ceylon was the growth of a Christianized elite. By the 19th century, a profession of Christianity together with a knowledge of English had become not merely the symbols of fashion and progress, but also a means of securing employment in government service. Absorbing alien attitudes, some of the Ceylonese Christians looked down upon Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and regarded the Sinhalese and Tamil languages and customs, and even indigenous personal names, as a residue of Asian backwardness. The emergent middle class was also composed of non-Christians who had acquired wealth and position but were subject to a kind of double disqualification. They were not only politically debarred from participation in the government, like the other middle-class Ceylonese, but they were also considered to belong to "heathen religions." The non-Christian middle class had to therefore contend with two opponents—the British rulers and the Christian missionaries.

11. "Kandyian Western Itineration," 3rd Annual Letter of W. G. Shorten, Colombo, 1904. Available in Colombo National Museum Library.

12. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 266, quoting extracts from J. Emerson Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, pp. 88-89.

In reaction against militant Christianity, the other religious groups in Ceylon—the Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims—began to take an interest in the revival of their religions in the latter decades of the 19th century. Several common factors characterize the awakening among these three religious groups. The revivals were begun by learned religious figures supported and financed by English-educated members of the local middle class. The efforts at revival were inspired by an urge to stem the influence of Christianity which was threatening the very existence of the indigenous faiths. In order to repudiate Christian attacks on local beliefs as barbaric, Christianity was called a backward superstition and virulent campaigns denouncing Christian dogma were conducted by means of meetings, public debates, pamphlets and journals. This was accompanied by an attempt to purify the local religions by eliminating obscurantist practices. The leaders of these religions also challenged the monopoly of Christian missionaries in the field of education by starting schools that offered an education in English. Some of the leaders of the revival, who were essentially “modern” in outlook, were inspired by liberal and nationalist foreign movements. The three religions were further invigorated by catalysts from abroad—Colonel Olcott, Swami Vivekananda and Arabi Pasha—all men of strong personality and charismatic appeal who were greeted in Ceylon like long-awaited Messiahs with spectacular demonstrations of enthusiasm. The overt purposes of the religious revival were to regenerate the old faiths through new liberal influences, and to give the younger generation a modern education which would also foster an appreciation of the traditional religions and cultures. But there were also important economic and political implications in the religious revival of 19th century Ceylon. The revival was sponsored by members of the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim middle class, who began their challenge to British rule by asserting their own cultural identity through religious agitation.

Influenced by the Hindu religious revival in India, the Ceylon Hindus made an effort to reassert their faith and rid it of harmful influences. The leading figure in this campaign was Arumuga Navalar (1822–1879) who had been a pupil and a teacher at the Jaffna Methodist School. His translation of the Bible into Tamil and his

study of the Saivite faith, a branch of Hinduism devoted to Shiva, made him aware of the need to challenge missionary encroachments. His media for propagating Hinduism included the foundation of Hindu schools, such as the Saivaprakasa Vidyalaya in 1849, the establishment of an organization to propagate Saivism, and the setting up in Jaffna of a printing press and a paper, the *Udaya Bhanu*, which advocated religious and social reform. While condemning the ignorance of some Brahmin priests and their neglect of the Hindu religion, Navalar also led a campaign against the Christian missionaries. Strong denunciations of Christianity were made in pamphlets such as *Falsity of Alien Religions, Superstition in Christianity*, and *The Disgusting Bible*. Navalar pioneered polemical public speaking in Tamil and also the use of simple forceful prose which made his pamphlets available to a large audience and created the beginnings of a public opinion among the Ceylon Tamils. Navalar's concern with religious regeneration was linked with his political awareness. During the 1877 food shortage and cholera epidemic in Jaffna Navalar bitterly attacked the Government Agent of Jaffna, and in a memorandum to Governor Longden he accused the authorities of bribery, corruption and nepotism. When the question of the nomination of a member to the Legislative Council to represent the Tamils came up in 1879, Navalar successfully championed the Hindu, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, against his Christian rival, and spoke on his behalf at several meetings. Navalar's influence was not limited to Ceylon Hindu nationalists but also included the poet V. Kalyanasundera Mudaliyar, one of the founders in 1918 of the first trade union in Madras (the Madras Labour Union) and an associate of Annie Besant.<sup>13</sup>

The work begun by Navalar was carried on after his death in 1879 by other enthusiastic Hindus, who were also inspired by Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, and the educational activities of the Theosophical Society, whose headquarters were in Madras. In 1888, the Saiva Paripalana Sabhai was started to continue the religious and educational crusade, and a year later this organization began to publish the *Hindu Organ*, a fortnightly

13. See V. Muttucumaraswamy, *Arumuga Navalar: The Champion Reformer of the Hindus*, for details of Navalar's life. I am grateful to Dr. K. Kailasapathy for the information about Kalyanasundera Mudaliyar.

journal in English and Tamil. The Ceylon Hindu public became interested in the Indian religious revival and also in the nationalist movement in India. Indian nationalists and religious figures made frequent visits to Ceylon, one of the most memorable visits being that of Swami Vivekananda, who after his success at the Chicago Parliament of Religions broke journey in Ceylon in 1897, was received in a triumphal procession in Colombo, and spoke at several mass meetings in Jaffna. This enthusiastic welcome was to honor the champion of the Hindu religion who had also, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, "very eloquently and forcibly preached the gospel of nationalism."<sup>14</sup>

Two important figures in the Hindu revival after Navalar's death were the brothers Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Ponnambalam Arunachalam, both Western-educated, wealthy members of the Tamil middle class. Ramanathan, who had entered the Legislative Council in 1879, was very concerned about the lack of Hindu education in Ceylon, and in 1889 he complained that Hindus were "compelled to send [their] children to schools where [they] profess reverence for Christianity . . . and contempt for their own religion." He described this development as a cancer that was "slowly but surely poisoning our society." Arunachalam, a civil servant who in later years became a political and labor leader, was also strongly influenced by Hindu philosophy, and was a devotee of the Gnani Ramaswamy of South India. Arunachalam was concerned with regenerating the indigenous religions and on the Hindu revival he said, "We shall conserve what is good in our past, we shall endeavour to remove the excrescences that have crept into our religion and social system and to harmonize them with the needs and conditions of the modern world." Criticizing the rich Tamil-Hindus of Colombo he said, "[They] have been scandalously indifferent to their heritage and are fast becoming thoroughly denationalized. They care neither for Eastern nor Western culture. They scarcely go to places of worship . . . they see little of their saints and pandits . . . they have no time or inclination to study the Agamas and Upanishads or to practise their teaching; literature, music and art are perishing for lack of encouragement; their sacred language Sanskrit is nearly as unfamiliar to them as Hebrew or

14. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, p. 437.

Chinese; their mother-tongue Tamil has become a jargon of English, Sinhalese and Portuguese."<sup>15</sup>

The Muslim middle class of Ceylon, whose wealth was mainly founded on trade, also began to assert itself during the latter quarter of the 19th century. The inspiration came from the movement to reform Muslim education in India associated with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who founded the Anglo-Mohamedan College at Aligarh in 1875. The Aligarh movement was directed against the missionary monopoly of higher education and was also part of a campaign to combat certain practices that had corrupted Islam. One of the influential members of the Muslim community in Ceylon was Siddi Lebbe, a lawyer, who was a member of the Kandy Municipal Council. Influenced by the Aligarh movement and also by Navalar and Colonel Olcott, he began a weekly journal, the *Muslim Nesan*, in 1882, and the *Gnanadeepa*, in 1892, both of which aimed at encouraging social reform, modern education, and political representation of the Muslims. The other influence on Ceylon Muslims was that of the Egyptian nationalist Arabi Pasha, the leader of the 1882 revolt against British domination, who spent a long exile in Ceylon from 1883 until 1901. On landing in Colombo he was received by a large crowd and it was reported that "excitement reached its highest pitch . . . and it was with difficulty that the crowd was kept from rushing on to the jetty in their eagerness to obtain a glimpse of Arabi."<sup>16</sup> The presence in Ceylon of the famous Egyptian hero acted as a stimulus to the local Muslim middle class, who sought his advice on many issues and even began to copy his style of dress. Arabi advised the Muslims to modernize their education system and to introduce religious reforms. Under his guidance, Zahira College, the first Muslim school in Ceylon to offer a modern education in English, was founded in 1892. The Muslim revival, however, never became openly political and was confined to educational, cultural and religious matters.

The political and nationalist upsurge was strongest in the movement to revive Buddhism—the religion of the majority which had

15. See *The Buddhist*, 13 Dec. 1889, for the references to Ramanathan. See P. Arunachalam, *Speeches and Writings of Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam*, pp. 310-11, for Arunachalam's views on the Hindu revival.

16. A. M. A. Azeez, *The West Re-Appraised*. Mr. Azeez kindly gave me some important information on the Muslim revival.

suffered the most from Christian encroachment. The Buddhist revival was not merely a challenge to the aggressive tactics of the Christian missionaries and their monopoly of education; it was also an attempt to curb the dominant influence of Christianity, and the whole process of Christianization. The first phase of the revival was the initiative taken by Ceylonese themselves to restore Buddhist scholarship and to regenerate the religion. The chief personality of this crusade was Bhikku Migettuwatte Gunananda of the Kotahena temple, a militant monk who had established a printing press which issued anti-Christian pamphlets. A vivid account of this bhikku has been given by the American Theosophist leader Colonel Olcott:

The famed Migettuwatte was a monk with a very intellectual head, a bright eye and an air of perfect self-confidence and alertness. Some of the more meditative monks habitually drop their eyes when conversing with one, but he looked you square in the face, as befitted the most brilliant polemic orator of the Island, the terror of Missionaries. One could see at a glance he was more wrangler than ascetic . . . he was the boldest, most brilliant and powerful champion of Sinhalese Buddhism.<sup>17</sup>

A great impetus to Buddhist studies was given by the foundation in Ratmalana of a Pirivena (monastery school) by Bhikku Valane Siddhartha of Panadura, where distinguished scholars like Bhikku Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala received their training. Sri Sumangala became the Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena, founded in 1873, and three years later the Vidyalkara Pirivena was started with Bhikku Ratmalana Sri Dharmaloka as its principal. The Buddhists also began a campaign of religious reform. As a challenge to the religious orders which were based on caste divisions, a new caste-free order of monks, the Ramanya Nikaya, was formed in 1865 to propagate a pure form of Buddhism. Several wealthy Buddhist laymen, who had prospered during the economic expansion of the 19th century, financed the revival that was started by Buddhist monks. These included Thomas de Silva Amarasuriya of Galle, who had made his fortune in coconut planting and the arrack trade; Simon Perera Abeyawardena of Galle, who owned coffee and cinnamon plantations; the family of H. Dharmapala (later Anagarika Dharmapala), who owned a prosperous furniture business; Mrs.

17. H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves, 2nd Series, 1878-1883*, p. 157.

Cecilia Dias Illangakoon, a wealthy Buddhist who financed the publication of Colonel Olcott's "Buddhist Catechism," and many other rich Buddhists who were landowners, professional men or holders of "native" titles. One must also note the support given to the Buddhist movement by several Hindus, most notably P. Ramanathan and P. Arunachalam. The latter, as Police Magistrate in Kalutara in 1880, openly encouraged the Buddhists. On this question he wrote:

Under British rule there has been a tendency towards Christianity on the part of well-to-do Sinhalese, who think it a 'respectable religion' . . . being the religion of their masters. . . . Since my arrival here I have done as much as I can to support . . . Buddhism and the people are pleased to have an official in my position doing so. We shall soon succeed in knocking all idea of respectability as attaching to Christianity out of [their] heads.<sup>18</sup>

The most popular method for Buddhists to express their views at this time was by means of controversies on religious issues, carried on in journals and in public debates. These debates, which began with purely internal issues such as the impiety of certain monks, soon became a means of opposing Christianity, and from 1865 onwards public debates between Buddhists and Christians were held at Baddegama, Kelaniya, and Gampola. In 1873, Bhikku Migettuwatte Gunananda challenged the Rev. David de Silva of the Panadura Wesleyan Chapel to a public confrontation because de Silva had condemned Buddhism as a false religion. The result was the sensational two-day debate between the Christians, led by the Rev. de Silva, and the Buddhists, led by Bhikku Gunananda. In this debate, which was held in August, 1873, before a large and enthusiastic audience in Panadura, Gunananda was able to use his knowledge of the Bible and European free-thought literature to counter the arguments of the Christians. A contemporary account

18. Letter to Edward Carpenter, Carpenter Collection, Sheffield City Library, MSS.271, no.28. The support for the Buddhist revival movement from the wealthy Buddhists was recorded by Colonel Olcott in the account of his travels around Ceylon during which he always had the lavish hospitality of rich Buddhist families. On the day he and Mme Blavatsky arrived in Galle they stayed at the house of Mrs. Wijeratna, "the wealthy widow of a late P & O contractor . . . [who] lavished every hospitality upon us . . . such as we had never seen equalled." He also relates how at the estate of Mr. Simon Perera Abeywardena "fifty seven kinds of curry were served." See H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, pp. 158-59, 167.



of the event describes the impact of Gunananda's oratory: "Of all the weak points in Protestantism, he only touches upon those which will excite the ridicule of the people and evoke a smile of derisive contempt . . . and winds up with a brilliant peroration to which the 'great unwashed' listen with deep attention, and the accents of which ring in their ears for some minutes after delivery."<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Christian priest had used abstruse arguments and quoted extensively in Pali, Gunananda, who was a master of popular oratory, spoke in simple Sinhalese and scored a resounding victory in the eyes of the Buddhist public. At the end of the debate it was reported that "cries of Sadhu ascended from the thousands" and that the police had difficulty in controlling the crowds of excited Buddhists who continued shouting and demonstrating until Gunananda appealed for calm. An English missionary who was present at the debate, said, "It was one of the most remarkable things I have ever witnessed. *It proved in a striking manner the strong interest, the deep anxiety which exists among the masses of the people about their religion. It is one of the signs of the times.*"<sup>20</sup>

It was certainly an important sign of the times, for after the Panadura debate the cause of Buddhism became a rallying point associated with patriotism and a national renaissance. The elation and jubilation which was felt by Buddhists after this event was not limited to purely religious emotions. The feeling was that Christianity—the foreign religion, the religion of the colonial masters and the aggressive missionaries—had suffered a reverse, whereas Buddhism—the national faith, the religion of the masses—had triumphed.

### Foreign Influences on the Buddhist Revival

The Panadura debate was also important because it led to the second phase of the Buddhist revival, when the influence of foreign movements—in particular, Theosophy, free thought, and radicalism—predominated. The latter half of the last century in Britain

19. John Capper, ed., *The Panadura Controversy*.

20. *The Ceylon Friend*, Sept. 1893, quoted in *Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Buddhist Theosophical Society*, emphasis added.

was a period of imperialist expansion when ideas about the superiority of Western culture and Christianity predominated. In reaction against this trend, some intellectuals in the West became interested in the religions and cultures of Asian countries. This attraction for the Orient was particularly marked among those members of Victorian society who were engaged in protest against the established order, and included many dissenting groups such as freethinkers, Theosophists, and Socialists.

### *The Theosophists*

Many of these rebel groups played an important role in the Ceylon religious and national awakening. The editor of the *Times of Ceylon*, John Capper, had published an account in English of the religious controversy in Panadura, in the belief that it would be "read with interest by a large number of persons here and in Europe."<sup>21</sup> This proved to be correct, for the book impressed freethinkers and Theosophists who were themselves conducting a campaign against Christianity. The Theosophists started writing to Bhikku Gunananda, who in 1877, along with John Robert de Silva, Thomas de Silva Amarasuriya, and Bhikku Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, became members of the Theosophical Society of Britain. Bhikku Sumangala was elected to be one of the Society's vice-presidents in 1880, one direct result of this contact being that a number of leading Theosophists visited Ceylon, helped to found the Buddhist education movement, and also succeeded in inspiring a political awakening among the Buddhists.

The Theosophical Society had been formed in New York in 1875 by the Russian spiritualist, Helena Blavatsky, and an American lawyer, Colonel Henry Olcott, who became its first President. The background to the movement was an interest in spiritualism and the occult and the curiosity about the Orient that was prevalent in the West. The Theosophists combined a liberal, anti-Christian outlook with certain esoteric beliefs and an uncritical glorification of the "spiritual East." The motto of the Society was, "There is no higher religion than Truth," and its aim was to attract adherents of all religions. The Theosophist leaders claimed that they were

21. *The Panadura Controversy*.

instructed by a group of spirits with superhuman wisdom and powers who were referred to as the “Masters.” The Theosophical Society had two broad types of objectives. The first was connected with acquiring “a knowledge of natural law especially its occult manifestations,” and the Society claimed that Man, as “the highest development, physically and spiritually, on earth, of the creative cause,” should aim to solve “the mystery of his being.” It was, however, the second group of objectives that held greater appeal to the Buddhists of Ceylon and the Hindus of India, for these urged the Theosophists to:

... oppose the materialism of science and *every form of dogmatic theology, especially the Christian, which the chiefs of the Society regard as particularly pernicious*, to make known among Western nations the long-suppressed facts about Oriental religious philosophies . . . to counteract the efforts of missionaries to delude the so-called ‘Heathen’ and ‘Pagan’ as to the real origin and dogmas of Christianity . . . to disseminate a knowledge of the sublime teachings of that pure esoteric system . . . mirrored in the oldest Vedas, and in the philosophy of Buddha, Zoroaster and Confucius; finally and chiefly to aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity, wherein all good and pure men of every race, shall recognize each other as the equal effects of one Universal Infinite and Everlasting Cause.<sup>22</sup>

The Buddhists of Ceylon were no doubt less impressed by the “occult manifestations,” “the creative cause,” and the spiritualist side of the Theosophical Society, than by the stand the Society took against Christianity and missionary activities. The Theosophists’ understanding of Buddhist philosophy, including the laws of karma and rebirth, and the importance the Society attached to racial equality and “the Brotherhood of Humanity” were factors that the Buddhists appreciated.

As early as 1875, Madame Blavatsky had urged that Indian philosophy should be made known in Europe and America and that the British should be made to “respect the natives of India and Tibet more than they do.” This new approach to Eastern peoples and their religions met with an immediate response from Ceylon Buddhists, whose religion had hitherto been denounced as heathen, and who were considered by the Christian

22. C. Jinarajadasa, *The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society*, p. 29, emphasis added.

missionaries to be steeped in the darkness of the devil. Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) challenged the "infallibility" of both modern science and religion, attacked "theological Christianity, the chief opponent of free thought," and upheld "ancient beliefs" including reincarnation and the law of karma.<sup>23</sup> *Isis Unveiled* attracted a great deal of attention in Ceylon, and Bhikku Gunananda translated sections of it into Sinhalese. About this time, Colonel Olcott informed Gunananda that he and Madame Blavatsky had read about the Panadura controversy and intended visiting Ceylon on their way to India. Gunananda aroused considerable enthusiasm about the proposed visit by delivering lectures on the Theosophical Society and describing its founders as the first Europeans to visit Ceylon in order to propagate, rather than attack, Buddhism. When Olcott and Madame Blavatsky landed in Ceylon in May, 1880, there were great popular demonstrations of welcome. The impact of their arrival was described by Olcott as "an intoxicating experience":

The people could not do enough for us . . . we were the first white champions of their religion, speaking of its excellence from the platform, in the face of the missionaries, its enemies and slanderers. It was that which thrilled their nerves and filled their affectionate hearts to bursting. I may seem to use strong language, but in reality it falls far short of the facts.

The two Theosophists caused a sensation by reciting the five Buddhist precepts (*pansil*) at Vijayananda Vihare near Galle, and proclaiming themselves Buddhists before a large crowd. Olcott's description of this incident recalls the excitement felt after the Panadura debate: "When we had finished the last of the *silas*, and offered flowers in the customary way, there came a mighty shout to make one's nerves tingle, and the people could not settle themselves down to silence for some minutes."<sup>24</sup> The importance of the Theosophists' arrival was assessed by Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who wrote in 1880:

My efforts on behalf of the Buddhists have been helped from an unexpected quarter. The Theosophical Society has sent a number of delegates here to study and help Buddhism. Their presence in Ceylon will

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 52.

24. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, p. 165.

do much good as these stupid people who think their White masters are all Christians and therefore they should be Christians will now see that there is division among the Whites and some of them even think Indian religions worth studying and even embracing.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after the Theosophist leaders' arrival in Ceylon, the Colombo Buddhist Theosophical Society was formed to promote Buddhist education. Olcott returned to Ceylon in 1881 and toured the island making speeches and collecting money for the Buddhist school fund; he also compiled a Buddhist catechism and designed a Buddhist flag. Several other foreign Theosophist teachers and local Buddhists joined the movement and by 1899 there were 120 recognised Buddhist schools with 15,000 pupils.<sup>26</sup>

An important aspect of Olcott's campaign for the revival of Buddhism and Buddhist education was the popular enthusiasm it created among the rural and urban population. Olcott recounts the journeys he made in the travelling-cart in which he lived and carried all provisions:

. . . the arrivals at villages in the dawn; the people all clustered along the road to meet you, the bath under difficulties; early breakfast of coffee and appas; the discussion of plans with the Buddhist monks; the lecture in the open air with a great crowd of interested people. Then come the spreading of printed subscription sheets on a table, the registering of names, the sale of Buddhist tracts; the goodbyes, tom toms, waving of flags and cries of Sadhu! Sadhu! and the resumption of the journey . . . and so on and so on, day after day.<sup>27</sup>

The enthusiasm was not confined to the villagers, but also extended to the urban poor who contributed to the Buddhist fund. In August, 1881, Olcott and Gunananda addressed the prisoners of the largest jail in Colombo, and in September of that year Olcott

25. Letter to Edward Carpenter, Carpenter Collection, MSS.271, no.28.

26. Sydney Wanasinghe, "Private Sector in Education." Although Olcott's activities were greatly appreciated by the Buddhists—Bhikku Sri Sumangala referring to him as "a Second Asoka"—some members of the parent Theosophical Society criticized him for being too absorbed in Buddhism. In explanation of his work Olcott stated, "as for Buddhism, my aim is to help to purge away its impurities . . . and diffuse a knowledge of Karma and Reincarnation throughout Christendom. I am doing my Buddhist work as a private individual, yet at the same time in the spirit of a real President of this non-sectarian, altruistic and progressive Theosophical Society." Jinarajadasa, *The Golden Book*, p. 52. In later years, Anagarika Dharmapala and other Ceylonese Buddhists criticized Olcott and the Theosophists for being more inclined to Hinduism than to Buddhism.

27. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, p. 305.

was invited to lecture to another group of a hundred convicts. In the poorer districts of Colombo, the Theosophical Society distributed earthen savings-pots in which coppers were collected, and urban workers gave donations on payday to the Society. Olcott, who related many touching stories of spontaneous contributions made by the poor, claimed that "in this simple way several hundred rupees were collected within the year."<sup>28</sup>

Emotions aroused by the Buddhist revival also led to violence, the first serious clash between Christians and Buddhist taking place in the populous urban district of Kotahena where Saint Lucia's Cathedral and the famous Buddhist temple of Migettuwatte Gunananda were in close proximity. In 1883, Gunananda had organized the celebration of Buddhist festivities on a grand scale, and the Buddhist processions continued during Easter week to the annoyance of the Catholics. The result was a serious riot in which one person was killed and thirty persons, including twelve policemen, were hospitalized. A Commission of Inquiry appointed by the government to investigate the riot declared that the causes of the disturbance included the revival of Buddhism "and the controversies consequent thereon," the protracted Buddhist festival carried on during Holy week, the strong personality of "so bitter an opponent of the Christian religion" as Gunananda, and the inability of the Catholic authorities "to control the more ignorant of their flock."<sup>29</sup> The report did not satisfy the Buddhists, who claimed that the culprits had not been arrested. A Buddhist Defence Committee was set up and Colonel Olcott interviewed the Governor of Ceylon and put forward some of the grievances of the Buddhists, including the demand that *Vesak* (the day commemorating the Buddha's birth) be a public holiday. Olcott, while on a visit to Britain, presented the Buddhist case to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, condemned the activities of the "Romish mob" in Ceylon, and described the "discontent and despair" rapidly spreading among the Sinhalese Buddhists.<sup>30</sup> This discontent and despair was in fact the first manifestation of what may be described as a national awakening, which had been encouraged by Bhikku

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 322-23.

29. *Sessional Paper 13 of 1883*.

30. Quoted in *Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Buddhist Theosophical Society*.

Gunananda, Colonel Olcott, and the other active members of the Buddhist Theosophical Society of Ceylon.

### *British Rationalism*

Another important foreign influence on the Buddhist revival was the British rationalist movement of the 19th century which challenged the Christian religion and the established Church. The conflict between science and orthodox religion in Britain had accelerated after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, which seemed to show that the literal truth of the biblical account of the Creation had no scientific basis. The age of doubt had set in; attacks on Christianity became widespread and intellectuals openly proclaimed themselves atheists and freethinkers. One reason for the affinity between an Eastern religion and the antireligious exponents of free thought was the common aversion to Christianity. Another was that Buddhists, who had no belief in God, held that Buddhism was a rational philosophy which did not come into conflict with modern scientific advances.<sup>31</sup>

The leader of the freethinkers in Britain was Charles Bradlaugh, the head of the National Secular Society. He had been repeatedly elected to Parliament but had been denied a seat because of his refusal, as an atheist, to take the oath on the Bible. The bitter but successful struggle that Bradlaugh had waged on this issue made him and the freethinkers internationally known. In Ceylon, the literature of the free-thought movement was available and had been quoted during the Panadura debate. Those Buddhists who had been educated in Christian schools and were familiar with the Bible were able to absorb two types of anti-Christian literature—the serious books which were critical of Christian doctrines, and the popular journals and pamphlets in which the Bible was lampooned. The missionaries complained of the spread of the writings of European freethinkers and drew attention to the popularity in Ceylon of the works of Bishop Colenso of Natal, whose *The*

31. Annie Besant in her *Gospel of Atheism*, which was read by Buddhist intellectuals in Ceylon, said, "An Atheist is one of the grandest titles. . . . it is the Order of Merit of the World's heroes . . . Copernicus, Spinoza, Voltaire, Paine, Priestley . . . in the world's history it has meant the pioneer of progress."

*Pentateuch and Book of Joshua* (1862) created a sensation in England, selling 10,000 copies in six days. This book critically examined the Old Testament in the light of modern scientific knowledge and tried to show the absurdity of literally interpreting the Bible. To the pious, the idea that a Bishop was undermining the faith from within and thereby giving ammunition to the freethinkers and scientists caused a profound scandal. Another book read by Buddhists in Ceylon was the *Free-Thinker's Text-Book* by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, which included attacks on the clergy and Pope, and accounts of the ignorance of Bishops and the corruption of the Church; it condemned Christianity for having "set itself against all popular advancement, all civil and social progress . . . all improvement in the condition of the masses," and predicted that free thought would "plant the white banner of Liberty in the Temple of Humanity."<sup>32</sup> At the more popular ribald level were books like G. W. Foote's *Bible Romancings*, which made fun of the stories in the Bible, and his *Bible and Beer*, which aimed at shocking its readers with assertions such as that "the Bible abounds in passages in praise of drinking . . . it might be called the drunkard's textbook."<sup>33</sup> Also sought after was *Crimes of Christianity* by Foote and J. M. Wheeler, which gave a lurid account of the history of Christianity. Another "blasphemous" publication which was in demand by Ceylon Buddhists was *The Free-thinker*, a weekly journal started in 1881 by G. W. Foote, which contained satirical and humorous articles (such as "On the Advantage of Going to Hell,") and also included a series of caricatures called "Comic Bible Sketches," irreverent accounts of the women in the Bible, and a column of "Profane Jokes."<sup>34</sup> The popularity of *The Free-thinker* in Ceylon led to protests from the missionaries, one of whom complained that copies of this "English infidel paper" were not only to be found in libraries but were also being distributed to travellers on trains.<sup>35</sup> In 1883 *The Ceylon Free-thinker* was begun, and the first issue included an article on "The Evil Results of Missionary

32. Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, *Free-Thinker's Text-Book*, Part II, p. 476. A. Nethercot, in *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*, p. 208, refers to the popularity of the *Free-Thinker's Text-Book* in Ceylon.

33. G. W. Foote, *Bible and Beer*, p. 6.

34. A. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives*, p. 199. *The Crimes of Christianity* was recommended to its readers by *The Buddhist*, 9 Dec. 1892.

35. Letter of Rev. J. A. Spaar. Quoted in *The Theosophist*, Feb. 1882.



Influence in Ceylon.”<sup>36</sup> All these writings were read with relish by Buddhists, who realized that serious and satirical anti-Christian propaganda could provide them with powerful weapons for attacking and ridiculing the missionaries and criticizing the government.

Further, the vilification and harassment of those who challenged orthodox Christianity made them martyrs among the non-Christians. Bradlaugh and Foote were charged under the old blasphemy laws of England, and their trials were widely publicized. There was a wave of protest against these archaic laws, and G. W. Foote issued a pamphlet, *Blasphemy No Crime*, in which he stated that “the cry of ‘blasphemy’ comes with ill grace from the professors of a religion whose founder was crucified after being arraigned as a blasphemer.”<sup>37</sup> The acquittal of the accused was welcomed as a victory for freedom of speech, and the effect of the trials was to increase both the membership of the National Secular Society and the sale of free-thought literature. Another critic of Christian dogmatism punished for his outspoken views was Bishop Colenso, who was tried in the Capetown Cathedral, deprived of his ecclesiastical office, but later acquitted by the Privy Council. The persecution of the freethinkers whose writings had given such encouragement to the Buddhists in Ceylon perhaps made the Buddhists realize that if they, too, were to be bold enough to challenge the policy of the ruling elite in Ceylon, they had to be prepared to face considerable opposition.

### The Political Impact of the Buddhist Revival

One important aspect of the influence of freethinkers, radicals and Theosophists on Ceylonese Buddhists was the stimulus that the leaders of these movements gave to the development of nationalist sentiment. All three movements were broadly anti-Christian, anti-conservative and anti-imperialist in outlook. There was also a certain idealization of the Orient, whose peoples were considered to be superior in many respects to the missionaries and colonial bureaucrats under whose domination they lived.

36. *The Buddhist*, Aug. 1883.

37. G. W. Foote, *Blasphemy No Crime*, p. 2.

The political significance of the free-thought movement derived from the sympathy its leaders had for the national aspirations of other races. The journal of the National Secular Society, *The National Reformer*, which had "Republican and Astheistic" as its slogan, expressed very radical opinions on social, political, and religious issues, and showed concern for problems affecting Indian and colonial territories. Several of the personalities associated with the criticisms of Christianity had supported the political rights of people under colonial rule. Even Bishop Colenso of Natal had been involved in politics in Natal, and his condemnation of oppressive measures against the Africans and his advocacy of political reforms had led him into conflict with the white South Africans. Charles Bradlaugh, the leading figure of the free-thought movement, was also known for his opposition to oppressive political regimes. In the colonial sphere, he was a sharp critic of British policy and took up the cause of the Egyptians and the Zulus as well as advocating self-government for India. In 1884, when he visited India and addressed the Indian National Congress, he received a rousing reception and was showered with presentation addresses and gifts. The popularity that Bradlaugh achieved among dependent peoples was said to have been unique and "never before earned by an Englishman."<sup>38</sup> The respect the Indians had for Bradlaugh was mentioned by Mahatma Gandhi, who, when he was a law student, had attended Bradlaugh's funeral along with many of the Indians in London.<sup>39</sup>

In Ceylon, in the wake of the new wave of European liberal thinking on Christianity, came the more radical political doctrines. In 19th century Britain, free thought not only meant a deliberate rejection of the established religion, but also led to opposition of imperialism. A section of the Ceylon Buddhist intelligentsia, which so eagerly read the free-thought literature from Britain, was also influenced by the political implications of this challenge to orthodoxy, and they became interested in British radical politics. Once conformism on religious matters had been challenged it was easier to break down conformist opinions on politics. The best known of the British "extremists" who championed colonial peoples and had

38. H. Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: His Life and Work* 2:198.

39. M. K. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 91.

links with Ceylonese was Henry Labouchere, the most radical member of the House of Commons and one of the sharpest critics of the Queen, the Church of England, and the Conservative Party. He was associated with *Truth*, described as “the mouthpiece of advanced radicalism, a journal with a unique record whose influence was felt all over the English speaking world.” Labouchere’s unorthodox views were fearlessly expressed. For example, he openly claimed that he did not feel “the slightest loyalty towards the Royal family,” and he constantly attacked and ridiculed the Church of England. During the Afghan war Labouchere stated: “I see that some persons are proposing that prayers be offered on behalf of our troops in Afghanistan. Seeing that our troops are armed . . . would it not be Christian like . . . that prayers also be offered up for the unfortunate Afghans?” Labouchere took a keen interest in Arabi Pasha and the other Egyptian nationalists who had been exiled to Ceylon, and on the question of imperial expansion he courageously raised a dissenting voice: “I have always objected to all these protectorates and annexations . . . I assert that Africa belongs to the Africans, and we have no more right to the interior of Africa than has any other country of the globe.” It is no wonder then, that Labouchere, who was called a “horrible liar” by Queen Victoria and a “viper” by King Edward VII, was at the same time popular with a small minority of radicals in India and Ceylon, whose anti-Christian and anticolonial attitudes he so well reflected.<sup>40</sup>

The foreign group that had the most direct political influence was the Theosophical Society, which in India and Ceylon actively encouraged nationalist politics. Many of the founders of the Indian National Congress, including A. O. Hume, “the Father of Congress,” were active Theosophists. The numerous Indian political leaders who had links with the Theosophical Society included Mahatma Gandhi, who had been a member of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, and Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, and V. K. Krishna Menon, who had been members of the Theosophical Society. In India and Ceylon the authorities were very suspicious of the political influence of the Theosophists and distrusted the fraternization between the Theosophists and the local population.

40. For details on Henry Labouchere, see Hesketh Pearson, *Labby*.

In India, the government suspected the Society of sedition; Madame Blavatsky, who was alleged to be a Russian spy, and Olcott, who was called a “secret detective” by the *Times of India*, were followed by the police on their journeys in India.<sup>41</sup> The missionaries also carried on an aggressive campaign against the Theosophists, accusing them of being the cause of the “revival of unbelief” and calling them “philistines of error and infidelity stalking through the land.” Olcott and Blavatsky were condemned for lecturing against Christianity and indulging in “horrible blasphemies.”<sup>42</sup> The missionaries, who denounced Annie Besant for calling Indian civilization “the oldest, truest and best in the world,” warned of the consequences of such falsehoods: “The fruits of atheistic and materialistic teachings are now fearfully shown in some parts of Europe . . . in Russia, Nihilists teach there is no God, that there should be no government, no marriage . . . that all land should be divided and that every man should do as he likes.”<sup>43</sup>

It should be emphasized that many of the foreign Theosophists who were influential in India and Ceylon were persons who had ties with radical movements or were associated with liberal causes. Henry Olcott (1832–1906) was for a time the agricultural editor of the leading liberal newspaper in America, the *New York Tribune*, and later became a lawyer. He was an opponent of slavery and at the risk of his life he went to Virginia on behalf of his paper to report the hanging of the abolitionist, John Brown. During the American Civil War, Olcott enlisted in the Northern army and made his name as a courageous investigator into corrupt practices and frauds involving army and navy contracts.<sup>44</sup> After the war he developed an interest in spiritualism. Olcott was the personal friend of many liberals of his day, including Charles Bradlaugh, whose militant atheism he had praised.

Several foreign Theosophists who taught in Ceylon were liberal in their political outlook, contemptuous of missionaries and bureaucrats, and unconventional in their behavior. Among these teachers were Fritz Kunz, the Principal of Ananda College; F. L.

41. J. Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, p. 131; Jinarajadasa, *The Golden Book*, p. 55.

42. Letter of Rev. J. A. Spaar. Quoted in *The Theosophist*, Feb. 1882.

43. *Who is Mrs. Besant and why has she come to India?*

44. J. Ransom, *A Short History*, p. 37.

Woodward, the Principal of Mahinda College, Galle; W. U. Moore, Principal of Siddhartha College, Balapitiya, and later Ananda College; Mrs. Musaeus Higgins, Principal of Musaeus College; and Mrs. A. E. Preston, who in later years was a founding member of the Ceylon Labour Party. Another Theosophist, J. Bowes Daly, who had been in Parnell's Irish Home Rule Movement, was the Manager of Buddhist schools in Ceylon from 1889 to 1890. In a stirring message to the officials in charge of Buddhist schools, Bowes Daly wrote: "Men of Ceylon, don't be cowards and poltroons . . . Sinhalese, close up your ranks; don't allow yourselves to be intimidated by proselytisers who have failed to do any good in their country, and come among you preaching Beer and Bible."<sup>45</sup>

One of the most striking personalities of the Theosophist movement was Annie Besant, a one time freethinker and Socialist who had been in several protest movements. As an atheist she had been closely associated with Bradlaugh and the National Secular Society, and as a Socialist she was at the center of the radical agitation and outburst of unrest in the 1880's. Annie Besant was one of the most active members of the Fabian Society. In 1886, on behalf of the Society, she delivered a lecture on "Socialism and Political Action" and proposed that Socialists should organize themselves as a political party "for the purpose of transferring into the hands of the working community, full control over the means of production and distribution of wealth." Annie Besant also became the center of the sensational match-girls' strike in 1888, the first of a wave of militant strikes in Britain. In a radical journal *Link*, she had written an article entitled "White Slavery," which exposed the deplorable working conditions at the Bryant and May match factory. Along with Herbert Burrows, Bernard Shaw, and other Socialists, she organized a strike at the match factory and formed a trade union of match workers. As a result of the spectacular victory of the match-girls' strike, Annie Besant led a campaign against "sweatshop" conditions in small industries, and became one of the leaders of the movement to form unions among the unorganized workers. In later years, when Annie Besant visited India and Ceylon her courageous past as a radical champion of the victimized and the underprivileged was not forgotten. The contact between Annie

45. *The Buddhist*, 16 Jan. 1891.

Besant and the East came through her adherence to the Theosophical Society after she had severed links with the freethinkers. She made her home in India in 1893 and participated in Indian nationalist politics. In 1915 she formed the Home Rule League in India and was imprisoned for sedition, and, in 1917, she was elected President of the Indian National Congress. Mrs. Besant made several visits to Ceylon, the first being in 1893 when she received a tumultuous welcome from local Buddhists. In Colombo, crowds lined the streets to greet her, and in Kandy she was conducted through the streets in a torchlight procession.<sup>46</sup> Her public lectures also aroused great interest among the middle-class Buddhists. A pamphlet, *Annie Besant in Ceylon*, published by Ceylon's pioneer trade unionist, A. E. Buultjens, attributed the success of the visit to her sympathy for "the weak and the oppressed," her advocacy of freedom of opinion, and her belief in the doctrines of karma and reincarnation; the visit was said to have "*roused into enthusiasm . . . a people whose religion had received for ages no other treatment from non-Buddhists but ridicule and contempt.*"<sup>47</sup> Herein lay the strength of the Theosophists' impact on Ceylon. The Buddhists, who were no longer prepared to tolerate "ridicule and contempt" on religious matters, were preparing to assert themselves on social and political issues.

In considering the political aspects of the Buddhist revival and the Theosophical movement, an important factor to be stressed is the growth of public opinion among the Sinhalese, attributable to the influence of Buddhist journals in Sinhalese dealing with political and social issues. It should be recalled that whereas the total literacy rate was 26.4 percent in 1911, the male literacy rate had made rapid strides, rising from 25 percent in 1881 to 40 percent in 1911,<sup>48</sup> which indicated the growth of a wider reading public. In 1880, the Buddhist Theosophical Society started a Sinhalese journal, the *Sarasavi Sandarāsa*, whose main contributor, Anagarika Dharmapala, in later years became a Buddhist nationalist and a supporter of labor agitation. This journal, edited by H. S. Perera, criticized government policy and exposed the misdeeds of

46. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives*, pp. 243-75.

47. A. E. Buultjens, *Annie Besant in Ceylon*.

48. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 601.

minor government officials. Through the columns of this paper, public opinion, which had been dormant among the Sinhalese, found a means of expression. The accusation of sedition was often made against the editor, who was prosecuted for libel on several occasions, and in 1915 the paper was banned. Another influential paper was the *The Sinhala Bauddhaya* (founded in 1906 by the Mahabodhi Society), in which Anagarika Dharmapala wrote a regular column called *Dānagathayuthu Karunu* (things that should be known) where he would comment in forceful language on all topics of the day, including the prevalent alien religious beliefs and social practices. This paper also attracted the attention of the authorities and was banned during the riots of 1915. A popular journal was the satirical Sinhalese paper the *Kavatakathikaya*, which had humorous articles and verses on current social and political issues. In addition to newspaper propaganda, public opinion among the urban and rural population was also aroused by the crusade of the Theosophists, who travelled to all parts of the country establishing contact among the Buddhists, holding meetings, starting schools, and awakening interest in issues such as religion, education, and politics. In this way, through the influence of journalism and propaganda, hitherto submerged groups in society began to express their opinions on current issues. This trend was especially prevalent among the urban skilled workers, who developed a willingness not only to express their views but also to challenge the authorities and the employers.

Another important link between the Buddhist revival and working-class agitation was the fact that the Buddhist education movement produced the labor leaders who were willing to give direction and guidance to the workers and to assume control of workers' organizations. This was partly due to nationalist ideals and a sense of social awareness that was fostered in Buddhist schools and encouraged in the publications issued by Buddhist associations. The English journals of both the Buddhist Theosophical Society (*The Buddhist*) and the Mahabodhi Society (*The Mahabodhi Journal*) were read by middle-class Buddhists. Although they were ostensibly religious publications, their anti-Christian articles had a strong nationalist content. For, as Colonel Olcott had stated in the first issue of *The Buddhist*, the paper was not limited

to religious revival but aimed at keeping its readers informed of "the advance of thought in the West," showing them that the "superstitions of Europe were being cleared away, leaving room for the pure light from the East to shine through."<sup>49</sup>

In addition, the religious controversies between Christianity and Buddhism, which were carried on in journals and pamphlets in both English and Sinhalese, generated a great amount of enthusiasm. Attacks on Buddhism in Catholic Sinhalese papers like the *Gnanartha Pradipaya*, and ribald anti-Christian pamphlets such as the famous *Durvadi Hrudaya Vidaranaya* (Dispelling Illogical Beliefs) by Bhikku Battaramulle Sri Subhuti, which was banned, had a large reading public. Of the polemic literature in English, the most sensational book criticizing Christian dogma was *The Credentials of Christianity*, anonymously written in 1909 but attributed jointly to Armand de Souza, A. E. Buultjens, and D. B. Jayatilaka. Through this book the Buddhist intelligentsia expressed its new-found confidence: "It is no longer easy to persuade Eastern peoples that their religions are idolatry and devil-worship. The intellect of the East . . . has mastered Western languages and is able to turn upon the Christian missionary subtle reasoning powers." The prophesies of the Old Testament were called the "babblings of mad men" and the Gospels were described as "inauthentic . . . full of legends, incredible myths and improbable marvels." Commenting on the conflict between Christianity and science, the book stated, "Science has triumphed, the reign of superstition is over and the world moves on to advancement." These charges evoked an immediate response. The missionaries held several meetings and wrote pamphlets to refute the allegations; the Catholic Archbishop, denouncing the book as "impious and scurrilous," ordered Catholics to organize penitential processions to atone for the scandal, and issued a decree forbidding the buying or reading of this book. "We order those who are in possession of the same to throw it in the flames."<sup>50</sup>

In attacking Christianity in such a virulent manner, the Bud-

49. *The Buddhist* 1, no. 1 (1888).

50. *The Credentials of Christianity*, pp. 3, 38, 146. For Archbishop Coudert's statement see *Ceylon Independent*, 23 Aug. 1909. Mr. Donovan Moldrich kindly lent me these documents. For a missionary reply, see A. G. Fraser and K. Saunders, *Some Credentials of Christianity*.



dhists were also indirectly expressing their resentment against the government and its officials, who were Christians. The language used in Buddhist publications against Christians and missionaries was unrestrained. For example, Christianity was called a “degrading superstition” and an “unmitigated curse.” The missionaries, too, were constantly subjected to name-calling. They were often referred to as “enemies” and complaints were also made of “ignorant catechists who infest our streets” and of the “epileptic howls” of the Salvation Army.<sup>51</sup> The attack on missionaries by C. W. Leadbeater, the General Manager of Buddhist schools from 1885–1889, was characteristic of the type of claim that was made for the supposed superiority of Eastern beliefs:

Thoughtful Orientals have long wondered how it was possible for nations which have achieved such intellectual triumphs as the English and Americans could fail to see the absurdity of sending crowds of half-educated missionaries to the East to teach a grotesque superstition to people who are not only far better informed on religious matters than themselves, but are also as races very far in advance of the West in morality.<sup>52</sup>

The political logic of the argument was not lost on the Buddhists. For on what basis could those who believed in a “grotesque superstition” claim to politically dominate a people who were “far in advance of the West in morality”?

It was therefore to be expected that the political discontent of the Buddhists began to manifest itself fairly soon after the formation of the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1880. This feeling of discontent was a natural outcome of religious resurgence. The Buddhists, aware of their weakness vis-a-vis the Christian missionaries, were also conscious of their lack of political power, and the Legislative Council therefore became a target for criticism. There was open resentment that the Sinhalese representative in the legislature was a Christian who misrepresented rather than represented the Buddhists. “We should surely have an able and willing advocate of our own persuasion in the legislature, rather than a Christian whose sympathies cannot be strictly with our religion,” proclaimed the Buddhist Theosophist journal in 1888, also alleging that the

51. See *The Buddhist*, 11 Nov. 1892, and 6 and 13 Sept. 1889.

52. *The Buddhist*, 27 Oct. 1893.

choice of the Sinhalese representative was determined by caste and family connection.<sup>53</sup> The main grievance was that the Legislative Council had been unreformed since 1833 and that the Sinhalese, who formed the majority of the population, were represented in the Council of 16 members by a single member for the Low-Country Sinhalese, and after 1889, by another member to represent the Kandyan Sinhalese. The Sinhalese Buddhists had a further grievance: although about 90 percent of the Sinhalese population was Buddhist, for eighty years (until the reforms of 1912) the six members nominated by Governor, who in succession represented the Low Country Sinhalese, were Protestant Christians, all but one being closely related.<sup>54</sup>

One of the incidents that demonstrated the gulf between the elite and the masses and confirmed the Buddhist mistrust of the Christian Sinhalese representative was the proposal in 1885 to make the Buddhist *Vesak* day a public holiday. Governor Gordon was in favor of this but the Sinhalese representative, A. L. de Alwis, disagreed and said he preferred the Sinhalese New Year to be made a holiday. The Governor declared that he felt "considerable difficulty" as the Government was "not in accord with the gentleman who represents the Sinhalese," but the Lieutenant Governor commented that if the representative of the Sinhalese community thought that *Vesak* should not be a public holiday "he ought to be the best authority on that point." In fact he was not the best authority, and it was left to the Hindu, P. Ramanathan to stress the strong feelings of the Buddhists and to read out a letter on the subject sent to him by High Priest Sri Sumangala. When it came to a vote, de Alwis hesitatingly agreed to the *Vesak* holiday and added, "It is not my wish, but it is the wish of the majority of the natives."<sup>55</sup>

It has been noted that the Buddhist Theosophical movement played an important role in the development of public opinion,

53. *The Buddhist* 1, no.9 (Aug. 1888).

54. They were James de Alwis, J. P. Obeysekera, A. L. de Alwis, A. de A. Seneviratne, S. C. Obeysekera and A. J. R. de Soysa. Except for de Soysa, who belonged to the Karava caste, the others were members of the Obeysekera-Bandaranaika family group of influential landowners of the Goigama caste.

55. *Legislative Council Debates 1885*, p. 84. The representative of the mercantile interests, G. B. Leccham, said, "I think it is hardly in the spirit of the times to extend the number of religious festivals kept as public holidays."

and that through its schools the new generation of Ceylonese were given an education which blended Buddhism and nationalism with radical ideas from the West. Not unexpectedly, therefore, the work of the foreign Theosophists in Ceylon aroused suspicion in official quarters and the activities and writings of the teachers and students of the leading Buddhist schools were closely watched by the police. The Inspector-General of Police, H. L. Dowbiggin, in a confidential report to the Governor, warned that the influence of the Theosophists over the younger generation was "not helpful to Great Britain"; the Theosophists, he claimed, were immoral, had "disordered minds," and should be "put away and prevented from preaching doctrines which excite the East which is unable accurately to judge the class of people who give them this advice." At the outbreak of the First World War, the police alleged that some of the leading members of the Theosophical Society were pro-German. Fritz Kunz, an American from Wisconsin of German ancestry who was the Principal of Ananda College, was watched by the police, who even censored his mail and reported the discovery of a letter from a Theosophist in Madras saying, "Our dear President [Annie Besant] is trying her level best to stir Indians up for self-government and I hope she will succeed." The Principal of Musaeus College, Mrs. Musaeus Higgins, who was German, was said to be in touch with the German Buddhist monks in Ceylon who were interned during the war; Inspector Dowbiggin complained that "feelings of loyalty to Great Britain find no place in the education she imparts. God save the King is never sung and the King's birthday is not observed. The history taught in this and other Buddhist schools is the history of Ceylon . . . not one which teaches loyalty to Great Britain but rather dwells on the glorious past of the Buddhists."

The anxiety of the authorities at the growth of nationalist sentiment among the young generation is seen from the scrutiny that was made of articles and poems in school magazines. The Inspector-General of Police even drew the Governor's attention to the *Mahabodhi College Magazine* of May, 1915, which included a poem, "Lay the Proud Usurpers Low," by Walter Scott. Another article in this magazine to which the police objected was one which alluded to British rule in Ceylon, saying "nothing is permanent and everything is transient." The police also noted that the Dharma-

raja College magazine contained an article which stated, "it is [a] duty peculiarly our own to work for the future glory of this land. I trust that the old boys will not be found wanting when the time comes." The police further alleged that Buddhist school buildings were used for political meetings and that these schools were managed by "undesirable persons" connected with "undesirable associations" who imparted an anti-British education which included "politics of a vicious type."<sup>56</sup>

In this chapter the emphasis has not been on the religious importance of the revival of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, but on the significance of these developments for the labor and nationalist movements. The political aspects of the revolt against Christianity have been highlighted in order to stress the links between religion, political agitation, and the labor movement. The revival movement was sponsored by the new middle class of entrepreneurs and professionals, who were excluded from all political participation. The movement of religious revival, strengthened by foreign support from Theosophists, freethinkers, and radicals, had several important results. The most significant was the impetus it gave to nationalism, which took on a more organized form after the turn of the century. Other notable results were the education movement, which produced several generations of radical leaders, and the growth of public opinion among the Sinhalese and Tamil reading public. In the chapters that follow, the close interconnection between religion and the labor and nationalist movements, and the role of the middle class in these movements, will be discussed.

56. These quotations by the Inspector-General of Police are from CNA, "Confidential Report on the Riots," 14502 of 1915, and PRO, "Confidential Report on Buddhist Schools," 6 Aug. 1915, C.O.54/785.

## Chapter 3

# The Leadership of the Labor Movement

*The so-called educated Sinhalese, the product of missionary civilization, is a useless entity and does nothing for the welfare of the Sinhalese race. Ignorant of the momentous questions of the day beyond reading a local newspaper, he is unfit to give an opinion on any important question. Social and political reformers, are not to be found . . . and as long as this state of affairs continues we cannot expect any progress. The ruling Briton knows that there is no educated public opinion among the Sinhalese people. He therefore treats the people with contempt.*<sup>1</sup>

Anagarika Dharmapala, 1892

*Agitators must be taught that disorder will not be tolerated in this colony; that the law must be obeyed and shall be enforced; that defiance of the law will not be allowed; and that any symptoms of disorder will be put down by all the means and resources at the disposal of Government, even should blood have to be shed.*<sup>2</sup>

Sir Joseph West Ridgeway, 1901  
(Governor of Ceylon)

With the rapid development of the plantation economy, the beginnings of small urban industries, and the emergence of wage labor and semiwage labor, the conditions for the growth of a labor movement existed. But the working class was not strong enough to form its own organization without the assistance of "outsiders." In this chapter several issues connected with the leadership of working-

1. A. Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness, a Collection of Speeches . . . of Anagarika Dharmapala*, p. 525.

2. Sir Joseph West Ridgeway, "Speech at Volunteers Camp, 27 September 1901," in *Speeches of Sir Joseph West Ridgeway, 1896-1903*.

class organizations in a colonial economy, the attitudes of various sections of the middle class to the question of labor agitation, and the careers of the pioneers of the trade-union movement in the country will be discussed. For this purpose, reference is made to two broad class divisions in Ceylonese society: the working class, who were dependent for their livelihood on wages; and the middle class—landowners, professional men, and others who may have been from “upper-class” or “lower middle-class” origins. A further distinction is made between several elite groups among the middle class. These include the British rulers and the traditional and modern indigenous middle class.

## The Role of the Middle Class

### *The British Rulers*

In 19th-century Ceylon, the ruling class, composed of those who directly wielded power and participated in the task of political decision-making, was restricted to the Governor, the Executive Council, the higher rungs of the civil service, and the influential European members of commercial and plantation organizations. Between 1890 and 1915 these persons, who reflected the ideology of British conservatism, opposed trade unionism or any form of organization and agitation by the workers. The Governors and senior civil servants who ruled Ceylon (apart from notable exceptions like W. T. Stace and Leonard Woolf) were usually orthodox believers in the imperial mission of Britain, and although there were some liberals in the Colonial Office in London, the opinions of “the men on the spot” carried greater weight in policy decisions. On the issue of political reform there was therefore no question of granting any significant measures of self-government to the Ceylonese, and manifestations of labor discontent in the Colony were immediately branded as seditious by the officials.

During the years from 1890 to 1913, the Governors of Ceylon, unlike some of their predecessors, were mainly products of an army or police background, with experience in conducting colonial wars

and quelling the rebellious Irish.<sup>3</sup> Sir Arthur Havelock, the Governor from 1890 to 1895, for example, was trained at the Military Academy of Sandhurst; he had served in many “outposts of the Empire”—Mauritius, the Cape, Seychelles, Fiji, Trinidad—and had led gunboat expeditions in West Africa. The next Governor, Sir Joseph West Ridgeway (1895–1903), was also a military man; he had joined the Indian Army at the age of sixteen, participated in wars on the Afghan and Russian frontiers, and had been Under Secretary for Ireland. Governor Ridgeway’s attitude toward “law and order” can be seen from his comments on a minor riot over taxes that occurred in Ambalangoda in 1903: “Never have I known a more deliberate and determined onslaught on the police and officers of the government than that which occurred at Ambalangoda, and my experiences in Ireland and in India makes this a subject on which I can speak with some authority.”<sup>4</sup> Ridgeway’s successor, Sir Henry Blake (1903–1907), started his career as a cadet in the Irish police and was appointed to be one of the five special Magistrates to “pacify” the Irish. Blake was successively Governor of the Bahamas, Jamaica and Hong Kong, but his nomination as Governor of Queensland (Australia) was withdrawn because the Irish in that State objected to his record of repression in Ireland. The next Governor, Sir Henry McCallum (1907–1913), also from a military background, was perhaps the most conservative figure of them all. He had served in Malaya and Hong Kong, and while Governor of Lagos in 1897 he led a mission against the French to preserve British conquests. From 1901 to 1907 he was Governor of Natal, during the latter part of the war against the Boers. His period in Ceylon was marked by continuous clashes with the Ceylonese nationalists. It is therefore clear that the Governors who ruled Ceylon until 1915 were not only out of touch with liberal opinion in England and with nationalism in the colonies, but also had very fixed ideas on how to combat “subversive” political and labor movements.

It was perhaps only to be expected that in spite of the constant protests and petitions by various groups of workers about wages

3. The details about the careers of the Governors are taken from H. A. J. Hulgalle, *British Governors of Ceylon*.

4. Ridgeway, “Speech at Volunteers Camp,” in *Speeches*.

and conditions of work, the Governors, government officials, and employers showed great resistance to change. They keenly resented any interference and were always ready to point a finger to other areas where wages and conditions were worse. The planters constantly argued that the wage level on Ceylon plantations was higher than that of South Indian peasants; on this topic a well-known British planter claimed that though planters in Ceylon were always accused of exploiting plantation workers, the fact was that "the Indian coolies [were] just about three times better off than in their native country."<sup>5</sup> Of course this was not saying much, as even Governor McCallum must have realized when, on the question of women and girls (who received 12 to 36 cents a day) working on road repairs in Ceylon, he said, "The rates of pay given compare favourably with those ruling on estates in Ceylon or in South India."<sup>6</sup> Employers and officials were also concerned with maintaining the existing pattern of wages and conditions among the labor force and opposed any interference with the status quo by government regulations. They often drew an idyllic picture of a contented labor force, and warned of the dangers of tampering with the "freedom" of the workers. In 1893, a newspaper claimed that the "native workman" was as a rule "perfectly happy,"<sup>7</sup> and in 1908 the Governor warned that restrictive labor regulations would not merely result in "the disintegration of our labour force," but would also be regarded by the workers themselves as "an inexplicable act of oppression and interference with the freedom of action which has belonged to them since the beginning of history."<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of trade unions it was often left to British members of Parliament to express some of the grievances of the colonial working class. But the government and employers in Ceylon greatly resented British politicians enquiring into and criticizing labor conditions. A planter expressed the strong class consciousness of many of the British in Ceylon, when, in a reference to the first Labour Member of Parliament (who was of working-class origin) he said, "I am not surprised at the antipathy of Englishmen to their

5. T. Y. Wright, *Ceylon in My Time, 1889-1949*, p. 106.

6. PRO, letter of Governor McCallum to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 7 July 1908, C.O.54/718.

7. *Ceylon Independent*, 21 Aug. 1893.

8. PRO, letter of Governor McCallum, 7 July 1908, C.O.54/718.



countrymen of the Keir Hardie type who are adept at destroying speedily what took generations of the better type of their race to build up.”<sup>9</sup> In 1908, when a member of the House of Commons asked the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies whether he proposed to put a stop to the employment of female labor in metal breaking on Ceylon roads, the Governor, showing his annoyance at such “interference,” wrote:

It would be to the last degree unwise to sacrifice the comfort and prosperity of a large and contented body of men and women, risk the lives of a considerable number of little children and destroy the labour forces of the Colony in deference to the sentiment on the part of certain persons in England which is not shared by and is not applicable to the Tamil population, and is in fact opposed to their every notion of propriety and justice.<sup>10</sup>

The prevalent feeling among officials was that these liberal busy-bodies and agitators in Britain were trying to upset a contented labor force, whereas the position of the workers in Ceylon was better than that of the British working class. This illusion was persistently fostered by employers. For example, in 1904 the Liberal Member of Parliament for Manchester raised the question of the need to provide an elementary vernacular education on Ceylon plantations “because the children of the Tamil labourers [were] devoid of facilities for education.” But in reply, the Chairman of the Planters’ Association warned that just as universal education had denuded British agriculture of its labor supply, “a too rapid spread of education among the same class in Ceylon might bring about a similar result.” He also claimed that because a working child ceased to be a burden to his parents, “no sensible man . . . would think of forcing these children to attend school,” and added, “the lot of Ceylon estate children is an infinitely healthier and happier one than that of the poorer classes in crowded manufacturing towns at home.”<sup>11</sup> Even in 1919, the Harbour Engineer, commenting on a petition by workers for shorter hours, contrasted the

9. Wright, *Ceylon in My Time*, p. 105.

10. PRO, letter of Governor McCallum, 7 July 1908, C.O.54/718.

11. *Planters Association Year Book 1904*. The question in the House of Commons was asked by C. E. Schwann (later Swan), the Liberal Member for Manchester from 1886–1918. He was also associated with the agitation to abolish the paddy tax in Ceylon.

misery he had seen in the London docks to the condition of Colombo harbor workers, who had, he claimed, the "amenities of a tropical city" where many of the "necessities of healthful living" such as clothing, fire, and light were "matters so little wanted and easily obtained."<sup>12</sup>

### *The Ceylonese Middle Class*

Reference has been made to the middle class, consisting of the British rulers and the indigenous group, but since the British in Ceylon were openly against trade unionism and working-class agitation, one has to examine the potential for leadership of the labor movement that existed among the Ceylonese middle class. In 19th-century Ceylon, the latter group wielded influence in society but did not come within the ambit of political decision-making. This class was composed of agricultural landowners, coconut and rubber planters, merchants, small industrialists, professional men, and others whose claims to "high status" in society were based on property ownership, caste, occupation, education, or combinations of these factors. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between the traditional and the modern sections of this indigenous group. The Sinhalese traditional elite included landowners, village officials, influential Buddhist monks, "ayurvedic" physicians, teachers, and others in the community who held positions of influence in the non-urban areas for the most part, and whose roots lay in the indigenous language, religion, and culture. Class and caste tended to be almost synonymous in the traditional society where the elite were members of the highest caste—the Goigama, except in coastal areas where there were important concentrations of the Karava, Salagama, and Durava castes. In the Tamil regions of Ceylon the pattern was even clearer, with the landowner, priest, teacher, and ayurvedic physician forming the key personalities in village society and belonging to the high castes.

The impact of foreign rule and the economic expansion of the 19th century changed the traditional class-caste hierarchical pattern and gave rise to a modern middle class composed of a multi-racial group of persons educated in English, and often converts to

12. CNA, Enclosure, Labour Advisory Committee, File R.O.PF.2899C.

Christianity, who had not merely assumed an English style of life in terms of dress, names, and habits, but had also adopted prevalent British social and political attitudes. This Westernized group conformed to Lord Macaulay's vision of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." Literacy in English is perhaps a rough method of judging their numerical strength. In 1911 it was estimated that of the total population of 4 million, 71,000 (excluding European and Burghers) were literate in English, that is 1.8 percent of the total population. If one included the Europeans and Burghers, the figure would be 95,000 or 2.3 percent of the total population in 1911.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the pioneer Ceylonese capitalists, who had derived their wealth from coconut planting, graphite (plumbago) mining, contracts for cart transport, liquor distilling, and small industries, gave their children an education in English so that they could enter government service and the liberal professions and thereby become a part of the modern strata of society. The social breakthrough of the new rich into modern society came through education. For, as E. B. Denham observed, "The older generation regard education as an investment for their children, which will enable them to take up positions to which their newly acquired wealth entitles them."<sup>14</sup> The leading schools in Ceylon at that time were predominantly missionary. The education imparted, which had a Christian, Western bias, was modeled on the English public school system and was geared to the Cambridge Senior examination. For example, at St. Thomas' College, Colombo, there was a boarding house with house masters and prefects, and the subjects taught were English, Latin, Greek, Christianity, mathematics, English history, and world geography. Although there was no University in Ceylon in the 19th century, there were medical, law, and technical colleges in Colombo. Some of the richer students and the government scholarship winners went abroad for their studies, mainly to Oxford, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court in London, and returned to Ceylon to take jobs in the government service, to practice medicine or law, or to look after inherited property. In

13. E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911*, p. 433.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

their student days in Britain, some of these Ceylonese came under the influence of British liberalism, but the majority did not appear to have taken much interest in either British politics or the British labor movement.

Even the social life of the Westernized Ceylonese at the turn of the century was an extension of Victorian England, "the journals published, the balls given by well-to-do families, the clubs, the race meetings, the dog carts and phaetons, the morning coats, evening dress and top hat, the whiskered faces and corseted figures," were described as being a natural accompaniment of the English language which had "taken deep root in Ceylon."<sup>15</sup> Many foreign observers also commented on this feature, among them the American writer Mark Twain, who visited Ceylon in 1903 and was struck by the sight of "sixteen prim and pious little Christian black school girls dressed to the last detail, as they would have been . . . on a summer Sunday in an English or American village."<sup>16</sup> In 1911, a civil servant commented on the cultural alienation of what he termed the 2,000 English educated "vernacular illiterates":

Most of them come from the towns, and belong to the wealthier classes. Over 1,700 are low-country Sinhalese of whom 1,500 are Christians. All these . . . vernacular illiterates, are practically denationalised in the sense that they can neither read their own native papers nor write in their mother-tongue to their relations friends and servants . . . yet [they] have received a . . . liberal education in English . . . and have been educated to meet a demand.<sup>17</sup>

*The Conservatives.* In this study, the modern section of the middle class has been divided into three groups, "conservatives," "moderates," and "radicals." The conservatives were those members of the Ceylonese middle class who could be considered economically and politically to be the local spokesmen of the imperial power, and who constantly applauded the political blessings of British rule. Many of them were large landowners and people who officially served the British as "native advisors." Ludowyk has described them as follows: "They were landowning gentry . . . loyal subordinates of the British . . . the more important in the group the

15. H. Passé, "The English Language in Ceylon," p. 76.

16. Mark Twain, *On the Damned Human Race*, p. 234.

17. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 441.

godsons of Colonial Governors. . . . By their official position and their long associations with the rulers both Dutch and English, they had come to be regarded and to regard themselves as the *crème de la crème* of the Ceylonese.”<sup>18</sup> The conservatives did not come into conflict on economic issues with the British and were therefore quite content with the status quo. They were against political agitation for self-government, and accepted the prevailing attitudes of British conservatives towards both poverty and labor agitation. The British tea and rubber planters and merchants had their own “spheres of influence” which did not collide with the new group of Ceylonese capitalists, who were mainly coconut planters, contractors, and arrack renters. Although the Ceylonese planters formed the Low Country Products Association in 1908, this was not intended as a rival association to the British dominated Planters Association because the British planters were not in competition with the Ceylonese planters, who were allowed a monopoly of the coconut industry. For example, James Peiris, a Barrister and President of the Cambridge Union in 1881, quite frankly admitted the identity of class interest between the British and local planters in a speech made in 1908: “Most of us are planters . . . the [British planters] deserve the credit for having brought capital into the country and shown us the path along which we may all win prosperity. . . . *The interests of the Ceylonese planters are identical with those of the European planters.*”<sup>19</sup>

*The Moderates and the Radicals.* From this group of conservative, middle-class Ceylonese, a “national minded” section emerged during the latter years of the 19th century. This group, which became politically vociferous around 1910, and was composed of both capitalists and professionals, led the movement for political reform. They have been termed moderates in order to distinguish them from the diehard pro-British Ceylonese; for unlike the conservatives, the moderates were for gradual constitutional reforms and more representation of their interests in both local and central government, and in the public services. This group balked at trade unionism and strikes, however. It is therefore necessary to intro-

18. E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Story of Ceylon*, p. 221.

19. *Ceylon National Review*, Feb. 1908, emphasis added.

duce a third category into the classification of the Ceylonese middle class—the radicals, a small minority of professional men who had come into contact with foreign political and social movements and were active in fostering various campaigns in Ceylon, including the Buddhist revival, the temperance and political reform movement, and working-class agitation. The radicals who were militants in the Buddhist crusade had strong nationalist views. They were also in a position to bargain on behalf of the workers, and to resist intimidation and social pressures that might have prevailed over uneducated and poorer trade-union leaders. In a country where both the rulers and the largest employers were British, English-speaking persons could assume the role of intermediaries between the authorities and the workers.

The economic base of the radicals differed somewhat from that of the other groups. Whereas the conservatives and moderates belonged to the landowning class (though some were professionals as well), the radicals were drawn almost exclusively from the professions of law, medicine, teaching, and journalism, many possessing lower middle-class backgrounds. It is true that the radicals also formed part of the modern strata of society, but they were highly critical of the social aspirations of the conservatives and moderates and dissociated themselves to a great extent from conservative or moderate political attitudes. The radicals were the first to show concern over the conditions of the working class and were instrumental in introducing trade unionism into Ceylon; in later years the moderates established rival workers' organizations, but the working class showed its preference for radical leaders. Since the radicals aspired to leadership on political and labor issues, they found it imperative to establish links with the traditional society, to identify themselves with the religion and culture of the majority of the population, and to champion the language and religion of the masses as against alien influences. To this extent they became the pioneers of the Buddhist revival and were able to draw some support from sections of the rural and urban lower middle class, and the urban working class.

It was in the sphere of controversial social and political issues that the differences of opinion between the conservatives and moderates on the one hand, and the radicals on the other, were fairly

sharp. The report on the 1911 Census remarked that few Eastern countries had “shown themselves more ready to adopt Western ideas”;<sup>20</sup> but there were two sets of “Western ideas,” one that appealed to the conservative and moderate section of the middle class and the other which influenced the radicals. Radicals of all communities, although themselves Western oriented, were concerned about the divergence that existed between the elite and the rest of the population, and trenchant criticisms of the Westernized Ceylonese came from those radicals who denounced the unthinking imitation of the West. Of these, the most relentless critic was the Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala, who deplored the lack of “men of education and brains to lead the people and defend their interests.”<sup>21</sup> Dharmapala described members of the elite as products of a “bastard education without a solid foundation,” and he criticized their wasteful consumption and slavish dependence on foreign goods: “We are ignorant of the first principles which regulate the production, distribution and exchange of wealth. We consume, but we do not produce fresh wealth. Our ancestral wealth we squander in luxuries . . . we are blindly following the white man. . . . we purchase Pears Soap and eat coconut biscuits manufactured by Huntley & Palmer . . . our own weavers are starving and we are purchasing cloth manufactured elsewhere.”<sup>22</sup> Another radical critic of “the few who have assimilated Western culture” was the eminent Tamil civil servant (and later politician) Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who expressed concern over the growing gulf between the Ceylonese middle class, “ignorant of the vernacular and classical languages of Ceylon, of its history, antiquities and traditions,” and the masses of the people, to whom the English language was a “sealed book.” He urged the English-educated youth to acquire a thorough knowledge of conditions in Ceylon and to know “above all the people of the country.”<sup>23</sup> Like Dharmapala, Arunachalam was aware of the problems caused by Westernization and was severely critical of the social life of the elite: “It is deplorable that English education has so multi-

20. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 157.

21. Guruge, ed., *Return*, p. 512.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 514, 518.

23. P. Arunachalam, “A University for Ceylon,” in *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 292–

plied our wants . . . and demoralized us, that those who ought to be indefatigable and devoted in her service spend . . . their time in earning money for the supply of those wants and spend their leisure not in intellectual culture or public work but in trivialities.”<sup>24</sup>

The conservative political views of some Ceylonese, who regarded demands for political reforms and for self-government as wild schemes of seditious Indians, also shocked and embarrassed the radicals, who were liberal in attitude and admired the nationalist political movements in India and other countries. Governor Ridgeway claimed in 1895 that there was no question of disloyalty in Ceylon, and that all classes and races were loyal to the Queen.<sup>25</sup> He was not far wrong—except for a few radicals who were indirectly challenging the British through religious movements of protest, there was no nationalist movement at this date. In fact, some Ceylonese went so far as to write pamphlets and poems praising the British monarch and denouncing the Indians for their nationalist agitation. One such typical pamphlet, *Unrest in India*, lavishly flattered King Edward VII, saying, “We Orientals, monarchical in sentiment to the core must admit that the glory of the best of our past Emperors will fade before the halo which encircles the brow of the greatest Peace-maker of the World, constitutional sovereign of the largest Empire, arbiter and counsellor of Europe and friend of humanity.” The same publication, describing sedition and anarchy as “more dreadful than the plague,” said, “We have not been altogether without our reward for having been less clamorous than India for political reform. It has given us time to attend to weightier matters and we are today in a position to read a lesson to India in the matter of political agitation.”<sup>26</sup>

It was claims like these which no doubt angered the radicals, who felt that the most important of the “weightier matters” that interested the rich Ceylonese was the scramble for privileged positions in society. The radicals held that this group was not merely lacking in patriotism and national pride, but that by their subservience to the British and their narrow ambitions for the security

24. Arunachalam, “Presidential Address at Ceylon National Conference, 1918,” in *ibid.*, p. 89.

25. Ridgeway, “Distribution of Prizes at St. Thomas College, 31 August 1895,” in *Speeches*.

26. W. S. Goonewardena, *Unrest in India and Political Agitation*.



of government jobs they had become an obstacle to political and social progress. On this question, Dharmapala, who often commented on the limitations of colonial rule and the political backwardness of the Ceylonese middle class, wrote, "As the government is conducted on colonial lines, the Britishers . . . have the voice, and the permanent population is looked upon as 'aborigines', and for the protection of the latter there is in London, a Society for the Protection of Aborigines. Our own leaders who have been educated under British influence in England are indifferent to the welfare of the Sinhalese."<sup>27</sup> In 1912, *The Ceylon Nation* warned that Ceylon had become a "bourgeois English colony" where the middle class remained "divorced from their fellowmen":

What is [the] ambition of the average educated Ceylonese? Is it not some fat official post? We sigh for invitations to Queens House, we love to be seen with Mr. this or Captain that. We would have our names appear in the paper as occupying rooms in the G. O. H. or Bristol Hotel and when we have made known to an admiring world the fact that we went to N'Elia or Bandarawela for the season, our happiness is complete. A country cannot progress whose people are not led by a higher aim than this. The majority of our young men appear to be consumed by a feverish desire for luxury and official position. Our old men are filled with worldly wisdom and caution. They tell us don't be singular, never offend against good taste. . . . Ceylon's citizens are staid, stolid, mediocre, without originality or enthusiasm, the character of the average educated Ceylonese may be summed up thus—he is kind to his superiors, condescending to his inferiors and his religion is that by the law established.<sup>28</sup>

The cleavage between the various groups among the Ceylonese middle class was at its widest on issues such as poverty and working-class agitation. On the question of poverty, the accepted viewpoint of the conservatives and moderates was that this problem could be tackled by private charitable organizations. Speaking in the Legislative Council in 1903, Governor Ridgeway said, "Out of Colombo there is no necessity for a poor house or any form of poor relief. Destitution—poverty—there may be, but no starvation, private

27. Guruge, ed., *Return*, p. 510.

28. Medicus, Chilaw, article, in *Ceylon Nation*, 12 Jan. 1912. See also Medicus, *ibid.*, 9 Feb. 1912: "We must pay more attention to the uplifting of the masses. An educated class divorced from their fellow-men country men should be something unthinkable."

charity and neighbourly kindness do the blessed work of relief quietly and effectually."<sup>29</sup> At that time the largest charitable association was the Colombo Friend-in-Need Society, formed in 1831, to relieve cases of distress and destitution in Colombo. The chief office-bearers were mainly British, along with a few rich Ceylonese, and represented the most influential sections of the middle class, from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government to the church, press, education, business, and the legal profession. They adopted the prevalent British view that charity had to be regulated as it often tempted people to adopt the vagrant way of life and resulted in dissipation and drunkenness.<sup>30</sup> According to the Ceylon Friend-in-Need Society, indiscriminate charity encouraged idleness, begging, and the feigning of hardship. The members were therefore urged to distribute food tickets among the needy which could be used to obtain meals from the Society's kitchen, a procedure that was considered better than the "indiscriminate donation of money, especially in cases of vagrants and loafers."<sup>31</sup>

This cautious and patronizing attitude towards the problem of poverty was not shared by the radicals, however. Anagarika Dharmapala expressed himself forcefully on this question in an appeal to young middle-class Ceylonese: "Learn to love your starving, poor, neglected Sinhalese brother . . . for after all it is the agricultural and labouring class that form the backbone of the Sinhalese nation . . . [not] a few barristers and doctors with British qualifications."<sup>32</sup>

On the question of labor activity and trade unions, the attitude

29. Ridgeway, *Speeches*.

30. "Report of the Friend-in-Need Society, Colombo, 1888." The Office-bearers for 1896 included the Governor, Justice Lawrie, J. Harward (Principal, Royal College), Rev. A. Dunn (Minister of St. Andrews Church), the Bishop of Colombo, F. J. de Saram (Proctor), J. W. C. de Soysa, (businessman), J. Ferguson (proprietor and editor, *Ceylon Observer*), H. L. Wendt (Advocate, member of Legislative Council) and E. Aitken (of Aitken, Spence & Co.). "Report of the Friend-in-Need Society, 1896."

31. The prevalent attitude in England is seen in a pamphlet entitled *Poor Law & Charity*, (Oxford 1887) by Rev. L. R. Phelps, who wrote: "It is very dangerous to try and relieve vagrants by charity, for every one who is so helped a dozen are tempted to take to the vagrant mode of life. . . . you are teaching them to rely on others, you are undermining their independence . . . once people come to the poor law for help against sickness, they are terribly ready to come to it to meet any crisis in life. . . . if you hold out such prospects you encourage dissipation and intemperance."

32. Guruge, ed., *Return*, p. 512.

of the wealthy Ceylonese and the British bureaucrats was almost identical and reflected the official thinking in Britain in the early days of industrialization, when trade unions were considered to be illegal combinations in restraint of trade. Even in the latter half of the 19th century, conservative opinion in Britain reacted strongly to trade unionism, considering labor leaders to be disloyal agitators and strikes to be subversive of law and order bringing misery to the workers.<sup>33</sup> Similar views were frequently expressed by Ceylonese, and when a strike occurred in 1893 a daily newspaper called it an attempt “to arouse sedition among those who until now have always got on well with their employers.”<sup>34</sup> In 1914, an exasperated Ceylonese employer named Christian Fernando was provoked to write a pamphlet complaining of the “utterly dishonest practices wickedly perpetrated on masters by their servants.” He contrasted the honesty and docility of 19th century workers with the “thieving propensities of the present day workmen,” and recommended thrashing as the only deterrent against “downright swindlers.”<sup>35</sup>

The first trade-union leaders were the radicals who defied the accepted opinions of society and championed many of the causes that were unpopular with persons of a conventional background. This section of the middle class, which was prepared to challenge authority, presented a new approach to problems of poverty and advocated trade unionism as a method of obtaining improved economic conditions for the workers. These leaders reflected the growing political consciousness that was taking place among a section of the privileged groups in society. The careers of the two pioneers of the labor movement show the extent to which religious protest and Western radical influences, combined with a new interest in the welfare of the masses, led to the emergence of trade unionism.

33. For example, Sir Guilford Molesworth in a pamphlet entitled *The Biggest Fool on Earth* (London, 1883), wrote, “The British workman is often a good man individually, but in the mass, he is the biggest fool on earth. He listens to the blandishments of Socialist agitators . . . so called labour leaders . . . who fatten on class discord and industrial unrest . . . and desire subversion of all social rule and order and are callous to the suffering entailed by their acts on the workers and the poor.”

34. *Ceylon Independent*, 21 Aug. 1893, emphasis added.

35. T. Christian Fernando, *A Treatise on Ceylon Workmen*.

## The Pioneers of Trade Unionism

The first person to introduce ideas of trade unionism into Ceylon was Alfred Edward Buultjens (1865-1916), a Burgher whose career showed the influences of both a Western liberal education and the Buddhist revival. Buultjens went to Britain on a Ceylon government University scholarship in 1883 and graduated from St. Johns College, Cambridge, in 1887. In Cambridge, his studies for the history tripos included a course in political economy under the renowned economist, Professor Alfred Marshall. While a student, Buultjens became interested in trade unions and visited industrial districts of Britain, obtaining a first-hand knowledge of working-class conditions. Buultjens was in Britain between 1884 and 1887, years of severe economic depression, unemployment, and political turbulence, when militant trade unionism, Socialist ideas, and Marxism were gaining ground. As the Socialist poet and writer Edward Carpenter, describing this period, wrote:

The years from 1881 onward . . . marked the oncoming of a great new tide of human life over the Western world. . . . It was a fascinating and enthusiastic period—preparatory, as we now see, to even greater developments in the twentieth century. The Socialist and Anarchist propaganda, the Feminist and Suffragist upheaval, the huge Trade-union growth, the Theosophic movement, the new currents in the Theatrical, Musical and Artistic worlds, the torrent of change in the Religious world—all constituted so many streams and headwaters converging, as it were, to a great river.<sup>36</sup>

London was a center of political dissent and social nonconformism. Karl Marx, Engels, and other revolutionaries lived in London, where Marx died in 1883. British Marxists, led by H. M. Hyndman, formed the Social Democratic Federation in 1881. The Fabian Society, formed in 1884, had Sidney Webb, Annie Besant, and Bernard Shaw among its leaders, and the Socialist League, also started in 1884, was led by William Morris. Among other political groups in London were the Anarchists, inspired by Michael Ba-

36. Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, p. 245; for a vivid account of this period see A. H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives*, pp. 243-75.

kunin and Prince Kropotkin, and the Nihilists, led by another Russian, Sergius Stepniak. There were many Socialist poets and novelists, including Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Edward Carpenter, and William Morris, who challenged conformism and puritanism. In addition, these were years of mass agitation, and several mammoth demonstrations were held during this period. These included the meeting of unemployed in Trafalgar Square in 1886, the radical mass meeting on the Irish question in 1887, and in the same year, the famous "Bloody Sunday" demonstration by the various groups of Socialists in Trafalgar Square (protesting against the curtailment of free speech), which ended in police attacks and violence. There was also a new wave of militant unionism, the most significant victory for the trade-union movement being the successful strike in 1888 of the match factory girls, led by Annie Besant. All these rebel groups attacked the evils and philistinism of the Victorian age. They denounced imperialism and the capitalist system, challenged Christianity, and interpreted the slogan of freedom to include not merely representative government, but the liberation of the Irish and colonial peoples, the granting of democratic rights for the working class, and the emancipation of women.

Buultjens, in Britain during this post-Darwinian era of "boundless disbelief," was strongly influenced by Liberals, freethinkers, and Theosophists, notably Henry Labouchere, Charles Bradlaugh, and Annie Besant, whose influence was described in the previous chapter. Buultjens renounced Christianity while in Cambridge, and became a Buddhist in 1888 after his return to Ceylon. Describing the impact of Buultjens's conversion, Dr. W. A. de Silva of the Buddhist Theosophical Society stated that the news created a stir in Ceylon because "a normal Christian was not expected to change his religion," and since Buultjens came from a Christian, Burgher family, the break with the family tradition was considered to be "almost a social offence." The authorities of his old school (St. Thomas' College), scandalized at Buultjens's conversion, had his name erased from the school's panel of honor. Hearing of this, Henry Labouchere referred to the incident in the radical journal *Truth*, and ridiculed the school authorities for their narrow-mindedness. But according to Dr. de Silva, Buultjens was not bothered by the disapproval of his teachers, friends, and relatives,

because "at that time the torch of free thought was held high in England."<sup>37</sup> On his return to Ceylon, A. E. Buultjens played a vital role in two important movements, the cause of Buddhist education, and the introduction of trade unionism. In 1889, at the age of twenty-four, he became the Principal of the Pettah Buddhist Boys School (later Ananda College), and remained in this post for eleven years. From 1890 to 1903, as the General Manager of Buddhist Schools, he devoted a great deal of energy and enthusiasm to the establishment and organization of Buddhist schools in all parts of the island. Speaking to the Ceylonese of Buultjens, the Theosophist J. Bowes Daly, said, "A man who has disregarded the decided prospects of an unusually brilliant academic training, sacrificing even family connection, to throw his lot in an unpopular cause establishes a claim on your confidence which no European can rival."<sup>38</sup>

For several years Buultjens edited *The Buddhist*, a militantly anti-Christian weekly in English which had been started in 1888 and included learned discourses on Buddhist philosophy and articles sharply critical of Christianity in general and the activities of missionaries in particular. Buultjens consistently attacked the Christian schools, not for the Western pattern of education they imparted, but for their religious objectives of conversion. The apostasy of Buultjens might have passed without much controversy if he had not so actively demonstrated his hostility to Christianity. To the Church in Ceylon, this was an unforgivable sin and it brought upon Buultjens the public censure not only of his old school, but also of the Bishop of Colombo. The conflict between Buultjens and the Anglican Church became bitter, and it resulted in a personal denunciation by the Bishop, who wrote, "Copies of *The Buddhist* which you send me contain language about Christianity . . . which makes it impossible for me to accept them or allow them to remain in my house. Your own career as one who has apostasized from Christianity makes it impossible for me to cultivate with you, those relations which I could adopt even to one who has always been a Buddhist." To this, Buultjens, who was always

37. *Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Buddhist Theosophical Society*. I am grateful to Mrs. C. Lutzer, the daughter of A. E. Buultjens, for background information about her father.

38. *The Buddhist*, 9 Sept. 1892.

eager for a religious argument, replied, "The Bishop has no qualms of conscience to receive from the government, Rs.20,000 per annum of public Buddhist money, but to accept copies of *The Buddhist* is against His Lordship's finely strung moral principles. We did not know that the head of the Anglican Church draws a distinction in his relations towards a born Buddhist as against a Buddhist converted from Christianity."<sup>39</sup>

Buultjens came into conflict with the government as well. The political significance of Buultjens's Buddhist propaganda activities lay in his emphasis on patriotism and national feeling, and in his criticisms of government policy. In a report on Buddhist education made in 1892, he claimed that the Buddhist schools were "national schools," imparting an education that was "in harmony with the national spirit," whereas the Christian schools were "foreign missionary agencies for conversion."<sup>40</sup> Buultjens also often stressed the political importance of the education imparted in Buddhist schools, and speaking in 1893 at the Kandy Buddhist School (later Dharmaraja College), he emphasized the political role that the Buddhist schools had to play, asserting that "the idea of patriotism should be taught to all the young, that *they might be able to better appreciate free constitutions and councils.*"<sup>41</sup> Buultjens's opposition to government policy was first seen when a disagreement arose over a government regulation which adversely affected Buddhist education. In 1892 the "quarter-mile clause" in the Education Act forbade government grants to any schools established within a quarter-mile of an existing aided school. This worked against the Buddhists because the missionaries, in the words of Buultjens, had "planted their proselytizing schools at most of the desirable centres of population."<sup>42</sup> All Buultjens's radical fervor was directed towards this campaign. In what must have been one of the first island-wide Buddhist protest movements, a petition to the Secretary of State was organized by Buultjens and signed by 2,000 Buddhist monks and influential Buddhists in towns and villages. In an article on the "quarter-mile clause," Buultjens, in tones reminiscent of Labouchere, wrote, "The Buddhists, only just aroused to

39. *Ibid.*, 17 Nov. 1893.

40. *Ibid.*, 6 Jan. 1893.

41. *Ibid.*, 1 July 1893, emphasis added.

42. *Ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1893.

the importance of having their children taught in their own schools, have as little chance as a horde of naked savages against European troops armed with rifles. This clause is one of those iniquities which can only be perpetrated with comparative safety in a distant colony." On this issue Buultjens also referred to Charles Bradlaugh's successful fight to sit in Parliament without taking the usual oath on the Bible, and added, "a Parliament that made room for Bradlaugh is not going to stand such nonsense."<sup>43</sup> The popular enthusiasm for the Buddhist education movement is seen in an account by Buultjens of his campaign in 1892. "I have personally visited and talked with the masses of Buddhist people in the Central, West and Southern Provinces. People prefer Buddhist schools to missionary schools and the villagers tax themselves for the upkeep of their own schools. *The movement for education is a national movement and the quarter mile clause is directed against the nation.*" Buultjens, like many 19th-century radicals, was also interested in women's emancipation. In the 1890's he was active in the Women's Education Society and helped to establish Buddhist girls schools which imparted a modern education.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to his Buddhist work, Buultjens, on his return from Britain, where he had acquired a theoretical knowledge as well as practical experience of trade unionism, began to study the working conditions of labor in Colombo. He was convinced that the workers were ripe for unionization and in July, 1893, an unsigned article (by Buultjens) appeared in a small radical journal, *The Independent Catholic*, which not only gave a detailed account of trade unionism in Britain but also advocated the need for unions in Ceylon and deplored the lack of interest "in matters affecting the public weal." This article, which was the first open call for trade unionism in Ceylon, was intended to "serve as an object lesson to illustrate to our countrymen the public spirit shown by the working classes of other nations, and to point out to them the immense advantages to be gained from such organisations." The difference between mutual provident associations (which already existed in Ceylon) and trade unions was explained, and the uses of

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 9 Dec. 1892, quoting a letter from A. E. Buultjens to the *Ceylon Independent*, emphasis added. Buultjens's interest in women's education was mentioned in his obituary in the *Ceylon Independent*, 4 July 1916.



joint action and strikes were described in detail. The printers of Colombo were urged to be the first to unionize:

They are a fairly strong body and are on the whole more enlightened than their fellow-workers of the other trades and above all we know they have their wrongs. It is, therefore, their duty to become the leaders of this movement we are suggesting for the establishment of Trades Unions, letting others follow in due course. . . . A union, if decided upon, might be based upon the principles of the London Printers Union, the rules of which Society can be easily obtained. We should be glad if some prominent and energetic members of the trade would communicate with us before any public action is taken in the matter, or we should even be happy to receive them personally when we could submit to them a definite plan of campaign.<sup>45</sup>

The printers responded enthusiastically to this bold proposal and to the promise of a "definite plan of campaign." But the *Ceylon Independent*, reflecting the attitude of the conservatives, was quick to see the potential dangers of such a movement, and it accused Buultjens of trying to arouse sedition among a group of workers who had good relations with their employers. The same newspaper also threatened that none of the daily newspapers would ever employ a unionist and added that it was wrong to stir up insubordination among the "native" workmen because they were "as a rule perfectly happy." But of course the radicals who had evidence that the "native workmen" were not perfectly happy as imagined accused the *Ceylon Independent* of treating its own workers badly. "Men are made to work 14 hours a day . . . two days in every week some have to do 19 hours at a stretch. Taking Rs.30. as the average, the men working 26 days a month do 364 hours work . . . which means 8 cents an hour. This state of things may be satisfactory to the shareholders." The radicals were determined to urge the printers to unionize and a further appeal was made to the printers: "Nobody can help you if you will not help yourselves. If you allow the present opportunity to slip, another may never come."<sup>46</sup>

In this campaign on behalf of the printers Buultjens was helped

45. *Independent Catholic*, July 1893. The main indication that the article entitled "Trades Unions" was in fact written by Buultjens is that it makes many references to trade unions in Britain and says, "The writer of the present article has been in some of the manufacturing districts of Great Britain." See editorial on trades unions, *Independent Catholic*, Aug. 1893.

46. *Ceylon Independent*, 21 Aug. 1893; *Independent Catholic*, Aug. 1893.

by Dr. P. M. Lisboa Pinto (1857-1898) an independent-minded rebel who had challenged the Catholic church and championed several unpopular causes. Lisboa Pinto, who was Goan, qualified as a doctor in Bombay, and became best known for his violent quarrel with the Catholic church. The Catholics in Ceylon and India had been under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Goa, but in 1886 they were grouped into an ecclesiastical province under Rome. This was denounced by Goans like Lisboa Pinto, who resented the change from "national jurisdiction" to the "foreign" control of Rome. After an unsuccessful visit to Rome and Lisbon in 1886 to protest against the changes, Pinto broke with the Catholic church and formed a group known as the Independent Catholics, conducting his campaign against the Papacy and the Church through his journal, the *Independent Catholic*. He attacked the Catholic clergy saying, "The more one writes about their deeds, still darker ones seem to crop up to the scandal of the Catholic religion in the East."<sup>47</sup> In defense of his bold and unorthodox views, Lisboa Pinto wrote, "Truth is not dependent on numbers . . . true believers have ever been few and despised."<sup>48</sup> The *Ceylon Observer* remarked that "Rome had raised up for herself a not contemptible foe in Lisboa Pinto,"<sup>49</sup> while the Catholic Church in Ceylon accused Lisboa Pinto of "defaming the Church and the Papacy, holding up the Catholics of Ceylon to the contempt of other religionists, and practising upon the credulity of his Protestant readers."<sup>50</sup>

Another protest movement with which Lisboa Pinto was associated was the temperance agitation. There had been general concern in Ceylon over the increase in drunkenness during the 19th century, but very little had been done to combat this problem. In 1872, the Governor, in introducing an Ordinance to control the sale of liquor, said, "English rule has given to Ceylon many bless-

47. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, *The Church Militant in India and Ceylon*. Dr. Lisboa Pinto's daughter, the late Mrs. Patricia Lobo, gave me some details about her father's career.

48. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, *Antioch and Rome*. In this pamphlet Lisboa Pinto challenged the basis of allegiance to Rome. "How if St. Peter never was in Rome? . . . Because thousands of men, in dark, ignorant and superstitious ages, believed a fable, that fable does not pass into a truth!" Pinto also quoted a Spanish critic of the Church who said, "There is not a single progressive principle that has not been cursed by the Catholic Church." Ibid.

49. Quoted in the *Independent Catholic*, June 1892.

50. *A Crucial Test by a Missionary Apostolic*.

ings but we have at the same time extended a curse throughout the Island, namely, drunkenness. Some years ago a drunken Kandyan would have been a disgrace in the eyes of his fellows. Now the occurrence is so common the disgrace has passed away. Drunkenness is extending into villages where it was before unheard of.”<sup>51</sup> In 1893, *The Ceylon Independent* attributed the causes of serious crime partly “to the unlimited multiplication of arrack taverns and liquor shops solely in the interests of revenue,”<sup>52</sup> and another journal, *Ceylon Native Opinion*, claimed that “with the increase of civilization and Western ideas, the native mind looks upon the use of spirituous liquors as a sine qua non of respectability.”<sup>53</sup> The first temperance organizations in Ceylon were started by Christian missionaries of various denominations. They issued pamphlets on the evils of drink, published monthly magazines like the *Ceylon Temperance Chronicle*, organized Bands of Hope, held regular meetings and constantly petitioned the government. Lisboa Pinto was a keen temperance worker and used to address meetings and write pamphlets which reflected his courageous nonconformist attitudes. His pamphlet *Alcoholic Drinks* advised his readers not to be afraid of their convictions, “have no dread of being called singular, put aside all false notions of social customs and politeness, despise the ridicule of fools and remain faithful to your noble purpose.” The attitude of Pinto towards championing an unpopular cause can be seen in his advice to temperance workers: “no doubt [you] will be called visionaries, dreamers etc. and be laughed at . . . the world seldom receives any great reform or discovery without heaping ridicule and worse upon its benefactors.”<sup>54</sup>

The third “protest” movement in which Lisboa Pinto was active was the trade-union movement, and it was in his journal, the *Independent Catholic*, that the issue was first discussed. Lisboa Pin-

51. Speech of Sir William Gregory. Quoted in William Digby, *Forty Years in a Crown Colony* 2:118. But a Ceylon paper alleged that “only a modicum of good resulted from the Ordinance . . . the working of it was left to Government Agents whose ambition for large collection of revenue is proverbial.” *Ceylon Native Opinion*, 8 Nov. 1898.

52. Editorial, *Ceylon Independent*, 13 May 1893.

53. *Ceylon Native Opinion*, 8 Nov. 1898.

54. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, *Alcoholic Drinks*. Lisboa Pinto also said it was foolish for people “to indulge in winks and whispers when someone has the courage to state that he does not drink . . . the degradation lies in the intemperance, not in being sober.”

to's approach to the workers stemmed from a genuine desire to help the less fortunate, which went beyond the doling out of charity. As a doctor with a practice in Dam Street, Colombo, he was well acquainted with the conditions of the urban poor, and as a social reformer he was interested in the problems facing the workers. On urban poverty Lisboa Pinto said, "No one is better qualified to speak of this subject than a physician or a clergyman." Like Buultjens, Lisboa Pinto was very critical of middle-class indifference to labor problems. Deploing the apathy of Ceylonese employers, Lisboa Pinto said, "Having had occasion to try to interest some of our wealthy native labour employers on behalf of their men, and to enlist their sympathy in the cause of the hard-worked labourer in general, I found the Ceylon capitalist as much exacting and relentless as the Englishman, perhaps more." Lisboa Pinto also advised the rich to acquaint themselves with the "anguish of body and mind to which so many of their fellow men [were] condemned," and, instead of scorning the worker for his failings, to do their best to assist him. "The Ceylon workman has few friends, and goodness knows that he needs many . . . he is called indolent, perverse, ignorant, dishonest. Perhaps he is; but he knows no better. It is very often circumstances that makes us what we are."<sup>55</sup>

Several factors account for the initiative taken by Lisboa Pinto and Buultjens in advocating trade unionism at a time when the current of middle-class opinion was against such a development. Like many radical reformers they both belonged to the liberal professions; they were essentially modern in their attitudes and had broken from the religions of their birth, thereby causing great scandal. They were the middle-class rebels of their age, protesting against injustices, social evils, and outmoded institutions, and agitating with great reformist zeal and enthusiasm on a variety of issues involving the democratic rights of various groups. In the 1890's, on questions ranging from Buddhist education, anti-Christian propaganda, and temperance, to social service, working-class agitation and trade-union rights, either Buultjens or Lisboa Pinto would figure prominently. At the time it needed courage and foresight to take up the cause of the workers against the interest of the employers, but to Lisboa Pinto, who had defied the Pope and

55. *Ceylon Review*, Oct. 1893.

the Church of Rome, and to Buultjens, who was battling with the Bishop of Colombo and the Church of England, the wealth and power of the employers and the disapproval of the Ceylonese conservatives were not serious deterrents. In addition, Lisboa Pinto was a Goan (of Portuguese-Indian descent), one of the smallest minorities in Ceylon, consisting of a few families who had migrated from Goa, and Buultjens's community, the Burghers, numbered 21,000 in 1892, less than 1 percent of the total population. Burghers and Goans were both communities which maintained a European tradition, and hence Lisboa Pinto and Buultjens were not inhibited by local middle-class conventions. Both had also travelled in Europe and were acquainted with Western radical thought. But unlike the rich Ceylonese who used foreign travel as a means of furthering their careers and increasing their wealth, Buultjens and Lisboa Pinto made use of their privileged education to challenge orthodoxy and introduce the Ceylonese workers to new forms of organization and protest. These pioneers of trade unionism in Ceylon were able to give the working class some measure of confidence in the possibility of economic improvement through joint action.

To summarize, it may be stated that since the workers were not in a position to put forward their demands independently, the leadership of the labor movement had to consist of persons who were not members of the working class. The ruling class, composed of the Governor and the bureaucrats, could not be expected to condone unionism, and of the indigenous elite, the rural-based traditional group had neither the opportunity nor the ability to become trade-union leaders. The group that could fill this role was the modernized middle class, educated in English and aware of trade-union patterns of agitation. The contention of this chapter has been that this leadership could not come from the conservative and moderate sections of the modern group, who not only regarded trade-union agitation as detrimental to their interests but also had adopted the ideology of the foreign rulers. The pioneers of working-class agitation came from the radicals—those rebellious members of the professional class who not only resented the political apathy of the conservatives, but also held them responsible for the submissiveness of the rest of the population. In spite of what

seemed an unfavorable situation, radical middle-class social and political reformers appeared on the scene in the late 19th century. This group inspired the Ceylonese to revive and regenerate local religions and culture; they also aroused nationalist sentiments and encouraged agitation among the urban workers.

Although conservative, moderate, and radical elements of the Westernized middle class have here been distinguished, the divisions were not always clear-cut and there was sometimes a considerable overlap between the groups. At the turn of the century, the moderates, although making demands for reforms, were sometimes hardly distinguishable from the pro-British conservatives; there were also many instances where the radicals of one generation became the moderates of the next. Moreover, certain moderate political organizations had radicals among the leadership and vice versa. The picture is often blurred, but the important links between religious revival, radical nationalism, and trade unionism can be discerned, even in the early 20th century.

## Chapter 4

# The Beginning of Labor Agitation

*Let the rich feel for the poor workman, and come forward to help—by their counsel, sympathy, influence and money—the Ceylon Workmen's Union, and not try to smother in the labourer's throat, his first cry for independence.<sup>1</sup>*

Dr. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, 1893

*To attempt to draw a line between master and man would be to stir up discontent, and insubordination and ruin those happy relations which have hitherto existed. . . . The native workman is as a rule perfectly happy and if he is not, it is perfectly easy for him to get employment elsewhere. Why then seek to put a weapon into his hand, which if powerful for a time will ultimately prove his own destruction?<sup>2</sup>*

*Ceylon Independent*, 1893

In countries where industrialization is at an early stage of development, absenteeism, high rates of turnover, and spontaneous strikes are used as means of protest, especially where the work force is not wholly urbanized but retains connections with the land, and is therefore only partly committed to urban life. Under such circumstances the discipline of the factory system of production, with its restrictive rules and regulations, insistence on punctuality and steady output, with work and rest determined not by the task but by the clock, was a sharp contrast to the traditional agricultural pattern and pace of peasant life. A reluctance to adjust to industrial discipline was evident in Ceylon, where high rates of absenteeism occurred among urban workers employed under factory conditions. The most common methods used by employers to combat

1. P. M. Lisboa Pinto, "Ceylon Workmen's Unions," *Ceylon Review*, Oct. 1893.

2. *Ceylon Independent*, 21 Aug. 1893.

absenteeism were punishments in the form of fines and deductions from wages for absence from work and unpunctuality. The series of sporadic strikes which occurred in the years before 1905—among printers, laundrymen, carters, butchers, harbor workers and others—were the first manifestations of labor discontent by isolated groups of workers through the use of the strike weapon. The demands of the strikers of this period were seldom for wage increases or better conditions of work; they were rather protests against changes by employers in the set patterns of activity and conditions of work to which the workers were accustomed, or changes in licensing procedures or regulations governing certain workers in independent trades. These earliest strikes reflected the resentment of the semicommitted labor force to innovations or changes in established practices.

It is not possible to precisely determine when the first strike occurred in Ceylon, for stoppages of work by groups of unorganized workers were not unknown in the 19th century. For example, around 1860 the carpenters and teachers at the Industrial School run by Mr. Thurstan went on strike because they had not received recognition in the form of "native rank" which they had expected from the government.<sup>3</sup> Another instance was the strike at an irrigation work site in the Eastern Province around 1870, which an engineer described as the only case he knew of "coolies striking and refusing to remain owing to the plague of mosquitoes."<sup>4</sup> In January, 1879, one of several strikes against Municipal regulations took place when the Colombo butchers went on strike for three days over the increase in the Municipal fee charged for the slaughter of animals. The *Catholic Messenger* described this as the first strike in Ceylon, and referred to the "novel spectacle of a body of men engaged in a trade, resolutely closing up their place of business." As in subsequent strikes of this type, the inconvenience caused to the public led to protests against the Municipality. There were letters to the press complaining of the "rapacity of Municipal councillors and the incompetence of Municipal officers" and one editorial quipped that Her Majesty's subjects had been "reduced to

3. *Sessional Paper 8 of 1867*, p. 15.

4. P. M. Bingham, *History of the Public Works Department* 2:206.



pumpkin curry.”<sup>5</sup> These early strikes, however, were sporadic stoppages without organization or leadership. The earliest labor dispute which had the elements of a modern industrial dispute was the strike of printers that took place in 1893.

### The Printers Strike

Because of their skills and educational advantages over other groups of workers, in many countries the printers have been among the first groups of workers to unionize and resort to direct action against employers. In 1891 there were over a thousand printers and bookbinders working in newspaper offices and printing firms in Ceylon, and it was claimed that the publication of five daily English newspapers in Colombo indicated “greater enterprise than [was] found in Bombay, Calcutta or any other town in the East.”<sup>6</sup> The printers were a literate body of workers with greater awareness than the average skilled workers in other occupations. Many printers had a knowledge of English and were therefore able to follow news of labor agitation in other countries. But as a livelihood, working in a printing office, even as a worker in the higher grades, did not carry the same status as the white-collar clerical occupations. Many of the proofreaders and compositors were likely to have been persons who had failed to become clerks and were therefore very concerned about their status and conscious of their grievances. The Government Printer in 1897 complained that even suitable young men who had completed the first stage of apprenticeship as proofreaders’ boys were unwilling to do any of the harder jobs, desiring to be readers “without going through that grounding as a compositor which in a general printing office is an absolutely indispensable preliminary.”<sup>7</sup>

The printers strike in Colombo in 1893 was the outcome of the propaganda in favor of trade unions that had been carried on by

5. *Catholic Messenger*, 21 Jan. 1879; *Ceylon Times*, 20 Jan. 1879. One letter in the *Times* of the same date said, “Were the Russians in possession of the harbour and the approaches to the town, dwellers in Colombo could scarcely be in a worse predicament than they are in at the present moment.” I am grateful to Mr. Donovan Moldrich for these references.

6. *Census of Ceylon 1891*. J. Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1903*, appendix 4, p. cxxvii.

7. “Report of the Government Printer,” in *Administration Report of Ceylon 1897*.

A. E. Buultjens and Dr. Lisboa Pinto. The main grievances of the printers included low pay and bad working and living conditions. The wages of printers seem to have varied considerably between the nature of the job and the offices in which they worked. The average wage of compositors in the Government Printing Office was Rs.30. a month, whereas in private firms wages were as low as Rs.11. a month. Dr. Lisboa Pinto wrote frequently of the poverty and indebtedness among printers and condemned the squalid conditions in which the poorer printers lived. Other causes for bitter feelings among the printers included the system of fines that was commonly used for offenses such as unpunctuality and bad work. The strain imposed by the nature of their work also led to dissatisfaction. The Government Printer in 1895 reported that his workers were almost all young because the printers' work was exceptionally trying, calling for close application and rapid work which resulted in intense strain upon nerves and brain; "the powers of printers 'wear out' more quickly than those of men engaged in most other occupations, and they therefore the sooner become incapacitated."<sup>8</sup>

The first revolt of printers took place in September, 1893, when a strike of sixty printers occurred at British-owned H. W. Cave & Co., the largest firm of printers and booksellers in Colombo. The wages of the printers at Cave's were paid on a monthly basis, which led to a great amount of hardship and indebtedness towards the end of the month. The immediate cause of the strike was a delay in the payment of wages and the refusal of the manager to alter the mode of payment. The printers were not able to hold out for long, lacking both funds and organization, and the strike ended after six days. The employers refused to make any concession to the printers' demands and rejected Dr. Lisboa Pinto's offer of mediation. Six days after the strike, the manager called up those workers he was willing to reemploy and asked them if they had made an unconditional surrender. After individual assurances were given, apologies for having left work were then made. Each printer was told that his payday would be as before. However, the five workers alleged to have been the ringleaders of the strike were dismissed. The *Times of Ceylon* described the attitude of the strikers as a

8. "Report of the Government Printer," in *Administration Report of Ceylon 1895*.

very contrite one, and even forecast that such an occurrence was not likely to occur again in Ceylon.<sup>9</sup>

At a public meeting held a day after the strike, a trade union of printers was formed. Printed handbills advertising the "monster meeting of workmen" were circulated by "little ragged boys," and the meeting attracted four to five hundred printers and other workers, with five police inspectors and twenty constables to keep watch on the proceedings.<sup>10</sup> The *Independent Catholic*, commenting on the meeting said, "The idea was certainly novel, startling and to some, we suppose, it almost seemed daring, for it was the first occasion in the history of this little Island that the labourers were going to stand up for their rights."<sup>11</sup>

The main speakers at the meeting were professional men and Buddhist "agitators" associated with various reform movements, who could be broadly classed as the radicals of the day. The chairman was H. J. C. Pereira, a young lawyer who in later years became a moderate political figure and President of the Ceylon National Congress. Pereira attacked the local employers: "The Ceylon workmen [are] undergoing considerable hardship at the hands of some hard masters, and the combined profits of labour and capital [are] all being enjoyed by the master, with the exception of a very small margin which remains to the labourers." Dr. Lisboa Pinto, who referred to himself as an "agitator and great raiser of rebellion," spoke of the need for a trade union among printers and described their hardships in detail. A. E. Buultjens, who laid great stress on the low wages and long hours of work of the printers, criticized local capitalists, who "kept their capital hoarded in strong chests, thereby giving little employment for the labourers," and attacked foreigners, who invested money in Ceylon but who had "ignored the rights of their workmen and [were] giving serious cause for complaint." Another speaker was Martinus Perera, the pioneer of the use of the bicycle who had also started a successful bicycle repair workshop. He was a well-known Buddhist lay preacher and temperance worker and a member of the British Rationalist Press

9. See *Overland Times of Ceylon* and *Ceylon Examiner* of 12-18 Sept. 1893, for details of the strike.

10. *Ceylon Examiner*, 18 Sept. 1893.

11. *Independent Catholic*, Sept. 1893.

Association, and in later years he was active in the trade-union movement. C. Don Bastian, a former printer who was a well-known Buddhist temperance worker, also addressed the meeting and said that although traditional Sinhalese writers had always stressed the respect due to masters, the workers nevertheless "had their own rights, the defence of which constituted no irreverence to their superiors." He added that the present opportunity for unity among workers was a golden one as they had "wealthy and talented gentlemen ready to help them in a good cause."<sup>12</sup> At the end of the meeting, two hundred printers joined the union and one of the resolutions expressed the hope that similar unions of other workers would be established all over the island. The real leadership of the union came from its President, Dr. Lisboa Pinto, and Secretary, A. E. Buultjens. Committee members were elected to represent the main printing offices of Colombo.

In spite of the failure of the strike, the organizers of the Printers Union had hoped that the movement to unionize would develop. A printed book of union rules stated that the union's objectives were the "professional interest and general welfare of workmen connected with the printing trade."<sup>13</sup> The union entrance fee was 50 cents and members contributed 2 percent of their monthly earnings to the funds. The union was mainly concerned with mutual insurance against sickness, old age, unemployment, and death. The sickness allowances and death donations were strictly "provident society" benefits by which the Printers Union attempted to give relief of a kind for which neither the employers nor the government made any provision. At this time workers were not entitled to paid sick leave, and they did not receive loans in time of hardship, or death donations and funeral allowances. In private firms there was no scheme of pensions for workers on retirement, nor was any form of unemployment relief provided by the government. The union also issued a monthly paper, *The Ceylon Printer*, which aimed "to defend the professional interests of the Ceylon printer, to elevate his character, to teach him unity of purpose and honesty in action and to make him provident and parsi-

12. Ibid.

13. "Rules of the Ceylon Printers Association 1893." Available in Colombo National Museum Library.

monious." The first issue contained an article by Buultjens on the "Improvement of the Labouring Classes," and another on "Ceylon Workmen's Unions" by Dr. Lisboa Pinto.<sup>14</sup>

One very marked feature of this first attempt at trade unionism in Ceylon was the influence of British methods of union organization and activity. This was because the Ceylonese middle class was familiar with British experience in this field and the inspirer of the movement, A. E. Buultjens, had studied the working of trade unions in Britain. Moreover there had been no survival of a traditional guild system on which a modern trade-union movement could be founded. The President of the Printers Union was Goan, and its Secretary and seven of the twelve committee members were Burghers, which made it natural that European patterns of activity would be followed. The union's business was conducted in English and British rules of procedure were followed at meetings. At the inaugural public meeting, all but one of the speakers addressed the crowd in English and the union's book of rules and its paper, *The Ceylon Printer*, were issued in English. Since "respectable" institutions at this time had Latin mottos, the Printers Union chose *unitas vis nostra* (unity is our strength), not too different from that of the most powerful group of employers, the Planters Association, whose motto was *unitas salus nostra* (unity is our safety).

But the Printers' Union was unable to consolidate its position. The causes of the collapse were the determination of the employers to crush incipient trade unionism, the lack of widespread support, and the unpreparedness of the working class for sustained trade-union action. In 1894, a year after the formation of the union, Dr. Lisboa Pinto complained that though the union had provided allowances from its funds, interest in the union had laged and there was difficulty in getting the necessary quorum at meetings. "The Ceylon printer expects everyone to come to his help; he knows he has grievances, but others must remove them while he looks on with folded arms . . . the apathy is surprising . . . and it is with great grief that I see the Society dragging itself on at a snail's pace."<sup>15</sup> But although the printers' strike ended in failure and the

14. Quoted in *Independent Catholic*, Nov. 1893.

15. *Ceylon Review*, Sept. 1894.

union did not last very long, the printers' agitation highlighted the possibilities of direct action by the Ceylonese working class.

### Attitudes to the Printers' Agitation

The difference in outlook of various elements of the middle class on labor questions was clearly seen after the strike of printers in 1893. Whereas the government officials and the conservative Ceylonese expressed their approval of the way in which the first outburst of working-class agitation had been crushed, the small group of radicals used the occasion to show that the executive, legislative and judicial institutions in the country, along with the press, the Church and the middle-class Ceylonese, were against trade unionism. The battle was carried on in the columns of the newspapers: ranged on one side were the leading newspapers, the *Ceylon Independent*, *Ceylon Examiner*, *Ceylon Observer* and the *Times of Ceylon*; standing alone against this combination was Lisboa Pinto's small weekly, the *Independent Catholic*, the only journal in which radical views were openly expressed.

The initiative taken by the radicals with regard to the printers' grievances contrasted sharply with the hostile attitude of the conservative middle class. When the need for trade unions was first advocated, the *Ceylon Independent* had raised alarms about sedition, and several other newspapers expressed concern that patterns of labor agitation in "more civilised countries" were being imitated in Ceylon. One reason for this anxiety was that in 1893 (the year of the printers' strike) there had been a great deal of industrial unrest in Britain, including a strike of Hull dockers, a general stoppage of Lancashire cotton spinners and a four months' strike of 400,000 miners. The newspapers also feared that the development of trade unions in the printing trade might have adverse effects on the newspaper industry. On trade unionism, the *Ceylon Observer* warned against "Western modes of agitation"<sup>16</sup> and the *Times of Ceylon* was equally alarmist:

The idea of a labour demonstration inaugurated and carried out on the lines which have found such favour with the working classes in more civilised countries, must appear as singularly ill-advised and uncalled

16. *Ceylon Observer*, 16 Sept. 1893.

for; but in Colombo, despite the terrible warnings that have been given to the world by agitations of this sort in England and Australia . . . there has been a wave of feeling in favour of such movements.<sup>17</sup>

The *Times of Ceylon* praised the employers for showing “a very proper resistance to the demands of their subordinates”<sup>18</sup> and the *Ceylon Examiner* declared, “Of course the Manager was not going to allow himself to be dictated to by his subordinates.” The latter paper, referring to the British trade-union leaders, made derisive remarks about the local “aspiring John Burnses,” and also expressed the commonly held view that the workers themselves were basically unwilling to strike, but had been misled by agitators and intimidated by the ringleaders among the strikers.<sup>19</sup>

The press was also used to put pressure on the strikers. The plentiful supply of labor in Ceylon, the possibility of getting workers from abroad, and the threat that no printing office would employ strikers were mentioned. The *Observer*, referring to the “superabundance of labour” in Ceylon, said, “We have been requested to send for compositors from Singapore and have done so . . . even if there is any difficulty in securing labour locally, an appeal has only to be made to Madras to obtain the services of all the workmen that are required.” This paper warned the strikers that they would not be employed by other printers and advised employers to make careful enquiries and “keep out such men as have been unruly.” It threatened its own workers with dismissal if they took part in “this foolish agitation.”<sup>20</sup>

Another body that came out openly against strike action was the Catholic Church. The institutional hostility of the Church to labor unrest was aggravated by the fact that Dr. Lisboa Pinto had been waging his lone crusade against Rome. In 1893, the *Ceylon Catholic Messenger*, commenting on the printers’ strike, wrote, “The men had no real grievances and would never have thought of striking if they had not been put up to it by a fussy little medical practitioner who is making a desperate attempt to push himself into notoriety.” The same journal also called Dr. Lisboa Pinto a “mischievous quack” who was trying to cause “disagreement between

17. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 18 Sept. 1893.

18. *Ibid.*, 13 Sept. 1893.

19. *Ceylon Examiner*, 12, 18 Sept. 1893.

20. *Ceylon Observer*, 16 Sept. 1893.

workmen and employers," and added, "some disreputable persons tried to get up a printers' Union at a meeting, but the whole thing was a ridiculous fiasco."<sup>21</sup>

An important outcome of the printers' strike was the judicial interpretation given to the existing labor laws. Under the Labour Ordinance of 1865, plantation workers, domestic servants, and journeymen artificers (skilled workers) who left work without a month's notice or reasonable cause could be punished with imprisonment or a fine. The law, which had mainly been used to prosecute workers who "bolted" from plantations, had never been evoked against skilled urban workers. But the repressive nature of the Labour Ordinance became a controversial issue with the criminal prosecution of a machine ruler named William, one of the five "ringleaders" dismissed for instigating the printers' strike in 1893. William had drawn attention to himself before the strike by sending a written request for his wages and by going alone to the manager to demand his wages. When the lower court acquitted the accused, 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 journeyman artificers and William was imprisoned for a week. This verdict led to bitter argument between the conservative and the radical Ceylonese. The *Ceylon Independent* welcomed the Supreme Court decision but regretted that the "unprincipled agitators" went unpunished: "Employers and employees have been getting on so harmoniously that we think any attempt to sow seeds of disaffection should be regarded as criminal and there should be a law to punish mischievous adventurers who mislead the ignorant classes."<sup>22</sup> But those who had been called "unprincipled agitators" made sharp criticisms of the court's decision. H. J. C. Pereira, in an article on "Refined Slavery," called the *Ceylon Independent's* allegations "a farrago of insane balderdash and barefaced falsehoods" and made allusions to the "malevolent influence" of the "corrupt and degenerate" press of Ceylon. Pereira claimed that the Ordinance which enslaved the workers was "a disgrace to the

21. *Ceylon Catholic Messenger*, 18 Sept. 1893.

22. *Ceylon Independent*, quoted in the *Independent Catholic*, Nov. 1893.



English government." Like the radicals of the day, Pereira used the occasion to criticize the government on political grounds and he claimed that it was only in a land where "freedom exists more than in mere name" that the strike weapon could be used. He made a strong appeal to the workers to resist the repressive legislation and said, "Let us hope that hunger and destitution will not in future drive the Ceylonese 'journeyman artificer' to barter his freedom for the filthy lucre of the purse-proud and avaricious capitalist. Let us hope that the result of this prosecution will be to incite all workmen in Ceylon to strenuously agitate for the repeal of that cruel and obnoxious legislative enactment."

This issue also resulted in a clash between the moderate and radical press. The *Observer* had frivolously stated that the Legislative Council should pass an Ordinance "to insist that the coolie and appu and Ceylon printer should be allowed to strut around the estate, house or office and tell their employers to do the work themselves . . . to come and go or work to suit their own convenience, and generally to be free to do what they like." To this the *Independent Catholic* protested that the *Observer*, instead of cruelly resorting to wit against the "unfortunate and indigent," should raise its "powerful voice" to insist that the country's laws were applicable to rich and poor alike and "to write an indignant protest when Ordinances are violated with impunity by those who possess influence and wealth."<sup>23</sup>

The unrepresentative nature of the Ceylon Legislative Council was also one of the questions that came up after the printers' strike. In the previous decade the agitation had been for a Buddhist representative, but by 1893 the politically conscious radicals raised, for the first time in Ceylon, the issue of working-class representation in the legislature. An important article in the *Independent Catholic* made the following comments:

In England the poor workman has friends and supporters, influential and powerful, but in Ceylon our Ordinances are framed and passed by masters, by labour employers, by the wealthy. *There are representatives in the Legislative Council of the Planters, Merchants and different communities in the Island, but the interests of our workmen are not represented there, the voice of our labouring classes is not heard in that*

23. See the *Independent Catholic*, Nov. 1893.

*august assembly*. As soon as planters feel a pebble in the shoe, they agitate until the offending pebble is removed. But the journeyman artificer! Why hundreds of them were lately turned out of our Government Factory, some of them positively to starve . . . but not a voice was raised on their behalf.<sup>24</sup>

The initial reaction of the middle-class Ceylonese to the first strike in Ceylon had been one of horror and dismay that labor agitation had made its appearance in the country. But gradually a change of outlook took place. Where only a few of the boldest radicals had dared to champion the printers in 1893, in the succeeding years others were also drawn into activity on behalf of the urban workers in Colombo, and the attitude of inflexible opposition towards the novel phenomenon of strikes and labor unrest underwent some modification.

### The Spread of Labor Unrest

In the years following the printers' agitation, strikes among groups of workers became a recurring feature of urban life and some middle-class Ceylonese began to feel that the workers, who were showing defiance of authority and even a willingness to resort to strike action, needed the guidance and patronage of the more "responsible" members of the community. This "moderate" group emerged as an important political force in the first decade of the 20th century. In the field of labor activity, however, the role that the moderate assumed was not that of labor leader or trade-union organizer, which meant actively aiding the workers in their struggle against the employers, but rather that of a "friend of the poor," a mediator between employers and workers in labor disputes, an advocate of caution and conciliation and a promotor of what was vaguely called "workers' welfare."

The moderate approach to labor was first seen during the strike of the Colombo laundrymen which occurred in July, 1896. This strike, the longest and most militant of the decade, was a protest against innovations. The grievance in this case was against an ordinance of the Colombo Municipal Council compelling all laun-

24. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

dries in the city to register with the Municipality in order to facilitate their supervision. The laundrymen opposed the scheme and decided on direct action. Careful preparations were made for the strike; meetings were held and strike committees were formed in various districts of Colombo. Printed circulars were sent by the laundrymen saying they would not wash from the first of July because the new regulations would cause "great inconvenience and hardship." The reasons for this hostility were varied. The laundrymen had never been subject to any kind of governmental control or supervision and they realized that registration would mean a system of licenses and taxation. They feared that the municipal officials would use the new rules as a means of extorting money and bribes, a common practice at the time among the police and other minor officials. A letter in a newspaper claimed that 99 percent of the Ceylonese believed that it was impossible to expect municipal officials to enforce the registration of laundries without using this as a means of blackmail: "Europeans find it difficult to believe this because [they] are treated by the police and municipal officers in a way very different from the way the native population, the poorer part of them in particular, are fleeced and oppressed."<sup>25</sup>

The laundry workers organized a campaign of meetings and petitions and sent deputations to the Governor (Sir Joseph West Ridgeway), the Maha Mudaliyar (Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike) and the Acting Attorney-General (P. Ramanathan). In spite of warnings from the Governor and the pressure brought to bear on them by officials and influential citizens, the workers proceeded with their plans for a strike. They had a month in which to make preparations, and they had determined leaders recruited from their own ranks who were able to organize the workers effectively and start a strike fund. The strike began on July 1, 1896, with a show of almost complete solidarity, as only six laundrymen out of seven hundred registered themselves under the terms of the ordinance.

Although the strikers, in contrast to the printers, had no outside leaders, Hector Van Cuylenburg and the Rev. G. B. Ekanayake were consulted by the laundrymen, attended their meetings, and acted as mediators with the authorities. But their advice was not

25. Letter to the editor, *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 13 July 1896.

always taken. For example, on the eve of the strike, a meeting of 350 laundrymen was addressed by the Rev. Ekanayake and Van Cuylenburg, who unsuccessfully tried to persuade the laundrymen to register. The Rev. Ekanayake (1866-1943) was an Anglican priest who had worked since 1888 in the Polwatte parish, the stronghold of the Colombo laundrymen. He was a popular figure in the neighborhood and was known for his interest in social questions and his concern about working-class conditions. Hector Van Cuylenburg (1847-1915), a lawyer and the proprietor of the *Ceylon Independent*, was a sympathetic paternal figure to whom the workers often went with their grievances. The Rev. Ekanayake was also a journalist on Van Cuylenburg's paper and his forceful articles contained attacks on the political and social policies of the government.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that the strike was used as an opportunity by some Ceylonese to express their pent-up feelings against the authorities. Severe criticisms, which amounted to political attacks on the Municipal Council and the Mayor, were openly expressed; one correspondent to a paper wrote, "The dhoby strike is really the first symptom of a crisis which Municipal misgovernment is leading to in Colombo . . . the state of things in this unfortunate city is such that one longs that the dhobies may triumph."<sup>27</sup> The *Ceylon Review* joined in the criticism, saying, "The Mayor is indulging in a masterly inactivity . . . as he thinks that what is needed to bring the dhobies to register themselves is persistence and unyielding obstinacy"; this journal expressed the hope that the strike would teach the authorities a lesson by "convincing the government that people will not always endure arbitrary and tyrannical action" and added that "the local government has yet to learn that sometimes even the worm turns."<sup>28</sup> The attitude of British officials, some sections of the press, and the majority of the Ceylonese middle class was one of total opposition to the strike, however. The Governor, in a sharp rebuke to the laundrymen, called the strike unlawful and disloyal and said it was not in his power to relieve any citizen from his liability to obey the law; he warned

26. For details, see Percy Wickremasinghe, *Rev. Canon Ekanayake of Colombo*, and A. Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

27. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 13 July 1896.

28. *Ceylon Review*, 22 June 1896.

the laundrymen that if they persisted in their combination against the law, they would be engaged in a struggle "not with the Municipality or the public but with the Government and all its resources."<sup>29</sup> In pursuance of this threat the government enlisted the cooperation of the military and railway authorities, and the police took legal action against some of the strikers.

The press was also used as a means of intimidating the strikers. Since laundry work was a caste monopoly and there was very little possibility of getting local replacements, suggestions were made that laundrymen should be recruited from abroad, or that convict labor should be used. Wild rumors were spread by newspapers that Chinese laundrymen were being brought over from Singapore, and a false report was printed that 107 were already on their way. The threat of bringing cheap labor from South India, which had been used during the printers' strike (and in many subsequent strikes) was frequently resorted to: "Let us import our dhobies from Madras" wrote a correspondent, and thereby relieve the housekeepers of Colombo from "the tyranny of the dhoby." The hostile attitude of some middle-class householders to the laundrymen's strike was also very marked. One reason was, of course, the inconvenience caused by the strike. The newspapers were inundated with letters (both serious and frivolous), some complaining bitterly of the impudence and cunning of the laundrymen, others claiming that they were not able to go to church because of the lack of clean clothes.

As in the printers' strike, the authorities took legal action against some laundrymen. There were only a few isolated cases of laundrymen continuing to work during the strike, and in the Polwatte district, where the most militant of the laundrymen lived, only one out of 200 workers of the area had registered himself. He continued to wash under police protection, but had been assaulted by the strikers, who had also thrown colored water on his washing. Of the strikers tried for intimidation, the first accused, Haramanis, was a leader of the laundrymen who had taken a prominent part in the organization of the strike. The other accused were acquitted, but Haramanis was charged with mischief and given one month's rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs.25. The defense counsel,

29. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 1 July 1896.

Hector Van Cuylenburg, complained in court that there seemed to be "some anxiety" on the part of the authorities "to punish these unregistered dhobies."<sup>30</sup>

The strike of laundrymen lasted three weeks, much to the surprise of the press and the public. But in spite of their determination not to give in (the Governor's laundryman being reported as willing to "suffer anything rather than submit to the fearful cruelty and unmitigated tyranny of registration"), by the third week the strike began to collapse. The strikers failed to get enough support from the middle class, who were inconvenienced by the strike. Financially, too, the laundrymen were not in a position to hold out for very long. The money in the strike fund was used only to relieve the poorest among them, while most of the strikers had to fend for themselves and live on their savings. The most decisive factor which led to the abandoning of the strike after three weeks was the uncompromising attitude of the government and the Municipality. The authorities were convinced that any agitation by workers was to be resisted in case such protests proved to be contagious. The *Times* argued that weakness in one direction indicated a weakness all around, and warned that the "bad example" of the laundrymen's strike would have serious consequences if "other humble labourers in our midst combined to strike at most inconvenient times."<sup>31</sup>

The majority of the strikers registered themselves on July 21 after going in a deputation to the Maha Mudaliyar. But the militant laundrymen of Polwatte still refused to register in spite of the apparent collapse of the strike. The Maha Mudaliyar was sent to persuade these workers, who were described as "the most refractory of the lot." Seeing the hopelessness of their position, the laundrymen decided to give in and register themselves.<sup>32</sup> But the laundry strike was a dramatic event nonetheless—it was said to be the first organized attempt of its kind in India or Ceylon, and it made a

30. *Ibid.*, 17 July 1896. For details of the strike, see *Ceylon Independent*, *Times of Ceylon* and the *Ceylon Examiner*, July 1896.

31. Editorial, *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 22 July 1896.

32. Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, *Remembered Yesterdays*. "After lengthy discussion on the position obtaining between the Government, the Municipality, and themselves, they agreed to resume work, and there and then followed me in a body to the Town Hall and complied with the new regulations . . . the Mayor was profuse in his thanks for the aid I had been able to render." *Ibid.*

sharp impact on the minds of both officials and the public. Although the strike failed, the laundrymen gained a great deal of publicity, and a few years after the strike the authorities granted some concessions to these workers.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the organized laundry strike of 1896 there were also many other spontaneous strikes which lacked either organizational backing or middle-class leadership. These were usually lightning strikes expressing some grievance over innovations which had changed the established pattern of working conditions or wages. For example, in July, 1896, the butchers in Kurunegala struck work for two days in protest against new local government regulations which required the licensed butchers to provide certain types of meat when ordered to do so by the chairman of the local Board.<sup>34</sup> In September, 1897, 200 workers at the Royal Engineers Department came out on strike over changes that had been made in hours of work and pay. Whereas these men also worked on Saturdays and received six days' pay, the new rules provided for a half-day on Saturday with five and one-half days' pay a week. An inquiry by the authorities showed that even with the half-day the workers had a 53-hour week, and it was therefore decided to allow them six days' pay.<sup>35</sup> Another strike took place at the Sri Lanka Cycle Works in November, 1897, when a new set of rules covering wages, overtime, advances, and hours of work was issued by the management. Discontent was openly shown by the excited workers, who began "to flourish umbrellas and sticks." The workers refused to send a deputation to meet the management, and went in a body to the head office. The new rules were explained, and according to one newspaper, the workers returned to work as it was clear that they had misunderstood the meaning of the rules.<sup>36</sup> In January, 1898,

33. For example, in 1897 some of the laundrymen who worked in the Pettah district of Colombo formed themselves into a syndicate for the purpose of constructing twenty washing tanks at a cost of Rs.1,300. A bargain was struck with the Municipal Council: the laundry workers would pay for the building of the tanks, the military would give them the land at a nominal rent, and the Municipality would lay on a cheap water supply. The opening of these tanks was done in the presence of the acting chairman of the Municipal Council, who praised the laundrymen for their enterprise. This was a happy sequel commented a newspaper, "to the stirring events of the time connected with the now famous Dhoby Strike." *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 5 Jan. 1898.

34. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 23 July 1896.

35. *Ibid.*, 13 Sept. 1897.

36. *Ceylon Independent*, 2 Nov. 1897.

there was a strike of carters employed at the Colombo wharf over a reduction in pay. The carters, who received 85 cents a load, were protesting against a reduction of 10 cents that had been made; the original rates were restored when the carters went on strike.<sup>37</sup> Another group of workers, the boatmen in the Colombo harbor, struck work in January, 1901, against a new salary scale that had been introduced. The workers had received a monthly salary of Rs.20. and night fees according to the number of vessels entering the harbor at night (which added up to an average of Rs.10. or Rs.12. a month); under the new scheme they were to receive a consolidated salary of Rs.25. a month and a pension. The result of the agitation was that the harbor authorities took swift action and the strikers were replaced by 64 workers brought from India.<sup>38</sup> Although there were several strikes over changes in patterns of wage payment and reductions in wages, labor had not reached a level of organization which permitted frequent strikes for such positive demands as wage increases. However, such strikes were not totally unknown. For example in 1896 there was a strike among cigar makers in Jaffna who demanded an increase of 12 cents on the 50 cents they received per thousand cigars.<sup>39</sup>

The growing sympathy of a section of the middle class towards labor was noticeable during a strike in January, 1898, when sixty printers in the jobbing department of the *Times of Ceylon* went on strike because their wages had been stopped during the Christmas holidays. The strikers held a meeting at which the employers, who were also present, agreed to the principle that holidays should be with pay, and work was resumed the same afternoon. During this strike, some Ceylonese newspapers took the opportunity to make anti-British comments about the rival British-owned *Times*. For example, the *Ceylon Independent*, which five years earlier had raised alarms about sedition during the printing strike, was jubilant that the *Times* had been "brought so many pegs lower and [was] compelled to eat humble pie served up by their own native workmen." The *Independent* claimed that the Ceylonese workers had thereby been given "a taste of the power they could wield if

37. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 26 Jan. 1898.

38. *Ceylon Independent*, 7 Jan. 1901.

39. *Overland Times of Ceylon*, 31 March 1896.



they only combined to resist instances of petty tyranny and oppression."<sup>40</sup> Another journal, the *Ceylon Review*, acclaimed the strike as having "absolute right on its side," and sharply criticized the British manager of the *Times* for applying different standards to "men with a darker skin . . . though he himself would sternly decline to have his wages deducted during his holidays."<sup>41</sup>

The number of sporadic strikes that had taken place in the latter decades of the 19th century revealed the existence of labor discontent and the willingness of urban workers to defy their employers and resort to direct action. This tendency was accentuated in the early years of the 20th century when labor was able to further its claims during a period of rising religious and political unrest.

40. *Ceylon Independent*, 12 Jan. 1898.

41. *Ceylon Review*, Jan. 1898.

## Chapter 5

# The Growth of Militant Labor Activity, 1906

*The deference to position and authority has been steadily growing less and it has altogether disappeared in Colombo.*

Letter to *Ceylon Observer*, August 18, 1906

*That 5,000 carters should abandon their work at a word shows a power of combination and organization that cannot be ignored in considering the possibilities of the future.<sup>1</sup>*

Sir Henry Blake, 1906, Governor of Ceylon

The interconnection between political agitation, religious revival, and labor unrest became more explicit between 1906 and 1915. There were three important phases of labor activity—in 1906, 1912 and 1915—and in each case, a study of the background of these years reveals the growing maturity and assertiveness of the Colombo working class, which began to acquire the characteristics of urban industrial wage labor. The strike of carters in 1906 was the first occasion when resistance to authority by a significant section of the working class met with success. A certain amount of political and religious unrest preceded the strike, and during this period the radicals continued to play an important part in the religious, political, and labor movements.

### Incipient Nationalism and Buddhist Agitation

Although there was no organized national political movement in the early years of the 20th century, there was a considerable

1. PRO, C.O.54/702, 28 July 1906.

amount of religious agitation and an increase in political awareness. On several issues the government came in for sharp criticism. There was resentment because the legislative structure had remained virtually unchanged since 1833, with the result that the 2.5 million low-country Sinhalese were still represented by one nominated member who was a Christian. In addition, the Governor, Sir Henry Blake, and the Colonial Secretary, Sir Alexander Ashmore, had made themselves unpopular among the Ceylonese middle class. One source of this discontent was the lease of the Pearl Fisheries by the Colonial Office without consulting the Legislative Council. Another was the rising cost of living and the Salaries Scheme. In 1904, the British officials in Ceylon contrasted the high cost of servants, housing, food, and whisky with the rates of 1894 and obtained a revision of salaries in 1905. The Ceylonese middle class protested at the racial bias in these salary changes. Commenting on the objections made by the "native representatives" in the Legislature, the Governor wrote, "The scheme . . . was regarded by these gentlemen as one designed to benefit Europeans to the exclusion of natives of Ceylon."<sup>2</sup> But though public opinion had become more articulate and there was increasing criticism of government policy, the Ceylonese did not have a political organization that could express their views. Instead, public meetings, the columns of the press, literary associations, debating clubs, temperance organizations, and reform societies were used as a means of expressing dissent. Since political agitation was only just beginning, the Ceylonese looked for inspiration to other Asian countries like India and Japan, and to liberal political groups in Britain.

The Ceylon Social Reform Society (begun in 1905), which reflected the growing concern of the intelligentsia in the national revival, was influenced by British "anti-establishment" movements of the late 19th century. The first President of the Society was Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who had studied science in London and was for a short time the Government mineralogist in Ceylon. He was keenly interested in the revival of traditional arts and crafts and is best remembered for his scholarly books on Oriental art and

2. Letter to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 Jan. 1906, *Sessional Paper 21 of 1906*; also *Sessional Paper 51 of 1905*, p. 17, for cost of living. Bread and beef, which were 6 cents and 18 cents a pound respectively in 1894, were 12 cents and 20 cents by 1904.

philosophy. The Executive Committee of the Society included Mrs. Musaeus Higgins and Peter de Abrew, who were in the Theosophical education movement, and Buddhist leaders such as D. B. Jayatilaka and Martinus Perera, who were also interested in labor problems. Among the notable honorary members of the society were Annie Besant and Anagarika Dharmapala. The members of the Social Reform Society were liberal, Western-educated persons who had an intelligent appreciation of the best in Western and Oriental culture, and their aim was "to discourage thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and customs." The Society took an active interest in social problems, advocated temperance, vegetarianism, and cremation, and opposed capital punishment. It supported liberal politics, and welcomed the sweeping victory of the Liberal Party in Britain at the general elections of 1906. It also sponsored public lectures and discussions and published a journal, the *Ceylon National Review*. In 1907, Annie Besant lectured at one of the Society's meetings and spoke of the dangers to Eastern thought from the "glitter and glamour of Western civilization with its outward show of luxury." She referred to the importance that should be given to the indigenous languages, religions and customs and said that one of the most encouraging signs was the way Asian people were "beginning to take their destinies into their own hands" and were trying to "shape their own civilization according to Eastern ideas."<sup>3</sup>

A section of the Ceylonese were attempting to question not only the glitter and glamor of Western civilization, but the basis of the political and social structure of their own country as well. An example of this challenge to authority, which began with the Sinhalese Buddhist intelligentsia and spread to the urban workers, was the Buddhist agitation which occurred at the turn of the century. Recent research has shown that following the Buddhist revival there was a proliferation of local associations in all parts of the country for the encouragement of Buddhist education, temperance, and social service. These associations, which were semi-political, drew their leadership from the Sinhalese-educated group of Buddhist monks, journalists, poets, ayurvedic physicians, traders,

3. *Ceylon National Review*, Feb. 1908.

and small landowners.<sup>4</sup> In class terms they belonged to the politically active Sinhalese lower middle class, which was beginning to assert its views on religious and political questions. Since the meetings and propaganda were in Sinhalese, they undoubtedly influenced the rural and urban masses.

The discontent and sense of grievance among Buddhists during these years was commented upon in 1905 by a newspaper which accused government officials of being "responsible for the grave condition of unrest that at present prevails among all Buddhists."<sup>5</sup> The Buddhist revival of the late 19th century had given rise to two movements of protest, the temperance movement and the campaign to protect places of Buddhist worship. Both these movements had political undertones, and were guided by Anagarika Dharmapala and Walisinha Harischandra, two of the most militant of the Buddhist radicals. Dharmapala (1864–1933), who was born David Hewavitarna, was educated at St. Benedict's and St. Thomas's College. His father owned a prosperous furniture business and the family pioneered in encouraging local industry. At the age of fourteen Dharmapala visited the Kotahena temple of Bhikku Migettuwatte Gunananda and, hearing about the Theosophical Society and its founders, he began to read *The Theosophist*, which was published in India. He was one of the enthusiastic members of the crowd that greeted Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky on their arrival in Ceylon, and he became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1884 and visited the Society's headquarters in Madras. When Olcott and C. W. Leadbeater toured Ceylon to collect funds for Buddhist education, Dharmapala, who was a clerk in the Education Department, accompanied them, later resigning his post to become a full-time worker in the Buddhist movement. He travelled abroad frequently, visiting Japan with Colonel Olcott in 1889, and he formed the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta in 1891 to propagate Buddhism and protect the Buddhist sacred sites in India. In 1893, Dharmapala represented Theravada Buddhism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In Ceylon, he conducted a fiery crusade

4. Michael Roberts, "The Political Antecedents of the Revivalist Elite within the M.E.P. Coalition of 1956," *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, series 11, (1969/70).

5. Quoted in W. Harischandra, *The Sacred City of Anuradhapura*, p. 84.

against Christianity and the Western way of life and urged the Sinhalese to be proud of their religion, language, and national customs. Dharmapala was the first to attract the masses to meetings connected with Buddhism and the temperance movement, which, in effect, were demonstrations against the government. In the context of the time, Dharmapala was a radical. He challenged the Christianization of the middle class and exerted a magnetic influence over the militant Buddhists, who regarded him as "the only aristocrat who walked with his head held high among a fawning, cringing, crawling multitude of his fellow men in Ceylon." Dharmapala's religious work laid the foundation for political agitation and he was accurately described as having "fired a whole generation of Sinhalese to refuse to accept the old world colonial mentality."<sup>6</sup> The other notable worker in the Buddhist movement was Walisinha Harischandra (1877-1913), who was born in Negombo. Inspired by Anagarika Dharmapala, he abandoned his legal studies to lead the life of a *brahmachari* (celibate) lay preacher and worked in India to propagate Buddhism. Harischandra became the Secretary of the Mahabodhi Society in Ceylon and visited towns and remote villages in connection with Buddhist education and the temperance movement. His powerful oratory attracted large crowds to these meetings and he became a popular figure among the Buddhists.

Dharmapala and Harischandra led the campaign for the protection of the sacred sites in the ancient capital of Anuradhapura, and in June, 1903, during the *Poson* festival in this city, Harischandra organized a protest against certain restrictions on Buddhist processions. Rioting broke out which took on an anti-Christian aspect, leading to Harischandra's arrest for incitement; he was acquitted, but the riot and the court proceedings against him generated a great amount of religious militancy among the Buddhists. In a petition on this question to the King of England, Dharmapala stated:

The Sinhalese Buddhists of Ceylon are being persecuted by the subordinate officers of your Majesty's Government. . . . For nearly a hundred years of British rule the Sinhalese have been loyal, but they resent interference where their holy historic religion is concerned . . . liquor, opium

6. D. B. Dhanapala, "The Makers of Modern Ceylon, Anagarika Dharmapala," *Ceylon Causerie* (Oct.-Nov. 1960).

and beef are given to the village people by the administrators . . . the removal of liquor saloons and butcher shops and foreign churches from the sacred city is what the Buddhists demand.<sup>7</sup>

Another by-product of the Buddhist revival was the temperance agitation by Buddhists, which aroused great enthusiasm in both the towns and rural districts. The temperance movement was important for several reasons: it was an assertion of Buddhist religious and cultural values against what were said to be foreign vices; it was used as a facade for attacks on the government, and in this sense was a semipolitical movement; it was also the training ground of many nationalist and labor leaders.

The Buddhist temperance movement was an outcome of the religious revival, for one of the main precepts of the Buddhist religion is abstinence from alcohol. The Buddhist Theosophist journal in 1889 had condemned the increasing consumption of intoxicating liquor as a serious danger which called for the attention "of all true patriots."<sup>8</sup> Although the Christians in Ceylon had an active temperance movement in the late 19th century, the Buddhist temperance agitation was not widespread until 1904, when a wave of temperance propaganda swept Ceylon and was particularly strong in the Southern Province. Mass meetings were held, thousands signed the pledge of abstinence, and there were large temperance processions and demonstrations. Dharmapala and other temperance leaders toured the country attacking the government for its excise policy. The arrival of Dharmapala's temperance crusaders caused great excitement in villages and towns, for not only did Dharmapala have such slogans as "He who drinks liquor is an outcaste" painted on his wagon, but he also used to thrill the crowds with his rousing invective, denouncing the Europeans as "beef-eating pariahs," and condemning Government officials, missionaries, and the Christianized Ceylonese.

The Buddhist leaders conducted their propaganda through the Sinhalese press and Buddhist journals published in English. For example, in 1906 the *Mahabodhi* wrote, "The descendants of savage Britons give the Sinhalese freely two gifts, arrack and the deadly poison, opium. A hundred years of British rule the country has

7. Harischandra, *The Sacred City*, pp. 79-80, emphasis added.

8. *The Buddhist*, 16 Aug. 1889.

had and yet the Sinhalese are today the most backward of all Asian peoples."<sup>9</sup> In such criticisms, Christianity and the British government were the main targets. The tactic used was to identify the government with the Christian religion, and Christianity with an alien and corrupt way of life, and then to severely criticize the government for its religious bias and its excise laws. In this way, through the skillful use of religion and temperance, political issues could be raised without the fear of prosecution for sedition. A typical example of this kind of journalism bordering on the seditious—which was commonly resorted to by the radicals—can be seen in the following extract from the *Mahabodhi*:

Thousands of Buddhist children are sacrificed at the altar of Christian heathenism year after year. Conversion to Christianity means also drunkenness. The legislator tells the Sinhalese that under British rule every man enjoys liberty and the first manifestation of liberty that the latter displays is to get drunk. Then somebody writes to a local paper that he does not see why a British subject is not given a place to purchase opium, and the next week the free subject gets his opium and the demand for opium increases with freedom under British rule in Ceylon. . . . *Opium, liquor, poverty, ignorance, are the blessings that the Sinhalese have received from the Christians.*<sup>10</sup>

The religious agitation at the turn of the century was effective in encouraging the growth of incipient political activity and consequently creating a climate which was favorable for agitation by the urban working class.

### The Influence of Japan

The modernization and industrial growth of Japan, along with the spectacular defeat of Czarist Russia by Japan in 1905, were events which affected the political climate in Ceylon and other Asian countries. A phenomenal transformation of Japan had taken place during the reign of the Emperor Mutsihito (1867-1917) when a determined effort was made to modernize the country. During these years, Japanese students went to Europe and America to learn the latest scientific and industrial techniques, and within a

9. *The Mahabodhi*, March 1906.

10. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1909, emphasis added.



generation Japan had become an industrial nation with a modern army and navy and a rapid rate of economic advance. The defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905 shook the foundations of European domination in Asia and spurred on Asian nationalism. The great powers of Europe, Britain, Germany, France, and Russia, had been involved in a scramble for territory and concessions in the Far East, and Japan had come into conflict with Russia over Manchuria and Port Arthur. The Russo-Japanese war, which lasted for 18 months, ended in the retreat of the Russian armies and the fall of Port Arthur to the Japanese. The Russian Baltic fleet, which had sailed half way round the world (via the Cape) to get to the scene of the war, was completely destroyed in a single day in the decisive naval battle of Tsushima in May, 1905. The Russian government, demoralized by these defeats and faced with a wave of strikes which culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1905, made peace with the Japanese. These two events—the War and the Revolution of 1905—strongly influenced Asian nationalists. One historian has observed that “The Russo-Japanese war . . . underlined the possibility of the overthrow of Western Imperialism in Asia. The Russian Revolution of 1905 indicated the feasibility of the overthrow of autocracy, native or foreign. . . . In most Asian countries, where the two objectives were fused, the fact of Russia’s defeat and the example of Russia’s revolution together produced a resounding and durable impact.”<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of the century, Asian countries under colonial rule seemed to be firmly in the grip of European rulers who were backed up by powerful armed forces. But after Japan’s victory, the feeling grew that the Eastern David had the ability to tackle the European Goliath. Lenin commented that “a progressive and advanced Asia has inflicted an irreparable blow on a backward and reactionary Europe,” and Sun Yat Sen claimed that Japan’s success gave “unlimited hope” to Asians and “raised the standing of all Asiatic peoples.” Jawaharlal Nehru, recalling the excitement he felt as a young boy at the news of the succession of Japanese victories, described the war as “an event which had a great effect on the mind of Asia” because Japan was regarded as “the representative of Asia battling against Western aggression.” “The Japanese

11. Ivar Spector, *The First Russian Revolution: Its Impact on Asia*, p. 30.

victory was a great pick-me-up for Asia. In India it lessened the feeling of inferiority from which most of us suffered. . . . If Japan could make good against one of the powerful European countries, why not India?"<sup>12</sup>

Admiration for Japan was also widespread in Ceylon. As early as 1875, when the first Japanese military ship called at Colombo, Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy (Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy's father) had entertained the Japanese officers to dinner. His nephew, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who had met many Japanese students studying science in Cambridge, contrasted Japan's advance with Ceylon's backwardness in scientific knowledge. In 1906 he wrote:

It is little more than a generation since Japan embarked on a policy of seeking Western knowledge. Colonel Teruda who led the 1st regiment through the siege of Port Arthur, in his earlier days actually fought in chain armour and carried a battle-axe. But here we are in Ceylon after 100 years of British rule still almost as ignorant of science as if it did not exist. What more can be expected when our education authorities are profoundly ignorant and contemptuous of science and their aim is to make our youth construe elegantly a bit of Latin or Greek verse.<sup>13</sup>

In Ceylon, the course of the Russo-Japanese war was featured almost daily in the local papers and the Japanese triumph was acclaimed by the nationalists, the Buddhists, and the urban workers. To the politically conscious, it represented the victory of Asian nationalism over European aggression. Commenting on the significance of the Japanese war, a Ceylon journal wrote, "Japan has been the inspirer of the nations of Asia. It was her victories in the war more than anything else that gave courage and confidence to the aspirations of the peoples outside Europe." A Ceylonese nationalist, Victor Corea, expressed his admiration for the Japanese victory in a lecture "East and West," where he said, "The debt that Asia owes to Japan can never be repaid! Had she failed in her struggle with Russia, we Asiatics would have had to remain groveling at the feet of Europeans as mere hewers of wood and drawers of water for centuries to come."<sup>14</sup>

The Buddhist public of Ceylon also showed great enthusiasm over the Japanese victory over Russia, which was hailed as a tri-

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, pp. 440-41.

13. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 265.

14. *National Monthly of Ceylon*, June 1912, Oct. 1913.

umph of a Buddhist country over a Christian power, and one of the active Buddhist and temperance leaders, A. A. Kuruppu, inaugurated a fund to help the Japanese. The Buddhists were also kept aware of Japan's progress through articles on Japan by Anagarika Dharmapala, who first visited that country with Colonel Olcott in 1889 and made subsequent visits in 1893, 1902 and 1913. Dharmapala was a great admirer of Japanese scientific skills. Contrasting Japan with the rest of Asia—which he described as being “full of opium eaters, sensualists, superstitious and religious fanatics who were kept in ignorance by Gods and priests”—he wrote, “Japan is a kind of beacon light to Asia. . . . the Japanese are the only practical people who have sent their sons to learn technical sciences.”<sup>15</sup> Dharmapala and his family encouraged Ceylonese to study in Japan and awarded scholarships for technical training in that country. By citing the Japanese example, Dharmapala also aroused the nationalist sentiments of Ceylon Buddhists. In a speech to a Japanese audience emphasizing the importance of political independence he declared, “The Asiatic peoples are on a downward course and it is Japan alone that keeps the life of Asia. You have never been conquered; you are free and independent. The bare consciousness that one has never been conquered is the mainspring of energy and effort.” In another article in praise of Japan, Dharmapala sounded a warning to the Ceylonese and claimed that it was a political trick of Europeans “to keep on harping” about the yellow peril. “It is the white peril that the Asiatic races have to guard against. Japan has learnt all the modern arts and sciences of Europe, and by her superior morality has subdued the most powerful of European nations.”<sup>16</sup>

Admiration for Japan was not confined to the middle class. The Russo-Japanese war was the first foreign war for which sections of the working population showed great enthusiasm; the day-to-day events of the war were followed by the urban working class and this popular enthusiasm can be gauged from the thriving trade in war pictures. One stationer advertised 15,000 Japanese picture post-cards depicting the battles and the generals in command, and after the fall of Port Arthur there was a brisk sale among the workers in

15. Guruge, ed., *Return*, pp. 717–18.

16. See *The Mahabodhi*, Sept. 1913, pp. 142, 177.

Pettah of pictures of the victorious generals. When the news of the final Russian defeat reached Ceylon, there was popular rejoicing and the celebrations included fireworks in Price Park.

The relevance of the Japanese victory to the labor movement was that it created a certain atmosphere of excitement and was one factor which gave rise to conditions favorable to working-class agitation. Commenting on the general political unrest in Ceylon at the time, a perceptive Colonial Office official, C. P. Lucas, said, "There has been a combination of conditions which has irritated the Ceylon people. *In the first place I firmly believe that in Ceylon as elsewhere, the result of the Japanese war has been to excite the Eastern races.*"<sup>17</sup>

### Indian Nationalism

In spite of the lack of political and social contact between India and Ceylon under British rule, the close proximity of the Indian subcontinent and the events that took place there were bound to have some repercussions on the Ceylonese. The ideals of the Indian nationalist movement, which gradually penetrated Ceylon, found a response among the radicals, and by the first decade of the 20th century, the government—which had been quite confident of the unquestioning loyalty of the Ceylonese—began to suspect that the unrest in India was spreading to Ceylon. These fears were first voiced in official documents in 1906 during the carters' strike, an event that was partially attributed by the authorities to the influence of Indian "sedition." Although the fears of the government were exaggerated, there is no doubt that the Indian nationalist movement had an effect on public opinion in Ceylon, and that the carters' strike reflected the prevailing feeling of unrest in the island.

The Indian National Congress had been formed in 1885 and in the early years it was led by moderates whose policy was to achieve greater Indian participation in the government through constitutional methods of agitation. By 1900, the moderates were challenged by the more radical "extremist" element in Congress, notably B. G. Tilak from Maharashtra, where there had been a wave of militant

17. PRO, Telegram of 28 July 1906, C.O.54/702, emphasis added.

Hindu nationalism, and Aurobindo Ghosh of Bengal, which was at that time the center of the anti-British movement. In contrast to the moderate Congress leaders with their cautious program of political reform limited to the English-speaking elite, Tilak provided the first taste of militant leadership, appealing directly to the Indian masses and drawing them into the nationalist struggle. The division in the Indian Congress between the extremists and the moderates was most marked in 1907: though the moderates controlled the Congress, the extremists succeeded in launching a nationwide boycott of British goods and in getting Congress to adopt "swaraj" as its main slogan in 1907.

All these developments were followed with interest by the Ceylonese reading public who, through the local newspapers, were kept informed on the latest political news from India. The links between the two countries were also strengthened by Theosophists who had their headquarters in Madras and travelled frequently between India and Ceylon. In this way the Ceylon Buddhists, through the Buddhist education movement and through contact with Theosophist teachers, became aware of Indian political and social questions. The leading figure in the Buddhist revival, Anagarika Dharmapala, lived for many years in Calcutta where he had formed the Mahabodhi Society in 1891. Moreover, the province of Bengal, where Dharmapala lived and worked, was the heart of the Indian nationalist movement, and also the center of a cultural renaissance associated with Rabindranath Tagore. After the partition of Bengal in 1905, the province was in a state of ferment. Not only did a mass-based nationalist movement arise with swaraj as its aim, along with a swadeshi campaign and a boycott of British goods, but there was also a wave of terrorist violence resulting in severe measures of reprisal against the Bengali nationalists.

The extent to which the Ceylon authorities were alarmed about the influence of Indian nationalism can be seen from the comments of the Inspector-General of Police who, writing of the years around 1906, stated, "About this time the doings of the seditionists in India were prominent before the public . . . for example the proprietor of the *Morning Leader* wrote to Krishnavarma, the notorious Indian agitator in Paris, "How long will poverty-stricken Hindustan and unfortunate Lanka tolerate so-called British justice. . . . I have a

very important matter concerning Ceylon to discuss with you."<sup>18</sup>

It is against this background and combination of circumstances—the greater assertiveness of the Colombo working class, the general discontent with the authorities, and the influence of Asian nationalism—that the labor agitation of the period must be reviewed.

### The Strike of Carters

The first occasion during which a labor dispute in Ceylon reflected the climate of unrest and the strong feeling of discontent against the government was the carters' strike of 1906. The differences in approach of the moderates and radicals towards strikes and trade unions, which has been noted in the previous chapter, was very marked during this strike. A Colonial Office observation that the strike was "another indication of the unsettled state of feeling in Ceylon,"<sup>19</sup> was fully borne out by the events of the strike, which showed that the Colombo working class and the radicals were beginning to express themselves more forcefully than ever before, and were willing to defy the police and the government.

The most important mode of road transport in Ceylon at this time was the carriage of goods by bullock carts. The growth that had taken place in the plantation sector of the economy had led to an increase in the demand for cart transport and it was estimated that the number of bullock carts rose from 17,000 in 1901 to 23,000 in 1910.<sup>20</sup> The commerce of Colombo was heavily dependent on carts for local trade and also for the transport of exports and imports to and from the Colombo harbor. The carters were a group of workers who, by the nature of their work, were actively in touch with the commercial life of Colombo and with other sections of the working class. They had a reputation for independence and bold behavior, and were vociferous in airing their grievances.

As in the case of the laundrymen, the immediate cause of the strike by the carters was opposition to a Municipal ordinance. The carters grievance was that the rule prohibited them from sitting

18. CNA, "Confidential Report of Inspector-General of Police on the riots of 1915," File No. 14502 of 1915.

19. PRO, Despatch of 16 Aug. 1906, C.O.54/702.

20. E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911*, p. 5.

upon any part of the cart, shaft, or yoke while driving their carts. The introduction of tramways and motor cars had made the regulation of road traffic necessary and the carters were accused of carelessness in observing the rules of the road, often falling asleep and "letting the bulls go along the road by instinct."<sup>21</sup> The carters opposed the new Municipal regulation because it meant walking long distances alongside their carts; they alleged that the bylaw would also give the police constables opportunities of exacting bribes, and complained that the usual fine of Rs.15. or Rs.20. was severe upon carters, who earned around Rs.12. to Rs.15. a month. The strike of five thousand carters on August 13, 1906, paralysed the commercial activity of the city, and firms were unable to hire carts even at higher rates. The Mayor of Colombo announced that the Municipality was "sitting tight and waiting for the collapse of the strike which was bound to come soon,"<sup>22</sup> but three days after the strike began, the municipal authorities withdrew the offending bylaw and the carters resumed work. The strike was the first major success that a group of workers in Ceylon had achieved through strike action and this was due to a combination of factors which had been absent during the earlier strikes in Colombo.

The previous strike of any significance was the laundrymen's strike which had taken place ten years earlier. Since that date the working class of Colombo had increased in number. But what was more important was the growing consciousness among a section of the urban workers that they had to fight for their rights and in doing so had to try and mobilize the support of the working class and radicals among the middle class. An important factor contributing to the success of the strike was the militancy of the carters themselves. A newspaper compared the more enterprising and bolder leaders among the carters to the British union leaders, and described "the budding Keir Hardies and Will Crookses" among the Colombo carters, who could be easily spotted among the strikers as "they 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."<sup>23</sup> The strikers kept strict

21. *Ceylon Independent*, 15 Aug. 1906.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Times of Ceylon*, 16 Aug. 1906.

discipline and prevented any hesitant carters from working. Some firms had their own carts but the carters refused to take them out, as they feared molestation, and it was reported that carters would not accept even Rs.5. for each trip to the wharf. The carters also made an open show of bravado and defiance against the police. One carter drove through the streets standing on the shaft of his cart and when stopped by a police constable pointed out that he was not in breach of the bylaw, which merely said the driver could not *sit* on the shaft. According to newspaper reports, a carter rode round the Town Hall sitting on the pole of the cart, "puffing a long cigar," with another sitting on the yoke "singing an indecent song."

The carters' success was also due to the active support they received from the working-class population of Colombo. During the course of the strike, other workers expressed their solidarity and urged the carters to oppose the police. The crowds on the streets not only treated the strikers as heroes who were resisting the government and the police, but also helped actively by seeing that no "blacklegs" were able to come on to the streets. Two carts from the Australian Stores conveying goods under police escort were attacked by the crowd; the carts were tilted, the yoke strings cut and the bulls released while the policemen were held down. Several incidents bordering on riot were reported in Colombo. In the Pettah (the "bazaar" area of Colombo), the crowd raised cries of loot, which resulted in "a rush, a scurry, stampede . . . the crowd knocking down hackeries and rickshaws, baskets and tables."<sup>24</sup> The Pettah was described as being under the domination of the crowd and the Maha Mudaliyar, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, commented that "mobs collected and the strike was attended by incidents of a very disgraceful type."<sup>25</sup>

The events of the carters' strike were a clear indication of the emergence of an independent and defiant spirit among the working population of Colombo. This was to be expected with the growth of urban wage labor. An observer of social customs complained that, whereas in the past "drivers of carts usually jumped off their seats in town or country when they passed respectable people,"

24. The details are from *ibid.*

25. Sir Solomon Bandaranaike, *Remembered Yesterdays*, p. 70.



deference to authority had almost disappeared in the capital.<sup>26</sup> A correspondent to the *Ceylon Independent* said that the successful carters' strike had proved "the power of unity among the masses" and another, who signed himself "Anti-Slavery," wrote, "The carters' strike has supplied a splendid object-lesson to all communities on the value of unity. . . . the carters . . . are men of various castes and creeds . . . but they left all religious and racial differences aside and combined most effectively."<sup>27</sup> In commenting on the strike, the *Ceylon Independent* criticized the authorities who had seriously underrated the idea that there could be "cohesion or combination among native workmen."<sup>28</sup>

The Buddhist agitation and the temperance movement had created an atmosphere in which opposition to government policy was openly expressed, and these movements had influenced the working class. The carters also had the support of the Ceylonese press, which used the occasion to express discontent against the government and the Municipality. The *Ceylon Independent* stated that such a serious mistake as the introduction of the bylaw called for "the loudest condemnation and [would] increase the general feeling of disgust with the way in which the affairs of this city [were] mismanaged."<sup>29</sup> Among the Ceylonese conservatives and moderates, some agreed with the opinion of the Maha Mudaliyar that the strike was an "ugly slur on the name of Colombo" intended to pay off "petty personal spites against the authorities,"<sup>30</sup> but the radicals openly sympathized with the carters. Claims were made that several "well known leading gentlemen" had subscribed liberally to the strike fund and that Rs.9,000. had been distributed to the strikers.<sup>31</sup>

The carters had a strong middle-class leader, John Kotelawala (1865–1908), whose physical prowess, encounters with criminals of the Colombo underworld and aggressive behavior towards the British "sahibs" made him a popular hero. Kotelawala was a keen sportsman and had once defeated a famous Indian wrestler who had

26. Letter to the editor, *Ceylon Observer*, 18 Aug. 1906.

27. *Ceylon Independent*, 17 Aug. 1906.

28. *Ibid.*, 16 Aug. 1906.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Sir Solomon Bandaranaike, *Remembered Yesterdays*, p. 70.

31. *Ceylon Independent*, 16 Aug. 1906.

come to Ceylon. He began his career in the police force, rose to Inspector, and later left the police and started a graphite business. During his years in the police, Kotelawala's exploits against well-known criminals and gamblers in Colombo, and his ability to physically subdue the toughest rowdies, made his name a respected one in the poorer districts of the city. His reputation for boldness increased because of several incidents of assault on Europeans who had insulted him. The story was told that a young European businessman, who had struck Kotelawala's rickshaw man with a whip, received a sound thrashing from Kotelawala. On another occasion he was said to have fought and knocked down several British planters who had provoked him in the refreshment car of a train. At a time when there was limited outlet for nationalist feelings and no effective means of expressing resentment against colonial rule, such individual acts of violence against arrogant Europeans were applauded by the radicals and the masses. For example, Anagarika Dharmapala in his speeches used to urge the Sinhalese to follow the example of "our fearless John Kotelawala . . . and thrash the white man." Moreover, these acts of Kotelawala against individual Europeans were portrayed in folk dramas (*nadagams*) and described in popular ballads and verse sheets, making him a legendary hero even in his lifetime. Further aspects of Kotelawala's career show that although he was somewhat unorthodox in his methods of challenging the British, his actions were not isolated demonstrations of purely personal anger. Kotelawala, who was a Buddhist, had become a member of the Rationalist Association of England and, along with Anagarika Dharmapala, Harischandra, and Martinus Perera, was very active in the temperance campaign of 1904. He toured Ceylon with the Buddhist leaders advocating temperance and sometimes physically punishing any notorious drunkards whom he came across. It should also be mentioned that Kotelawala, who had a great admiration for the Japanese, had formed the Ceylon Japan Trading Company to promote trade with Japan.<sup>32</sup>

At the turn of the century (after the collapse of the Printers' Union) there were no acknowledged labor leaders in Colombo, and the usual practice of the workers was to appeal to the most sympa-

32. The details about John Kotelawala are taken from his son's autobiography, Sir John Kotelawala, *An Asian Prime Minister's Story*, and from *Kotelawala Charitaya* (in Sinhalese) and A. Wright *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

thetic middle-class persons for support. When the carters were faced with the municipal bylaw directed against them, they turned to their fearless "popular idol," John Kotelawala, who was also a cart contractor and therefore had a personal interest in the question. Kotelawala urged the carters to show a militant defiance of the authorities by coming out on strike. It is interesting to note that as a member of the police force, Kotelawala had been present at the Printers' Union meeting in 1893 and had kept law and order in Polwatte during the laundry strike of 1896. He was therefore familiar with the use of the strike weapon as an effective means of protest against injustices. After advising the carters to strike, Kotelawala assumed the leadership of the carters. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary, Kotelawala referred to the law against the carters as iniquitous and an infringement of personal liberty. He held that the law would result in "additional oppression" of the carters and "additional temptations" for the police to exact bribes. During the strike, Kotelawala fed all the carters and their bulls, who crowded into his front garden.<sup>33</sup> Soon after the successful strike, a meeting presided over by Kotelawala was held for the purpose of forming a Carters' Union. It was decided that if the government attempted to reintroduce the bylaw in any modified form, the carters would launch a second strike. A fund was started which included subscriptions of 50 cents from each carter and contributions from cart owners and contractors.

### The Political Significance of the Strike

The Carters' Union was the second trade union to be formed in Ceylon. Like the union of printers thirteen years previously, it was formed after a strike had been called and proved to be a "mushroom" organization which did not long outlive the spectacular events of the strike. But, from the evidence, it is clear that the strike was a reflection of the increasing militancy of the Colombo working class and of the changing political climate in the country which affected both the middle class and the workers; it also led to a noticeable shift in government policy towards labor questions.

33. *Ceylon Observer*, 15 Aug. 1906.

The change in attitude of important sections of the middle class towards the formation of trade unions was a feature of this period. Whereas in 1893 the *Ceylon Independent* was the first to cry "sedition" and denounce the introduction of trade unionism into Ceylon, by 1906 it had changed its views on the subject. When the *Times of Ceylon*, the stronghold of British business interests, denounced the Carters' Union as "an attempt to menace the harmonious working between employer and employed which has always been such a marked feature of the commercial life of Colombo," the *Ceylon Independent* replied that the carters had every legal right to form a union, and condemned the "arrogant pretension . . . inexperience and prejudice of the *Times*."<sup>34</sup>

The printers' and laundry strikes of earlier years had resulted in court proceedings against some of the strikers, but in the case of the carters' strike the government decided to change its policy. It is clear from the Governor's correspondence that the events of the carters' strike caused serious concern and that the authorities decided to combat the unrest through conciliatory rather than repressive means. In a confidential letter to C. P. Lucas of the Colonial Office, the Governor (Sir Henry Blake) said that he had appointed a commission to inquire into allegations of blackmail and bribery against the police in order to "smooth matters a little."<sup>35</sup> This was the first time a commission had been appointed after a strike although in subsequent years it became a common method used by the government to placate strikers and their leaders.

The commissioners were H. L. Crawford, the Government Agent of the Western Province, and P. D. Khan, a Parsee businessman (partner of the Pettah firm of Framjee, Bhikajee & Co), who was also a member of the Colombo Municipal Council. The findings of the commission revealed that sections of the Colombo working class, especially carters, rickshawmen, and cattle drivers, were the victims of police corruption and systematic extortion against which they had little redress. It was found that carters regularly paid bribes at the wharf, the railway goods shed, and in crowded streets of the Pettah, in order that their carts might pass without

34. Editorial quoting *Times of Ceylon, Ceylon Independent*, 21 Aug. 1906.

35. PRO, Letter of 30 Aug. 1906, C.O.54/702.

delay. One carter in his evidence stated that he preferred to pay a constable 25 cents to avoid prosecution for alleged road offenses, rather than go to court and be fined Rs.5. and lose a day's pay. The commissioners, commenting on the "organized system of petty exactions to which the police force has so long been accustomed," recommended better wages and housing for police constables and a greater vigilance in detecting bribery among policemen on duty.<sup>36</sup>

The strike was also a reflection of the prevalent political discontent. The anti-British and antigovernment sentiments that were roused at the time of the carters' strike were expressed in the editorials and letters in the *Ceylon Independent*. This paper, calling itself "a newspaper for the people," was the first penny newspaper in Ceylon and was known for its "outspokenness, fearless ventilation of public questions and bold exposure of public evils."<sup>37</sup> The proprietor, Hector Van Cuylenburg, was popular among the Colombo workers and he had helped the laundrymen during their strike in 1896. Political bitterness was reflected in newspaper rivalry between the *Ceylon Independent* and the British-owned *Times of Ceylon*. During the strike, the *Independent*, which expressed some of the nationalist opinions of the middle-class Ceylonese, accused the *Times* of "misrepresentation . . . calumny . . . and inaccuracies" in its reporting of the strike; the suggestion by the *Times* that a show of force by the military was needed, led the *Independent* to comment, "The *Times* make about as pitiable an exhibition of its cowardice and arrant poltroonery as has ever disgraced a newspaper sheet edited by Englishmen."<sup>38</sup> In a strongly worded editorial, the *Independent* said:

The *Times* is endeavouring to make a racial question out of the recent dispute. . . . An intolerable affront, so the *Times* affects to see, *has been offered to the dominant, the conquering and the superior race*, and the only thing that will bring balm to this distressed Gilead is that a few wretched carters should be dragooned into showing deference, respect and obedience to the authority of the British Raj. Apparently, it does not matter to the *Times* whether the by-law is good, bad or indifferent. The thing that solely counts is that it was *made by the white man to be*

36. *Sessional Paper 52 of 1906*.

37. A. Wright, *20th Century Impressions of Ceylon*.

38. Editorial, *Ceylon Independent*, 17 Aug. 1906.

*enforced against the black man.* It is gall and bitter wormwood to the *Times* that it should have to even hint that any of the ruling race has blundered.<sup>39</sup>

The Governor too was aware of the political implications of the strike, and in a confidential letter to the Secretary of State indicated that the carters' strike presented "some serious aspects" as it went beyond mere opposition to the bylaw and was a demonstration against constituted authority. "The movement seems to me to be a continuation of the wave of unrest that is felt at present all over the East and in Ceylon is encouraged by the 'Ceylon Independent' a paper largely read by English speaking natives."<sup>40</sup>

Dissatisfaction with government policy continued, and three months after the carters' strike the Ceylonese found another reason to flare up against the government. The occasion was a statement by the Colonial Secretary (Sir Alexander Ashmore) that Ceylonese were not employed in the higher posts of the public service because they were deficient in qualities of duty and honor. A "monster protest meeting" attended by leading Ceylonese lawyers, doctors, merchants, and also by clerks, and law and medical students, was held at which the government was severely attacked; a resolution was passed condemning the policy of recruitment to the public services as "based on an unfounded assumption and on racial distinction."<sup>41</sup> In 1907, a year after the carters' strike, a pamphlet called upon "the labour leaders and other supporters to convene a public meeting of the members of the working-classes of Colombo and other towns to confirm the establishment of a Labour Union of Ceylon and to appoint office-bearers." The document contained a strong denunciation of government officials; charges were made of corruption in the government (especially with regard to the lease of the Pearl Fisheries), and to the paucity of government expenditure on hospitals and roads. The *Times* denounced the pamphlet as inflammatory, "a vicious manifesto . . . too scurrilous to quote . . . agitation to create mischief and disaffection written by irresponsible imitators of sedition mongers of India."<sup>42</sup>

39. Editorial, *ibid.*, 21 Aug. 1906, emphasis added.

40. PRO, Despatch 451 of 16 Aug. 1960, C.O.51/702.

41. *Sir Alexander Ashmore's Disparagement of Ceylonese*. Pamphlet of press reports from the *Ceylon Independent*.

42. *Times of Ceylon*, 18 July 1907.

The fact that this pamphlet, while calling for a labor union, at the same time expressed strong criticisms of a political nature against the government, led to fears that sedition was gaining ground in the country. One important aspect of this question was the Colonial Office attitude towards strikes and urban labor unrest. In the past, the civil servants in Britain in charge of colonial affairs had rarely ventured to express dissenting opinions on such matters. But after the Liberal landslide victory in 1906 a change occurred, and the conservative outlook of the authorities on the spot was sharply criticized by Liberals in Britain. After the appearance of the pamphlet, the Governor, Sir Henry Blake, who had past experience of the "seditious" Irish, wrote to Lord Elgin, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, "I do not think I need trouble your Lordship with any detailed refutation of the statements contained in this manifesto, reference to the Estimates sufficing to dispose of allegations that no money was available for hospitals and roads. My object in forwarding this document is solely to bring to your notice the fact that there are in Ceylon at the present time *certain indications that the 'unrest' unhappily prevalent in India, may spread or is spreading to this Colony.*"<sup>43</sup> But this was not the view of Winston Churchill, the Parliamentary Under Secretary in the Colonial Office who at the time was a Liberal. In a minute on the "seditious" pamphlet, Churchill expressed his views forcefully:

It constitutes to my mind a serious and reasoned indictment of the administration of Ceylon of which I have been led to form no very high opinion. It is easy to dismiss these complaints with a gesture of impatience, to assume that officials are always right, and the populations they rule always wrong. But in my opinion an earnest effort should be made to understand the point of view of the native population, to try to measure the might of the burden they bear, to appreciate their feelings in being ruled by alien administration.<sup>44</sup>

The carters' strike made a deep impression on public opinion in the country and in the years after 1906 it was regarded as a "historic strike"—a landmark in the labor movement. The immediate importance of the successful agitation of the carters was the effect it had on other unorganized groups of urban workers, who began

43. PRO, Despatch 408 of 11 July 1907, C.O.54/709, emphasis added. The pamphlet is not available in this despatch.

44. Ibid., Minute of 5 Aug. 1907.

to look upon strike activity as an acceptable and effective means of securing redress of grievances. Working class militancy and religious and political unrest continued to grow, and nationalism and semipolitical religious activity became important factors on the political and social scene in the years between 1912 and 1915.



## Chapter 6

# Religion, Politics, and Labor Unrest, 1906-1915

*There is the same persistent meeting and preaching of Buddhist agitators of a character calculated to stir up feelings of ill-will between classes. Claims are put forward under the cloak of temperance and religion which are purely political and are directly intended to undermine authority.<sup>1</sup>*

Herbert Dowbiggin, 1915,  
Inspector-General of Police

*With any large movement in favour of Buddhism, political motives must almost of necessity be joined.<sup>2</sup>*

J. Devane, 1915, Special Commissioner under Martial Law

A study of the labor unrest that occurred between 1906 and 1915 shows the connection between the growth of an assertive labor force on the one hand, and religious agitation, political discontent, and nationalism on the other. The most important factor in the increase of working-class agitation was the gradual emergence in Colombo of wage labor accustomed to the factory form of production and less tied to the rural sector of the economy. With the growth of this urban proletariat the attitudes of workers changed and they became less concerned with protests against rules and restrictions (as in earlier years) and more intent on obtaining concessions from the employers with respect to wages and conditions

1. CNA, "Report on the Riots of 1915," Confidential Paper No.14502 of 1915.

2. PRO, Despatch 37091, enclosure, "Report on the Riots in Yatinuwara by J. Devane, 15 July 1915," C.O.54/783.

of work. This increasing maturity of the working class, which led to industrial disputes, coincided with a period of religious and political agitation. The religious protests included the continuing campaign by Buddhists for their rights, and the important Buddhist temperance campaign of 1912. The political upsurge took place over the demand for democratic rights and greater measures of self-government; the economic unrest of the period was associated with the cost of living, and the salaries of government servants and the working class. All these protest movements were inter-linked. During these years religious unrest took on a political complexion and the political movement became more openly nationalist. The "new wave" of Buddhist temperance activity became a platform for nationalism, and the nationalists who were claiming political rights began to extend this campaign to include economic rights for the working class. These were leaders who, being opposed to autocratic rule and the monopoly of power held by Christians and foreigners, demanded political representation in the legislature and equality of treatment with British bureaucrats. The leadership of these various movements tended to be confined to the same middle-class persons who were often active in temperance activity, nationalist politics, and labor agitation.

The development of public opinion resulting from the spread of education was one of the factors in the growth of nationalism and the labor movement. This was reflected in the increasing number of English and Sinhalese daily papers and journals, in the formation of political organizations and debating societies, and in the mass temperance demonstrations and public meetings on various issues that became a feature of Ceylon life during this period. From the point of view of the labor movement, the importance of public opinion lay in the fact that it was not confined to the English educated few, but extended to sections of the rural population and the skilled urban workers. The old feudal attitudes of obedience and subservience, characteristic of a society based on rigid class and caste foundations, were being further eroded by urbanization and education. The challenge to authority inspired by the Buddhist revival and the temperance movement aroused widespread enthusiasm. Armand de Souza, the journalist, observed in 1913 that it was no longer possible for a few prominent men to

dominate public life. "The old days when strong cliques imposed their opinions upon the silent masses around have gone by. The people have come into their own almost suddenly . . . the bulk of the people no longer assent, they consider and criticise and arrive at their own conclusions independently."<sup>3</sup>

During the period between 1906 and 1915 the Ceylonese middle class began to assert itself in a forceful manner on political questions. This class had consolidated its economic base during the latter quarter of the 19th century. It had moreover, by means of a Western-oriented education, established its claim to be considered the equal of the foreign ruling class in Ceylon. The combination of wealth and education gave the Ceylonese capitalists and professionals the necessary self-confidence to challenge the government. This group was also influenced and inspired by foreign nationalist movements—especially the Indian movement—and also by the British Labour Party. These were years of increasing discontent, especially among the younger nationalists. One of the means by which the English-educated expressed their views was through "literary associations" in all parts of Ceylon, associations which were in fact political debating clubs. Whereas the literary associations which had flourished in the 19th century had debated topics such as the execution of Charles I or the character of Napoleon, by the 20th century the nationalists used the literary associations to discuss controversial political and social issues of the day, including constitutional reforms, the salaries scheme, the Waste Lands Ordinance, and the temperance question. In 1913, a Congress of these associations (composed of 60 delegates) was marked by a clash between the conservative and radically inclined members. The latter, who formed a young, active group—A. E. Goonesinha, Armand de Souza, E. A. P. Wijeyeratne, M. L. M. Reyal, and A. P. de Zoysa among others—looked upon the Congress of Literary Associations as a forerunner of a nationalist political organization. The radical viewpoint dominated the proceedings, and the statement of a conservative that he hoped the literary associations would never develop into a political movement was greeted with loud hisses. Armand de Souza expressed the feelings of the rebels when he said that though the word politics "sent a shiver through timorous

3. Armand de Souza, preface, *First Congress of Literary Associations*.

people" it was up to the young men to shame the older generation into accelerating the advent of a National Congress.<sup>4</sup>

The state of political ferment which was characteristic of this period was particularly strong in 1912. Describing this atmosphere a weekly journal had the following comment to make at the end of 1912: "The demon of unrest has come among us during the past year and many voices of discontent are clamouring that will not be stilled. . . . the people of Ceylon are on the eve of a great awakening . . . the call of progress, of new thought, of reformation, has reached us . . . and we are moving into a new era of action."<sup>5</sup>

The three main issues which caused this unrest in 1912 were the question of political reforms, the government's salaries scheme, and its excise policy. This agitation had two important results for the labor movement. From the workers' point of view, the prevalence of unrest made the climate a favorable one for pressing their demands and even resorting to strikes. In addition, sections of the Ceylonese middle class, who were involved in opposing government policy, developed a greater concern about the welfare of the masses and their economic conditions, and showed a willingness to champion strikes and lead workers' organizations.

### The 1912 Constitutional Reforms

The issue that led to the greatest amount of friction between the government and the Ceylonese was that of the reform of the Constitution. Since the reforms of 1833 there had been no major change in the institutions of government, though significant economic and social changes had taken place in the country. Some demands for political reform had been made in the years before 1908 by various associations formed for the promotion of agricultural and regional interests, but the emergence of the moderate reformers as a distinct group occurred after 1908. It was around this time that the division in middle-class society between the conservatives, who were solidly pro-British and against political reform, and the moderates, who were for more representative government, became evident. Be-

4. Ibid.

5. *Amicus, the Ceylon Illustrated Weekly*, 22 Nov. 1912.

tween 1908 and 1909 there was a sudden increase in political agitation, and a spate of memorials making very moderate demands for constitutional reform were sent to the Secretary of State for the Colonies by several organizations. These included the Low Country Products Association, the Chilaw Association, the Jaffna Association, and the Ceylon National Association, all of which were basically organizations of Ceylonese planters, merchants, and professionals. There was also an individual petition by James Peiris and another by H. J. C. Pereira on behalf of 760 signatories representing "landed, mercantile and other interests." These petitions reflected the discontent of the middle class, which was excluded from the exercise of political power by the outdated political system in the country. The main demands were the elective principle with a restricted franchise, the abolition of racial representation, and the inclusion of two unofficials on the Executive Council. It was pointed out in all the memorials that colonies "inferior" to Ceylon in revenue and general progress had been granted more liberal and representative governments. These organizations, by insisting that there was a divergence between economic and political realities, were voicing the interests of the Ceylonese capitalists and professionals, whose economic interests were not reflected in the political superstructure. As James Peiris wrote:

The last quarter of a century has been especially remarkable for the great expansion of the industries and commercial pursuits controlled by the native population. . . . the Legislative Council is completely out of harmony with the present advanced and progressive conditions of the Island . . . there is a general feeling among the educated and thoughtful classes that the time has arrived for a liberal reform of its constitution.<sup>6</sup>

The moderates sounded a warning about the agitation that might arise if reforms were not granted. For example, H. J. C. Pereira said that although many had demanded "a public agitation . . . to voice the widespread dissatisfaction with the present political "system," the moderates had used their influence "to discourage such agitation as tending to produce an excitement and unrest undesirable in view of recent events in India, and likely to embarrass the

6. "Memorial of James Peiris 1908," in *Handbook of the Ceylon National Congress*, ed. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, pp. 7-8.

Government." James Peiris also urged the government to implement moderate reforms and thereby "rally on the side of the government the most intelligent as well as the most influential of its inhabitants," and he warned that there were signs that a "general agitation in the country" was beginning.<sup>7</sup>

Even these moderate demands for reform were strongly opposed by the Governor, Sir Henry McCallum, and the Colonial Secretary, Sir Hugh Clifford, who rejected the view that increasing measures of self-government were necessary. McCallum and Clifford were both old style imperialists. They distrusted and disliked the Western-educated Ceylonese who were agitating for a more liberal and democratic system of government and who might develop, like the Indian "seditionists," ambitions of ousting the British altogether. The demand for the election of representatives was opposed by the Governor on the ground that the "native population" would not be able to vote "with judgment or intelligence" and on the pretext that the candidates would come from the "professional and commercial middle classes," and that this would lead to "not representative, but oligarchic class government." In his despatch on the subject, the Governor said:

The granting of what might be thought to be more liberal political institutions may . . . result in giving to a small and peculiar class of the native population, alien in training, education, civilisation and interests to the bulk of the people, rights and privileges which it is fondly imagined are being bestowed upon the natives of the land as a whole.

But perhaps the real reason for the opposition was the fear of the political unrest and increasing pressure for self-government that would arise if significant reforms were granted; Governor McCallum warned the Secretary of State for the Colonies that the introduction of the elective principle would "speedily lead to the creation of a class of professional politicians, to whom self-advertisement and agitation would be essential necessities of existence, whose election campaigns would cause unrest and distraction among the ignorant masses."<sup>8</sup>

7. *Ibid.* pp. 15, 22.

8. See "Despatch of Sir Henry McCallum to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 May 1909," in *Handbook of the CNC*, ed. Bandaranaike, pp. 46-59.

When constitutional changes—the Crewe-McCallum reforms—were announced in 1912, there was a great deal of resentment among the Ceylonese because even their moderate demands had been ignored. The new Legislative Council was composed of 11 officials and 10 unofficials, thereby continuing the principle of an official majority; moreover, of the unofficials, six were *nominated* by the Governor to represent various communal groups—two Low-Country Sinhalese, two Tamils, one Kandyan Sinhalese and one Muslim. As a meager concession to the elective principle, there were to be four unofficials elected on a very restricted franchise: two Europeans, one Burgher and only one to represent the “educated Ceylonese.” This led to strong criticism of the reforms, for not only did the representation perpetuate the communal divisions in society, but also the middle-class Ceylonese, in spite of the moderate nature of their demands, felt that they had been severely rebuffed.

The bitterness can be seen from the unprecedented personal attacks that were made on Governor McCallum and the Colonial Secretary, Sir Hugh Clifford. They were accused of opposing significant political changes, of attempting to stifle the right of petition of the masses, of trying to impose an African style hut tax on peasants (in order to make them work on plantations), and of discontinuing the practice of inviting Ceylonese to the Governor’s functions. A pamphlet on “The Un-British Administration of Ceylon,” issued in 1910, condemned McCallum for sharing “the prejudice of all despots against enlightenment and education,” and for attributing the demand for rights and reforms to “the blighted influence of Western education.” This pamphlet bluntly stated that the Governor had arrived in Ceylon fresh from Natal, and added, “We must protest with all the vigour we can command that we ought not to be governed by Zulu chieftains in the garb of British Governors . . . by training, environment and by reason of his strong prejudices against Asiatic races, Sir Henry McCallum is ill-adapted to continue as Governor of Ceylon.”<sup>9</sup> The attacks were also directed at Sir Hugh Clifford, the Colonial Secretary, who was known to be the brains behind McCallum’s despatches. Clifford

9. *The Un-British Administration of British Ceylon* by Argus Zeylanicus.

had been a soldier by training and while in Malaya he had led an expedition to crush a rebellion. The *Ceylon Morning Leader* claimed that Clifford's reactionary outlook was due to his long periods of service in outposts of Empire where "he lived and ruled despotically." One of the main points of the criticism was that McCallum ("the Zulu Chieftain") and Clifford ("the Malay Sultan") were totally out of touch with British politics and were therefore not representative of the Liberal Government which was in power in Britain. McCallum was referred to as the "most un-British and prejudiced administrator that ever set foot in this Island," and Clifford's ideas and aspirations were said to be "no longer those of the majority of his countrymen."<sup>10</sup> This kind of name-calling and open criticism of the highest government officials which was carried on in local newspapers and pamphlets, together with the refusal of some Ceylonese to treat the Governor with customary deference and expressions of loyalty, reflected the growing challenge to authority during this period.

The climax to this campaign of hostility to the authorities came when the announcement was made in 1912 that Sir Hugh Clifford was to be transferred from Ceylon. Some Ceylonese seized upon this opportunity to publicly demonstrate their antagonism towards Clifford. The usual practice when administrators left the island was for "loyal" citizens to express their gratitude to the departing officials. But Clifford received an unusual send-off when a meeting was organized to record satisfaction at his departure. This meeting, which attracted nearly 4,000 persons, condemned the Colonial Secretary for his "lack of sympathy with the people, repression of their legitimate aspirations and studied disregard of educated public opinion."<sup>11</sup> It is significant that the leading personalities at the meeting included many of those who were interested in labor problems. Among them were A. E. Buultjens and Martinus Perera, leaders of the printers' agitation in 1893; Anagarika Dharmapala, Arthur Dias, Charles Batuwantudawe and Emanuel Jayawardena, all of whom championed the railway workers in the strike of 1912; and Victor Corea and G. A. H. Wille, who in later years were associated with the labor movement.

10. *Ibid.*, quoting *Morning Leader*, 12 Feb. 1910.

11. *Overland Leader*, 19 Sept. 1912.



## The Salaries Commission and the Cost of Living

Two major economic sources of discontent in 1912 were the rise in the cost of living and the findings of the Salaries Commission, which had been appointed by the government to report on the salaries of government employees. The sharp rise in the cost of living was openly admitted by the authorities, and in 1911 the Colonial Secretary stated, "It is clear that the cost of living in Colombo has in the last five years increased in a manner out of all proportion to anything experienced in the previous history of the Island."<sup>12</sup> In 1912, a Salaries Commission (the Slater-Stevenson Commission) composed of two civil servants declared that the prices of commodities and services had risen considerably and made a special comment on the marked increase in the price of basic foodstuffs and the shortage in housing. They also agreed that there had been a change in the standard of living, an increase in the range of individual wants, and admitted that the hardship caused by the increased cost of living was greatest among the lowest-paid government servants: "The classes most urgently in need of relief are peons, process servers, railway porters, vaccinators and employees of that type and the large army of minor clerks."<sup>13</sup> The Salaries Commission awarded the British officials in Ceylon considerable rises in salary, but the Ceylonese government servants were only granted small increases, and the daily-paid government workers received no increase. The government attitude was expressed in an official despatch which said that if further concessions were made, it would have been impossible to resist the demands of 9,000 railway men, and workers at the Government Printing Office, the customs, the police and minor employees of all other government departments.<sup>14</sup>

There was an outburst of indignation against the recommendations of the Salaries Commission, which were denounced for being based on a policy of inequality of treatment and racial bias.

12. *Sessional Paper 35 of 1912*, quoting Sir Hugh Clifford's Despatch of 12 July 1911.

13. *Sessional Paper 35 of 1912*.

14. *Sessional Paper 28 of 1913*.

Criticism was levelled at the unrepresentative composition of the commission, which contained no Ceylonese and no unofficial members of the Legislative Council. When the salaries scheme was discussed in the Legislative Council, the unofficial members voted against it and even one of the officials, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who was the Registrar-General, voted against the scheme. A select committee was appointed to consider the Salaries Commission Report, which included a Ceylonese member (A. J. R. de Soysa); his dissenting report expressed "entire disagreement" with the proposals because the Ceylonese had received very little relief whereas the British officers had "benefitted in a very disproportionate degree."<sup>15</sup> The Ceylonese press was also highly critical of the government's policy and one paper, commenting on the salaries scheme, wrote, "It is a great political blunder to carry out measures without submitting them to the test of public examination and criticism. . . . *The present government does not appear to care much about what the people have got to say and this we think is the cause of friction between the people on the one side and government on the other.*"<sup>16</sup>

### Nationalism and the Temperance Movement of 1912

During this period, Buddhist agitation continued to be militant and campaigns of protest on religious issues served as a means of expressing the dissatisfaction of the Buddhists at the form of government under which policy was made without consulting Buddhist opinion. In 1909, for example, there was an upsurge of religious emotion when the government proposed that the Waste Lands Ordinance be extended to cover the sacred Mihintale hill. Walisinha Harischandra and Anagarika Dharmapala, who had led the 1903 Anuradhapura protests, and other Buddhists such as the trade-union pioneer A. E. Buultjens, organized a Memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies against this move.

The revival of the temperance movement in 1912 was the outcome of an Ordinance passed by the government in 1912, which

15. *Sessional Paper 17 of 1913*.

16. *Amicus, the Ceylon Illustrated Weekly*, 18 Oct. 1912, emphasis added.

provided for the establishment of liquor taverns in areas where there were high amounts of illicit distilling. The resulting increase of licensed taverns led to an outburst of indignation among the temperance leaders, one of whom, Dr. H. M. Fernando, wrote, "The wholesale dumping of toddy shops throughout the country with a suddenness and secrecy almost dramatic . . . has created a profound sensation in the Colony . . . speaking from experience of over thirty years, I can most emphatically assert that never before has the government policy received such widespread condemnation and disapproval."<sup>17</sup> Clearly the opposition of the temperance leaders was not merely to the increase of toddy taverns, but to the system of undemocratic government whereby with "suddenness and secrecy" unpopular measures could be imposed on the people. One of the leading figures of the renewed temperance agitation was Anagarika Dharmapala, who by this date was causing the authorities some anxiety by his criticisms of British rule. In May, 1912, Dharmapala organized a mass meeting at the Vidyodaya temple where a resolution was passed emphatically protesting against the policy of opening taverns.<sup>18</sup> The Total Abstinence Central Union was formed that same year, and with the assistance of temperance societies in Britain a deputation from Ceylon interviewed the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The Buddhists were represented by D. B. Jayatilaka, who made it clear that the resentment felt on the temperance issue was also an expression of political discontent:

Officials say local option is not possible in Ceylon. This is the offspring of that prejudice so habitual in the official mind in Eastern lands . . . that Orientals must be treated like children to the end of all time. . . . Centuries before the arrival of Europeans, there was in the Island a regular and settled form of government under which the people enjoyed some measure of local self-government.<sup>19</sup>

In April, 1913, the government, alarmed at the rapid growth of the temperance movement and its open criticisms of government policy, enacted a General Order prohibiting village headmen from joining temperance societies and making it obligatory on public servants wishing to join these societies to get permission from the

17. "Ceylon Excise System," *Sessional Paper 42 of 1912*.

18. *Ceylon Nation*, 24 May 1912.

19. "Statement of D. B. Jayatilaka," *Sessional Paper 42 of 1912*.

government. There were immediate protests from the Total Abstinence Central Union, which cabled the Secretary of State saying that the government's action would jeopardize the work of temperance and be "a death blow to the cause." In Britain, the Native Races and Liquor Traffic Committee complained to the Secretary of State that not only had "prolonged and widespread discontent" been caused in Ceylon by the new excise policy, but it had also resulted in many of the educated Ceylonese challenging "the moral right of Britain to govern their country in a manner repugnant to their sacred convictions." In explanation, Governor McCallum informed the Secretary of State that the temperance associations were "bogus societies with objects other than the advancement of the temperance principle." The Governor also referred to the methods of boycott of taverns and intimidation used by these societies and said that because temperance gatherings were made the occasion of "incitements to disaffection and personal abuse of government officers," it was undesirable for public servants to be associated with such meetings. But in the face of criticism in Ceylon and England, the government withdrew the General Order and this was hailed as a notable success for the temperance movement.<sup>20</sup>

The Buddhist temperance movement became bolder in its references to nationalism and political change. The Total Abstinence Central Union in January, 1914, claimed a membership of 30,000, with 100 affiliated societies, and its Chairman made demands for the greater participation of the people in the government of the country. "We Sinhalese Buddhists have been regarded by government as inarticulate and fit only to be led by the nose. . . . we were thought unable to unite and work for the common weal . . . we have vindicated our ability to unite for a common purpose and our right to have a voice in the affairs which concern our common welfare."<sup>21</sup> D. C. Senanayaka, the President of the Hapitigam Korale Temperance Association, the most militant of the provincial as-

20. See CNA, Despatch No.324, letter of 29 May 1913; Despatch No. 391, letter to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 June 1913, in File on Temperance and Riots. "The reason for prohibiting government servants from taking part in the management of a Society or from attending public meetings held by it was the desirability of removing probable occasions for friction between government and its servants since public meetings are only too apt to degenerate into indiscriminate attacks on the government." Ibid.

21. *The Mahabodhi*, Jan. 1914.

sociations, stated, "The work of this society filled the hearts of Buddhists with enthusiasm, since it showed the practical outcome of the growing spirit of nationalism in the country."<sup>22</sup> Another temperance leader, Dr. C. A. Hewavitarna, a brother of Anagarika Dharmapala, referred to the time when the temperance societies would form a National Congress of the Sinhalese Buddhists and he described the national awakening spreading throughout Ceylon as "*an awakening not only among the leaders but among the masses themselves.*" He also urged that mere abstinence was not sufficient and that the temperance societies should tackle social and economic problems.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that the temperance revival of 1912 was not confined to issues of temperance alone. It was also a political movement which expressed the resentment of the Ceylonese against the unrepresentative system of government. By creating public opinion against the authorities through propaganda, mass demonstrations, and processions, an impetus was given for further political action and for working-class agitation. Moreover, the temperance leaders of 1912 provided the necessary leadership for the militant sections of the workers. The distrust and growing alarm of the government at the activity and influence of the temperance leaders was reflected in the careful watch kept by the police on their meetings, and especially on Dharmapala, who was regarded as a dangerous fanatic. The political content of the temperance agitation was clearly seen by H. L. Dowbiggin, the vigilant Inspector-General of Police, who wrote, "*Nationalism and politics generally figured largely in these temperance meetings, in fact they were political meetings held under the cloak of temperance.*"<sup>24</sup>

### Foreign Influences on Labor and Politics

The two important foreign influences on politics and trade unionism in Ceylon at this time were Indian nationalism and the British labor movement. The influence of Indian nationalism,

22. *Ibid.*, Sept. 1913.

23. *Ibid.*, Feb. 1915, emphasis added.

24. CNA, Confidential Paper No.14502 of 1915, emphasis added.

which was more marked than it had been in the past, inspired the Ceylonese to bolder criticisms of government policy. Between 1906 and 1911 there was a growth of political agitation in India which was counteracted by repressive measures taken by the government. In 1908 the "extremist" B. G. Tilak was tried for sedition and deported. The resulting outburst of protest included a spectacular strike of the workers in 70 textile mills in Bombay, which led Lenin to make the comment that the "Indian proletariat had matured sufficiently to wage a class-conscious and political mass struggle." There were acts of violence against the British, including bomb throwing and sabotage in Bengal and the Punjab, and the assassination by a Bengali of Sir William Wyllie, Lord Morley's Secretary, in 1909. During this period of conflict the Government of India took two courses of action. The "extremists" were imprisoned and their activities were curtailed by the Seditious Meetings Act of 1907 and the drastic Press Act of 1910, and the "moderates" were pacified with the concessions granted by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1908 and by the revision of the Bengal partition in 1911. During the First World War, the Indian National Congress, which was under the control of the "moderates," proclaimed its loyalty to the British, but some Indians in Germany formed a committee and made an agreement to support the Germans in return for a guarantee of Indian freedom after the war. In Ceylon, the authorities were suspicious of Anagarika Dharmapala because of his links with India. When riots between Buddhists and Muslims broke out in Ceylon in May, 1915, Dharmapala, who had arrived in Calcutta in April that year, was interned and kept under strict surveillance by the Bengal police. Officials in Ceylon also claimed that political agitation in India was one cause for the tension in Ceylon in 1915, and one report on the riots of 1915 made mention of the "vibrations, from the wave of general unrest in India [which had] undoubtedly permeated Ceylon."<sup>25</sup>

In the years after 1910 the British labor movement made impressive political gains. Whereas in 1892, with the victory of Keir Hardie and two others, the first Socialists had entered the House of Commons, by 1906, Labour had increased its strength to 29

25. PRO, "Confidential Report on the Riots, R. W. Byrde, Special Commissioner, 26 August 1915," C.O.54/784. For an account of the Indian nationalist movement and also the quotation from Lenin, see R. Palme Dutt, *India Today*, p. 345.

members and, by 1910, the party had 42 members in Parliament. The Ceylonese politicians who were agitating for constitutional reforms looked for support to the British Labour Party and there was never a lack of Labour Members of Parliament who were willing to ask questions in Parliament on issues such as temperance, political reforms, and the excesses of the 1915 riots. An indication of this interest was seen in 1912 when the Ceylon government, which was seriously considering prosecuting Anagarika Dharmapala for sedition, was advised on this matter by the Inspector-General of Police, who wrote, "A successful prosecution with a really deterrent sentence will be regarded as 'cruel' at home, and even if the Secretary of State does not reduce it, the matter will never be allowed to die a natural death so long as Messrs. Keir Hardie & Co. can ask questions in the House."<sup>26</sup> The links between Labour Party politicians and Ceylonese caused some anxiety to the Colonial Office bureaucrats, and when Ceylonese political figures visited Britain, the police kept watch on their correspondence and their movements. When D. B. Jayatilaka was in Britain in 1916, his letters were intercepted and his movements were followed. A postcard sent to him by George Lansbury arranging for a meeting with Philip Snowden (both leading figures in the Labour Party) was sent by the police to the Colonial Office, where a civil servant referred to it as "evidence of another of Jayatilaka's alliances."<sup>27</sup>

British trade unionism and the unparalleled wave of trade-union activity and strikes that swept Britain after 1910 also had an impact in Ceylon. Trade-union membership in Britain had increased spectacularly from around 2.5 million in 1909 to nearly 4 million in 1914; there were several major strike victories in 1911, including the dockers' strike and the first national railway strike. The railway employers were compelled to negotiate with the unions and a settlement was reached which gave a great fillip to the railway workers. In 1912, the largest strike to take place in Britain occurred when over a million miners struck work. The news of labor unrest in Britain was given continuous publicity in both the local English and Sinhalese newspapers. This undoubtedly had an influence not only on the Ceylonese railway men, who struck work

26. CNA, Confidential File P(5)3, Vol. 1, Minute Paper 5373/12.

27. PRO, minute No.28769, 28 July 1916, C.O.54/798.

in 1912, but also on the British railway drivers recruited in England for service in Ceylon, who began to agitate for better conditions of wages and work.<sup>28</sup>

The influence on the Ceylonese of these two foreign movements—the Indian nationalist struggle and the British labor movement—gave the government cause for concern. The extent to which the authorities distrusted both the Indian and Western radical political influences on the Ceylonese was expressed in 1915 by the Inspector-General of Police in a confidential report: “The Buddhist agitators have travelled since 1903 and picked up all that was bad in India and Europe, and in pursuing this agitation in Ceylon have endeavoured to induce young educated Sinhalese to copy the methods of the Indian agitators and their friends in Europe. The younger generation and the nouveau riche fancy themselves in this new role and have been nibbling at sedition.”<sup>29</sup>

### Nationalism and Labor Conditions

The growth of concern about poverty and the welfare of the population is often a by-product of a national consciousness. It was therefore to be expected that after 1910, when there was increasing political discontent and nationalist feeling, there developed a new awareness among the Ceylonese middle class of the conditions that prevailed among the workers and the poor. The sharp contrast between wealth and poverty was more noticeable as these were years of economic prosperity with boom conditions in the tea and rubber industries. While there was an increase in government revenue and many fortunes were made by foreign and local capitalists, the wages of the workers remained stagnant in spite of the rise in the cost of living, and vagrancy and destitution among the urban poor became a social problem which attracted attention.

The concern over the colonial economic system in Ceylon, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the need for social reform, was

28. See below, pp. 215-18. For details about the strikes in Britain see G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement* pp. 328-45.

29. CNA, Confidential Paper No. 14502.



greatest among the radicals, of whom Anagarika Dharmapala was the most outspoken. His frequent tours of Ceylon made him aware of the effects of poverty and social inequalities among both the peasantry and the urban poor, and he commented bitterly on the lack of interest in these problems shown by the rich. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary at the time of the severe floods of 1906, he wrote, "We who live in palatial mansions can have no idea of the terrible suffering of the poor villagers," to which the Colonial Secretary cynically noted, "as far as I have seen of the 'poor villagers', they seemed to enjoy the flood thoroughly."<sup>30</sup>

Dharmapala was one of the first Ceylonese to criticize the economy, which was geared to a few primary products, and to advocate the need for industrial development. In 1909 he complained that the country had "no technological schools, no manufacturing firms, no engineering college, no industrial schools, no agricultural training college, [and] no weaving schools."<sup>31</sup> In 1912, Dharmapala criticized the Waste Lands Ordinance, accusing the government of forcibly selling the land of the villagers to tea and rubber planters and thereby trying to reduce the people to "wage slaves working under inhuman planters, like the Negro slaves of the Southern States of America." On this issue he advocated sending "our patriots to England, America and Japan to ask for their sympathetic support" and also urged the need for Ceylonese to stir up "national agitation."<sup>32</sup> Dharmapala was also highly critical of the economic consequences of foreign political rule; in 1915 he wrote, "Asia with the exception of Japan is in a state of moral, industrial, political and economic decay . . . [Asians] have lost their economic independence and their political independence without which a nation cannot make progress."<sup>33</sup>

In 1911, the *Ceylon Nation*, which was published by Anagarika Dharmapala, referred to "the mass of pauperism in our midst," and to the sickness and suffering that was to be seen in the parks and public places of Colombo. This paper in 1912 (in an editorial

30. Guruge, ed., *Return*, p. 527.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 532.

32. CNA, Confidential File P(5)3, Anagarika Dharmapala, Vol. 2, which cites an article from *Ceylon Nation*, 15 March 1912.

33. *The Mahabodhi*, May 1915.

on "Our Poor") stated that in spite of official statistics about increasing prosperity, the plight of the poor was desperate; it described "the men and women lying on the roadside in every variety of want and wretchedness and in every stage of loathsome disease" and added, "whatever the prosperity of the country, there [can] be no doubt of the prevalence of mendicancy."<sup>34</sup> Dharmapala's interest in labor problems may also have arisen from his earlier contact with Annie Besant. His diary records that he received reports of the American Labour Bureau from 1905 onwards,<sup>35</sup> and in 1912, when there was labor unrest in Colombo, Dharmapala championed the strikers and became one of their main spokesmen.

Another radical nationalist of the time, C. E. Corea, in an article written in 1912, clearly showed to what an extent nationalist feeling could arouse a social consciousness and a growing dissatisfaction with the inequalities of wealth. Claiming that this aspect of British rule had been a "ghastly failure" he wrote, "I am not ashamed if my nationalism is ill-balanced for as we are governed, I and such as I have ample opportunities to grow rich and fat and sleek in prosperity, while beyond the gulf, the masses of my countrymen starve and are being strangled out of existence."<sup>36</sup> Even among the moderates a feeling developed that the wealthier Ceylonese had a responsibility towards the poorer members of the community. For example, one of Ceylon's wealthy men, A. J. R. de Soysa, took an interest in labor problems and social service, signed a dissenting report on the salaries scheme of 1912, and was one of the chief mediators between the workers and the government during the railway strike of 1912. Another leading moderate, James Peiris, speaking in 1913 at the Congress of Literary Associations, stressed the need for social service and admitted that the temperance campaign had brought "the upper classes into contact with the lower classes." E. W. Jayawardena on the same occasion declared, "we in our own circles should try to do some little good for the poor."<sup>37</sup> This interest in the underprivileged forms the background to the labor agitation which occurred in 1912 and was supported by both the radicals and the moderates.

34. *Ceylon Nation*, 5 Dec. 1911, 16 Feb. 1912.

35. Anagarika Dharmapala, 20 Sept. 1919, "Diaries."

36. *National Monthly of Ceylon*, Nov.-Dec. 1912.

37. *First Congress of Literary Associations*.

## The Railway Strike of 1912

The first serious industrial unrest in Ceylon began in 1912, a period of great political discontent when low wages, rising prices, and economic boom conditions made it a favorable moment for the working class to win concessions. The labor agitation on the railways between 1912 and 1915 reflected the extent to which the workers, influenced by the current political climate, were willing to defy the authorities. This new wave of working-class assertiveness had the support of those radicals and moderates who had been active in temperance and constitutional reform campaigns.

The unrest on the railways began with the workers in the locomotive workshops. A skilled, literate body of men working under factory conditions in a single place of work, they numbered about 3,000, were conscious of the shortcomings in their conditions of work and pay, and were vociferous in the expression of their grievances. The most militant section of the Colombo workers were these locomotive workshop men, who were regarded as the vanguard of the working class by the radicals, and were described by a hostile Inspector-General of Police as the "worst ruffians" in Colombo.<sup>38</sup> The main complaint of the railway workers concerned wages, which had remained stagnant for nearly twenty years although there had been a rise in the cost of living estimated at 33 percent. The locomotive workshop men were divided into grades, and a maximum and minimum wage was laid down, but hardly any workers achieved the maximum wage, and many with long service were drawing low pay. Other causes for dissatisfaction were the lack of increments and overtime, the nonpayment of sickness allowances, the low amounts paid as gratuities on retirement, and the indiscriminate fines and deductions made for alleged offenses. The workers also complained of long hours, bad conditions at work, unjust dismissals, and harsh treatment by superior officers.

The locomotive workers had often sent petitions to the authorities enumerating their grievances as this was the accepted and most

<sup>38</sup> PRO, Comment made in "Report on Buddhist Schools, 6 August 1915," C.O. 54/785.

widely used method at that time of making demands and airing complaints. In 1911, a petition asking for overtime pay on Sundays and holidays was rejected. In February, 1912, the locomotive workers petitioned the Salaries Commission for an increase in wages, sick leave with full pay after five years' service, and a gratuity to be paid after 20 instead of 25 years' work. But the General Manager of Railways informed the Salaries Commission that he could only recommend a rise in the maximum pay of head carpenters and blacksmiths and an increase in the lowest paid unskilled workers' pay from 50 cents to 60 cents daily. He wrote, "The general rise in the cost of living must affect this lowest class equally with others but the case for increasing wages is not based on that ground, but on the fundamental economic law of supply and demand." On the workers' specific demands, the General Manager of Railways said that payment during sickness was impossible as it would lead to malingering, and the Locomotive Manager, reporting on the demands, remarked that it was generally "the lazy and the inefficient" who asked for increases: "I have looked into the timekeeping and length of service of the memorialists and find that most of them are not men of long service nor are they good timekeepers."<sup>39</sup>

Prior to 1912 there had been several short-lived sporadic strikes on the railways. In 1910 the coal fuellers struck work for a day, thereby causing a delay to trains, and the same year there was a one-day strike at the locomotive workshops because of insufficient ventilation. But the first important strike among railway workers took place when the workers of the locomotive workshops struck work on August 24, 1912. The strike spread to the running sheds of Colombo, Kandy and Nawalapitiya, and to the carriage men in Colombo, thereby disorganizing the entire train service of the island. The immediate cause of the strike was the grievance of the locomotive workshop men that their petitions had been ignored and that they were subject to fines and large deductions from wages. Fines were imposed for failing to turn up for overtime, for absence without leave, and for loitering, and deductions from wages were made for negligence, persistent irregularity in attendance, and for "gross and continued insolence." These methods of punishment were keenly resented by the workers as the fines were made on the

39. *Sessional Paper 35 of 1912.*

foreman's advice without any inquiry and without a register being kept of the fines and the offenses. As one worker protested, "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 enquire." Further, the workers, who were not used to the discipline of industrial life, rebelled against the practice of fines for absence from work; the feeling that this was unjust was expressed by one of the pattern workers, who complained, "If I am absent I am the loser. I lose Rs.3. a day."<sup>40</sup>

As the workers at the locomotive workshops did not have a trade union, they approached several of the prominent citizens of Colombo, whom they anticipated would give them the necessary help, advice, and leadership during the strike. The distinction between two types of labor leaders, the moderate and the radical, which was discernible during this strike, became a characteristic feature of labor agitation in later years. In the 1912 strike, mediation with the authorities on behalf of the strikers was undertaken by these two sections of the Ceylonese middle class. On the one hand, there were the moderate political figures—Emanuel Jayawardena, a member of the Municipal Council for Maradana (where the workshops were situated), Hector Van Cuylenburg, the Burgher member of the Legislative Council, and A. J. R. de Soysa, a noted philanthropist who was also the Sinhalese member of the Legislative Council—all of whom were concerned with the grievances of the workers and assumed a paternal interest in their welfare. On the other hand, the railway workers were also advised by the radicals, the politically conscious Buddhist leaders and temperance workers, notably Anagarika Dharmapala and Walisinha Harischandra, who regarded the 1912 strike as an important manifestation of a national awakening.

In the Legislative Council, in reply to a query by Van Cuylenburg, the Colonial Secretary agreed to appoint a commission to enquire into the grievances of the railway workers on condition the strikers resumed work. A deputation consisting of Jayawardena, de Soysa, Dharmapala, and Harischandra called on the General

40. Railway Commission, evidence of K. L. George Silva, and J. Solomon Perera, *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*.

Manager of Railways, who referred to the Colonial Secretary's promise of a commission and asked that the workers be persuaded to return to work. With these assurances from the authorities, a mass meeting of railway workers was organized at Mahabodhi College (the Buddhist school run by Anagarika Dharmapala) in order to present the Colonial Secretary's proposal to the workers. Although all the speakers urged the workers to return to work, there was a conflict of opinion on broader issues. The moderates criticized strike activity and stressed the benefits of British rule, while the radicals spoke of the reawakened national consciousness and praised the strikers. For example, Jayawardena said that though the grievances of the workers were real, he did not want to encourage anything subversive of discipline. "I have the greatest respect and affection for the British government . . . I know what is due to the authorities," he stated, adding that if the men did not go back to work they would "forfeit the sympathy of every right-thinking man." He urged the workers to show that they were "generous to forgive, respectful of those in authority, and readily guided by those whose sympathy and kindness" they enjoyed. Van Cuylenburg also spoke of the advantages of British rule, and said that the workers as "intelligent and honourable men" should abide by the promise they had made to accept the decision of the mediators. In contrast, Anagarika Dharmapala, a very popular figure among the Sinhalese workers because of his aggressive criticisms of the authorities, congratulated the strikers on showing "strength and power in the face of hard and merciless treatment." He supported the view that the railway strike afforded "unmistakeable proof of the national spirit among the Sinhalese" and said that there was nothing which a national awakening and unified effort could not accomplish.

This was the most important organized labor meeting that had taken place in Ceylon to that date, and it was said to have "made a profound impression upon all those who witnessed the proceedings."<sup>41</sup> Following on the decision at the mass meeting, the workers, who had been on strike for nine days, assembled outside the railway shops the next morning. The General Manager and A. J. R. de Soysa assured the strikers that they would not be victimized in

41. For details, see *Ceylon Morning Leader*, 2 Sept. 1912.

any way. When the General Manager refused the request for wages during the period of the strike, the workers threatened to leave again, but de Soysa promised that if the government refused to give them the week's pay he would do so out of his own pocket. This was received with a cheer and work was resumed, but de Soysa had to pay Rs.9,000. to the strikers as promised. The *Times of Ceylon* criticized this as "impolitic" and said that although de Soysa had got the government out of difficulty, such an act would have a "bad moral effect," giving the workers the impression that they had got all they wanted, and that if the recommendations of the government commission did not please them the strike might be resumed.<sup>42</sup>

### The Significance of the Strike

Several important factors, including the foreign and local political influences on Ceylon labor, the attitude of the middle class towards labor agitation, the increasing militancy among the skilled workers, and the policy of the government towards labor unrest, emerge from the events of the 1912 strike. This strike occurred during a period of acute industrial unrest in Britain, and the national railway strike in Britain in 1911 was thought to have influenced the Ceylon workers. When the Ceylon strike began, a railway official stated that though the local workers did not have any leaders among their ranks like Ben Tillet, it was probable that "some of the better educated workmen had been reading in the English papers of the numerous strikes and had got infected with the idea."<sup>43</sup> It was also alleged that the "sympathy strike" of the running-shed workers had been inspired by its successful use in England, and the *Times of Ceylon* wrote, "it is manifest that the influence of home strikes is making itself felt even as distantly as Ceylon."<sup>44</sup>

The authorities also believed that the strike was a politically inspired event, and fears of sedition through labor agitation were

42. *Times of Ceylon*, 3 Sept. 1912.

43. *Ibid.*, 26 Aug. 1912.

44. *Ibid.*, 29 Aug. 1912.

expressed by government officials. The Colonial Secretary remarked that "it was notorious that outside incitement did have a good deal to do with the strike,"<sup>45</sup> while Governor McCallum noted that the strikers were being "excited and incited by an arch seditious agitator"—a reference to Anagarika Dharmapala.<sup>46</sup> There is no doubt that the climate of political discontent made some sections of the Ceylonese press harshly critical of government policy and sympathetic to the strikers. Three leading newspapers used the occasion of the strike to attack government and railway officials. The *Ceylon Observer* criticized the system of punishments, the reduction of wages and the stoppage of promotion, and blamed the railway officials for precipitating the strike by their tactlessness. The *Ceylon Morning Leader* accused the heads of railway departments of treating their workers "with very little sympathy and infinitely less tact,"<sup>47</sup> while the *Ceylon Independent* claimed that the Ceylon workman was normally most tractable and only gave trouble when "treated like a dog and spurned." Whenever workers made representations they were "disbelieved, totally disregarded and the stereotyped reply [was] sent that His Excellency [saw] no reason to interfere with the decision of the Head of the Department." The *Independent* declared that there was popular sympathy with the strikers and warned the government that the conduct of its officials was intolerable; there was no government department in which there was not "sullen dissatisfaction in the lower ranks through the overbearing conduct, bad temper and generally offensive behaviour of the superior officers to their subordinates."<sup>48</sup>

The prevailing political unrest had the effect of increasing working-class militancy. The temperance agitation against the excise bill was a mass movement in which urban workers participated, and Dharmapala's writings and preachings against the authorities were avidly read and listened to by workers. The *Observer*, which accused the government of having shown a "callous disregard for the welfare of the people" in its excise policy, attributed the "ebullition among the railway workers to feelings of unrest caused by re-

45. CNA, File PF.2586B.

46. *Ibid.*, File PF.2586.

47. *Ceylon Observer*, 29 Aug. 1912; *Ceylon Morning Leader*, 30 Aug. 1912.

48. *Ceylon Independent*, 4, 6 Sept. 1912.



cent government policy.”<sup>49</sup> The agitation over the salaries scheme also affected the daily-paid government workers, who had not received any increments and were therefore in a hostile mood against the government. This change in the attitude of the workers was commented upon in the *Morning Leader* in 1912: “A comparison between public opinion six or ten years ago and its condition today discloses a . . . progressive virility. Six years ago interest in public affairs was confined to a few. *The man in the street today has his own opinion about most of the main questions of the time . . . the administration finds itself confronted by a new influence, with which it is forced to reckon.*”<sup>50</sup>

The willingness of a large group of railway men to come out on strike, as they did in 1912, reflected the general discontent among urban labor. There were also strong feelings of class solidarity among the strikers. Some intimidation of nonstrikers took place, and it was reported that the 500 firemen, cleaners, and coal trimmers who struck in sympathy with the locomotive workshop men were not only noisy and boisterous, but also shouted and jeered at passing trains and threw stones. A certain “jaunty spirit” was also noticeable among the working class; after one of the meetings held by the strikers, a Sinhalese song was sung in chorus and “a holiday feeling” prevailed. Sympathy for the strikers was also shown by other sections of the Colombo working class. The government was unsuccessful in its efforts to get fitters from other government departments to work on the railway during the strike, and workers at the Harbour, Municipality, Government Factory, Walkers, and other firms made collections for the strike fund.<sup>51</sup>

The greater understanding among the middle class of the phenomenon of industrial unrest, and the new militancy that developed among the workers, led to the formation of the first trade union among railway workers after the strike. This union, called the Ceylon Workmen’s Provident Association, had several well-known politicians, temperance workers, and leading Buddhists among its main office-bearers. The president was Charles Batu-

49. *Ceylon Observer*, 30 Aug. 1912.

50. *Ceylon Morning Leader*, 28 Sept. 1912, emphasis added.

51. See *Ceylon Observer*, 28–31 Aug. 1912, for details.

wantudawe, a lawyer, who was also Secretary of the Ceylon Reform Society, President of the Buddhist Theosophical Society, and a very active temperance leader. He had supported the railway workers during the 1912 strike and acted as one of their counsel before the Railway Commission which was appointed after the strike. The Vice-President of the association was a wealthy landed proprietor, Arthur Dias, one of the foremost temperance workers, who was also active in nationalist politics and social service work. The Treasurer, D. C. Senanayake, a proprietary planter, was one of the best known temperance workers and an office-bearer of the Buddhist Theosophical Society. The committee members, composed of the most active and militant railwaymen, were all skilled workers of the higher wage groups. They included four fitters, Marshall Wickremasinghe, H. Valentine Fernando, W. H. Blok and D. John Perera; three carpenters, W. Johanis Fernando, P. Pedru Perera, and A. L. Pedru Appu, of whom the latter two were head carpenters; J. Solomon Perera, a pattern maker, and Marthelis Perera, an overseer earning the maximum salary for his grade of Rs.4. a day and described by the railway authorities as "the best man" in the workshop. The objects of the union were to protect the interests of the workers, to make representations on their behalf, and also to serve as a provident society which would give help in times of need. The suspicions of the authorities were immediately roused, and the Inspector-General of Police stated that the object of the association was "really to start a collection to support strikes."<sup>52</sup> All the office-bearers, whether workers or middle-class leaders, became marked men over whom the police kept a close scrutiny, and in 1915, during the riots, they were all imprisoned or exiled.

The policy of the government towards industrial unrest on the railways was a cautious one. Though the authorities believed that seditious elements were behind the strike, they refrained from taking any drastic action on this occasion. They may have been motivated by the fear that the continuous political unrest in 1912 would erupt again if repressive action was taken. The government also had to contend with a new factor. In previous years when strike

52. CNA, Confidential File N.34.

leaders were thought to be a few agitators or cranks, it was easy to crush a strike, but by 1912, many of the moderate Ceylonese were showing an increased interest in labor questions. During the 1912 dispute, the Colonial Secretary had managed to settle the strike by promising that a commission would consider and report on the workers' grievances and following on this, the Railway Commission of 1912 was appointed. The choice of the six commissioners was significant, for while the Controller of Revenue (C. W. Booth), the Solicitor-General (J. Van Langenberg), and a businessman (Sir Stanley Bois) were the "safe" members of the commission, Ponnambalam Arunachalam (the Registrar-General), Hector Van Cuylenburg, and A. J. R. de Soysa (both unofficial members of the Legislative Council), were well known for their interest in the Colombo working class, the latter two having mediated in the 1912 railway strike.

There was a difference of opinion among the commissioners on several issues. Three Ceylonese commissioners added their own riders to the report and were rebuked by the government for their opinions. These riders reflected the growing concern among the Ceylonese over the wages and conditions of labor. The commission was also an important landmark in the labor history of the country because the most militant and capable of the locomotive workshop men, showing a considerable amount of boldness and courage, came forward to give evidence, complained of their hardships, and made allegations of harsh treatment.

The main grievance considered by the commission was that of wages. The majority of the commissioners agreed that the increase in the cost of living was "a matter of common knowledge" and that the evidence of the workers revealed "cases of genuine hardship," but stated that they were unable to recommend any revision of rates or any increase in the wages actually paid: "Their wages would suffice for men in their class of life to live on in average conditions. With every desire to deal with the men in the most sympathetic spirit, it is clearly not reasonable to contend that they should be paid more because they have been unfortunate or improvident." Other grievances which were considered included overtime, long hours of work, sick leave, compensation for accidents,

pensions, conditions at place of work, railway passes, and fines. The commissioners recommended overtime pay for Sunday work, a board of railway officials to investigate accidents and decide on relief, small pensions (instead of gratuities) for the more efficient workers, better facilities for meals and washing, and two free railway passes to employees with over five years of service. On the question of sick leave, the commissioners declared that if a man was frequently ill "his value as a worker was impaired" and his lack of efficiency would tell against him so long as the railway was managed on business lines and not as a charity. To the suggestion that half-pay be given during sickness, the commissioners said it was inconsistent with the status of daily-paid workers and would offer "a strong temptation to malingering." But on the issues of fines and reductions of pay, which had led to the 1912 strike, the commissioners found that the power of reducing a man's pay had not been abused and they held that such power was necessary for officers "who have to work a large daily-paid staff and to enforce discipline among them."<sup>53</sup>

The recommendations of the commission were not of a drastic nature and the government was able to agree with the findings. But the dissident note was sounded by the riders of three of the Ceylonese members of the commission, who on the important question of wages, expressed doubts. Arunachalam said that the commission should have gone into evidence of the cost of living and referred to the distinction between money wages and real wages, remarking that in Europe and America "an opinion as to the adequacy of wages would scarcely be ventured upon without a careful inquiry into these fundamental matters . . . such as that made in England by Rowntree and Booth, and in the United States by Atwater." The Colonial Secretary in his comments on the commission's report criticized Arunachalam's efforts to obtain wage increases for the railway workers:

As an employer of labour the Railway does not compare unfavourably in the rates which it pays with private firms in Colombo, and service under the Railway is popular. Mr. Arunachalam merely indulges in theorising and in doing so attempts to apply theories which the authorities whom he quotes have never attempted to apply to any but un-

53. *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913.*

skilled labour. It would be impossible to put his theories into practice in the case of skilled labour, the wages of which must be governed by its market value.<sup>54</sup>

Van Cuylenburg's rider claimed that as the cost of living had risen at least by 33 percent, the wage rates given 20 years previously were no longer adequate. He also urged the railways to be more generous in giving promotions, because many of the workers had been engaged in these crafts for over ten years and would of necessity "have acquired efficiency in their work." A. J. R. de Soysa, in his rider on wages, argued that an increase of wages all round was necessary as wages had stagnated for several decades. "So long as imposing fines is the usual mode of punishment, and the department reserves to itself the right of suspending a man at any moment owing to slackness of work or any other reason, a request for a more liberal scale of wages is not unreasonable . . . all posts carrying the maximum pay ought to be filled up."

Arunachalam was the Registrar-General at the time and his dissenting remarks caused particular annoyance to the government. The commission's report had said that the workers had no justification for taking the extreme step of going on strike, and suggested that certain dissatisfied workers had been encouraged by outsiders to go on strike. But Arunachalam held that outside incitement, if any, played a small part in the strike, and describing the grievances over wages and conditions among Ceylonese workers, he said:

The general spirit of unrest which has broken out in strikes and other violent upheavals in widely sundered places of the earth should not be overlooked. With the close continual contacts of trade, investment, travel and intellectual life, every country is more sensitive to the events and thoughts of other countries than ever before. Ceylon cannot expect to be untouched by the wave of discontent among the proletariat of the world.<sup>55</sup>

The Colonial Secretary held that this rider was "calculated to make the men think that they [were] badly treated and to excite discontent." He maintained that it was notorious that outside incitement did have a good deal to do with the strike, and said that "Arunachalam's attempt to find excuses for the strike is greatly to be

54. CNA, Railway Commission 1913, R.O.PF.2586B.

55. *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*, pp. xiv-xvi.

deprecated." Governor McCallum, in commenting on the riders, said that A. J. R. de Soysa's rider was "unusually foolish" and that Arunachalam's attitude was "calculated to give encouragement to strikes." To the authorities, these commissioners were theorizers and unintentional provokers of further labor troubles, who in their concern for the workers showed themselves to be out of touch with reality. The view of the Colonial Secretary was that the railway workshops should be run purely as a business concern: "If you turn the shops into a charitable institution the margin of profit on locally made goods will disappear, goods will have to be imported . . . and the local workshops will have to be closed down to a great extent, thus throwing numbers of men out of work and defeating the very object which these benevolent gentlemen have at heart."<sup>56</sup>

The report of the Railway Commission proved to be a great disappointment to the railway workers. They had consented to call off the strike in 1912 on the assurance given by the government that their grievances would be investigated and redressed. None of the major demands of the workers regarding pay, fines, promotions, and conditions of work were granted, and the recommendations by the three Ceylonese commissioners were ignored by the government. According to one journal, the railway workers' opinion on the commission was that the findings had "added insult to injury."<sup>57</sup> From 1912 until 1915, the dissatisfaction among railway workers continued to be openly expressed. The climax of this mood of unrest on the railways came in 1915, when the economic and political tensions of the war years resulted in an outburst of rioting, which in Colombo was precipitated by the workers of the railway locomotive workshops.

56. CNA, R.O.PF.2586B.

57. *Amicus, the Ceylon Illustrated Weekly*, 28 Feb. 1913.

## Chapter 7

# Labor Unrest and the Riots of 1915

*Had the outbreak been confined to the up-country I could have dealt with it without proclaiming martial law. . . . But when the outbreak reached the low-country, and when the criminal classes of Colombo and elsewhere joined in a movement which had become simply predatory and anarchic, then the time had come for the sternest measures.<sup>1</sup>*

Sir Robert Chalmers, 1915, Governor of Ceylon

*They are a set of skunks—mostly I regret to say, men educated in Europe—one or two Cambridge men among them.<sup>2</sup>*

R. E. Stubbs, Colonial Secretary, on the Ceylonese  
alleged to have instigated the 1915 riots.

The riots which took place in 1915 between Buddhists and a section of Muslims known as Coast Moors, and the repression that followed, form an important part of the history of the Ceylonese nationalist and labor movements. A close interweaving of religious, political and economic forces was evident during the riots. Although the initial explosion was a religious issue, the riots cannot be simplified into a religious outburst between Buddhists and Muslims, which British officials suppressed in the name of law and order. The issues were far more complex, the religious controversy being linked with manifestations of nationalist feeling and with the economic grievances of the urban and rural poor. Since the

1. Despatch of 17 Aug. 1915, in HMSO, London, *Ceylon, Correspondence Relating to Disturbances in Ceylon*, p. 32. This Command Paper will hereafter be referred to as Cd. 8167.

2. PRO, Letter of R. E. Stubbs to A. E. Collins, 8 June 1915, C.O.54/782, No.29924.

riots occurred at a time when the First World War was being waged in Europe and nationalist activity was spreading in India, the government panicked, proclaimed martial law, and took very harsh measures against the Sinhalese Buddhists, the temperance leaders, and the militant workers. These events left a sense of grievance among the Sinhalese and acted as a great impetus to the national movement.

The dispute began in 1912 at Gampola when the Muslims protested about the playing of music as Buddhist processions passed the mosque, and the Buddhists insisted on their right to conduct processions in the traditional way. In 1914 the Kandy District Court had given judgment in favor of the Buddhists, but this was reversed by the Supreme Court in February, 1915. In May, 1915, during Buddhist *Vesak* observances, the Muslims objected to the music played by a group of Buddhist singers as they passed a mosque in Kandy; this angered the large crowds gathered in Kandy for *Vesak*, and spurred on by rumors of acts of violence by Muslims, there were riots in Kandy on May 29th and 30th, resulting in several deaths. The news of the disturbances in Kandy spread to other provinces and there was further rioting and looting directed against Muslims. On June 2, 1915, the government proclaimed martial law in seven provinces and troops were sent to these parts of the island. The leading Buddhist political and temperance workers were detained, and many Buddhists were shot or imprisoned after trials by courts martial. There were also summary executions carried out by parties of soldiers under special commissioners. Many deaths were also caused when the police and military fired into crowds. During the period of martial law, which lasted until August, 1915, the troops and police, along with armed British planters and civil servants, unleashed a punitive campaign of terror. Long after the riots had subsided people who were thought to be implicated in the riots were summarily shot by these armed civilians. By an Order in Council of August, 1915, those responsible for these unlawful shootings were indemnified, and by the Riots Damage Ordinance a levy was forcibly collected from the Sinhalese community indiscriminately to compensate the Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

3. No reliable estimate has been made about the deaths during the riots. The official figures were 39 persons killed by rioters, 63 by the police and military, and



The drastic repressive measures taken during the riots can be explained by the prevalent fear that the breakdown of law and order meant a serious challenge to British rule during the critical years of the World War, and by the alarmist view that the participation of the Colombo workers in the riots was an indication of anarchy and lawlessness. There were also rumors that the riots were part of a German plot, that Anagarika Dharmapala was a German agent, and that leaflets showing the Kaiser with Dharmapala as his chief priest had been distributed. Though the authorities treated most of these rumors lightly, one report suggested that "German agents might have fomented the trouble."<sup>4</sup> But the possibility that the riots were ultimately directed against British rule was taken more seriously. For example, the Colonial Secretary, R. E. Stubbs, in a private letter to a Colonial Office colleague wrote, "There is no doubt in my mind that the procession business is only a pretext and that the affair has been organised by big people who want to see how far they can go in defiance of the government."<sup>5</sup> Captain Northcote of the Ceylon Command claimed that officials who had visited the disturbed areas believed that the riots were "not intended to be continued solely against the Moormen but ultimately against the Europeans," adding that therefore the strongest measures were necessary to prevent "further acts of disloyalty to the Crown."<sup>6</sup> These views were strengthened by some of the confidential reports of the special commissioners appointed to investigate the riots. The Kegalle report claimed that a general outbreak was carefully planned, and that differences between Sinhalese and Moors were "convenient pretexts to carry on agitation which

34 executions after trials. For details about the riots, see articles by Robert Kearney, P. T. M. Fernando, Charles Blackton, and Kumari Jayawardena, *Journal of Asian Studies*, (Feb. 1970).

4. See, PRO, "Confidential Report on the Colombo Riots by R. W. Byrde, Special Commissioner, 26 August 1915," C.O.54/784. See also PRO, Minute of H. A. Cowell of the Colonial Office, 2 Sept. 1915, C.O.54/784, No.43941. Although so far there has been no proof of German involvement in the 1915 riots, it should be remembered that there were German "agents" in all parts of Asia; that Germans supported and financed anti-British activities in India during the First World War; and that several Germans were deported from Ceylon around this time for suspected anti-British views.

5. PRO, private confidential letter of R. E. Stubbs to A. E. Collins, 2 June 1915, C.O.54/782.

6. Ibid., letter of Captain L. A. Northcote to the Governor, 7 July 1915, C.O.54/782, No.35109.

had as its real, if fantastic object, the subversion of British rule."<sup>7</sup>

In Ceylon it was the more conservative among the local officials who tended to regard the 1915 riots as a threat to the British that had to be crushed, and the excesses committed during this period by the authorities led to a divergence of opinion between the die-hards and the others. Conflicts had often occurred between the Colonial Office and the "men on the spot" in the colonies but, as some of the documents on the 1915 riots show, in this case there was serious disagreement not only between Ceylon and Whitehall but also among government officials themselves. In 1915, Governor Chalmers and some of the more enlightened civil servants were often overruled by the diehard group consisting of Colonial Secretary Stubbs, the Brigadier-General (H. H. L. Malcolm), and the Inspector-General of Police (H. L. Dowbiggin). In the conflict between the Governor and the Colonial Secretary, the opinions of the latter frequently prevailed. In a private confidential letter written soon after the riots began, Stubbs complained that the situation was "far more serious than His Excellency realised," and added "the only possible way of meeting the situation is to declare martial law and leave the military to settle the whole thing, but His Excellency is still hesitating." Stubbs also informed the Colonial Office that the Governor's despatches on the riots did not give a "strong enough coloured picture."<sup>8</sup> There was also a certain amount of disagreement over policy between the Governor and the Brigadier-General who was in charge of the troops. In the famous case of D. E. Pedris, a wealthy young member of the Town Guard who was sentenced to death under court martial for allegedly instigating rioting, the Governor, who normally confirmed or commuted death sentences, was not consulted. In a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the morning after the Pedris execution, the Governor noted that "the Brigadier General saw fit not to

7. *Ibid.*, "Confidential Report on the Riots in Kegalle, G. F. Forrest, Special Commissioner, 27 August 1915," C.O.54/784.

8. *Ibid.*, letter of R. E. Stubbs 2 June 1915, and letter of R. E. Stubbs to A. E. Collins 8 June 1915, C.O.54/782. Some idea of the attitude of Stubbs can be seen in another extract from the latter letter on the death of the temperance leader R. A. Mirando. "The troops have always got right on to the mob & killed men with arms in their hands. The only exception was the case of a leading Buddhist named Mirando, who was shot by accident. But this was a special act of providence as there is evidence to show that he at first egged on the mob and then returned to watch the effect, so we bagged the right man by accident."

refer the matter to me and the death sentence was carried out.”<sup>9</sup> This was the only death sentence during the course of the riots that was not referred to the Governor. The reason may have been that, since Pedris was in the Town Guard, his case was subject solely to military jurisdiction; it is also possible that the military authorities desired to make an example of at least one member of the Ceylonese elite. Whatever, the result of this shooting caused deep resentment and bitterness among the Sinhalese. It made Pedris into a national martyr, and as the Rev. J. S. de Silva recorded in his diary, this execution during the “reign of terror,” created a “feeling of horror throughout the country.”<sup>10</sup>

It is usually believed that the causes of the riots were exclusively religious in origin and that the “mobs” were composed of hooligans and criminals. But there is evidence to show that strong economic and nationalist forces lay behind the unrest, and that the working class of Colombo took a prominent role in the rioting. The Colombo “mob” was not led by criminals but by skilled workers, in particular the railway locomotive men. The most militant of them were exiled to the East coast of Ceylon, and the radical Buddhist temperance leaders who had helped in the formation of the railway workers’ trade union in 1912 were imprisoned.

### The Economic Background

According to the usual viewpoint, the riots of 1915 were sparked by religious fanaticism as the Buddhists saw in the “intolerance and aggressiveness of the Muslims, a permanent danger to their religious practices and celebration of their national festivals.”<sup>11</sup> This interpretation of the riots ignores several important economic factors which had led to the development of resentment against a section of the Muslim population. In the 1911 Census, the Muslims in Ceylon consisted of 234,000 Ceylon Moors, descendants of Arab settlers, 13,000 Muslims of Malay descent, and 33,000 Coast Moors (or Indian Moors) who had migrated to Ceylon to trade, and who fre-

9. *Ibid.*, confidential letter 8 July 1915, C.O.54/782, No.35109.

10. CNA, extracts from “Diaries of the Rev. J. S. de Silva.”

11. D. C. Vijayavardhana, *Revolt in the Temple*, p. 121.

quently returned to South India. The Coast Moors were mainly engaged in petty trade throughout the country and their small shops provided the foodstuffs and other necessities of life for the urban and rural poor.<sup>12</sup> In the towns, there were many teashops owned by Coast Moors and patronized by urban workers. Since Coast Moor shopkeepers were often pawnbrokers and moneylenders as well, allegations were frequently made of usury and rapacious business dealings. R. W. Byrde, one of the special commissioners appointed to report on the riots, wrote, "In the ordinary course of events the Coast Moor is unpopular in the villages . . . he is thrifty and prosperous . . . a money-lender and a land grabber."<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the Moor traders, Governor Chalmers stated that they had "always been viewed by the villager with feelings entertained at all times and in all lands towards transitory aliens who make money out of the local peasantry by supplying their wants at the 'shop' and frequently securing mortgages of the lands of thriftless debtors."<sup>14</sup>

The feeling against the Moor petty traders increased a great deal after the outbreak of the war in 1914. Restrictions on trade and a shortage of freight caused a decline in imports and exports in the first year of the war. Ceylon's main products were affected by the slump; there was a fall in coconut prices and the depression in graphite and rubber resulted in a reduction of wages and the retrenchment of labor in these industries. There was, in addition, an increase in unemployment among skilled workers in the towns. The shortages caused by the war led to a sharp and sudden rise in the price of foodstuffs and other necessities, which was most keenly felt by the poor. The Governor, describing the rise in prices, and the tendency of retail traders "to exact exorbitant prices from poor people,"<sup>15</sup> wrote, "In a peasant country where retail prices are ex-

12. E. C. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911*, p. 232. The principal necessities of life for unskilled agricultural labor in 1913 were assumed to be grain, curyrstuffs, dry fish, vegetables, salt and cotton goods. This would have been roughly the consumer budget for a worker, agricultural or urban in 1915. "Report of Silver Currency Commission." *Sessional Paper 6 of 1894* (O.D.4).

13. PRO, "Report on the Riots, 26 August 1915," C.O.54/784. See Denis Greenstreet, "The Nationalist Movement in Ceylon," p. 143, for a discussion of the economic discontent at the time of the riots.

14. Cd. 8167 of 1916 p. 3. Letter of Governor Chalmers to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1 June 1915.

15. *Debates of the Legislative Council*, 24 Aug. 1914.

pressed in cents and half cents, even a slight rise in prices is both felt and resented by the customer.”<sup>16</sup>

### The Political Factors

The riots of 1915 should also be viewed against the political climate of the time because political motives were invariably linked with religious unrest. During the years preceding the riots there was considerable political agitation connected with constitutional reforms, the temperance movement, and the salaries scheme. There had also been an increase in communal tension and an outburst of nationalist feeling. The impact of Indian nationalism and foreign radical movements must also be noted. An official report on the rioting in Colombo stated:

Vibrations from the wave of general unrest in India have undoubtedly permeated Ceylon. The circumstances . . . present a serious political aspect. After a hundred years of British rule there exists a strong and growing spirit of discontent . . . [and] a valid spirit of nationalism. Its ultimate aim is to get rid of British control. Men are exhorted to become martyrs for the cause. A leader such as Parnell is sought for and a doctrine of no conciliation is preached.<sup>17</sup>

The animosity directed against the Moors was a result of the growth of communal and religious awareness on the part of the Sinhalese Buddhists which had been fostered by the Buddhist revival, the Sinhalese press, and the preachings of Anagarika Dharmapala. One of the aspects of the increase of national feeling was the hostility that developed against “foreigners,” especially Europeans and Indians resident in Ceylon. The “decline” of the Sinhalese race and the Buddhist religion was blamed not only on the European conquests, but also on other minority groups in Ceylon, and the Sinhalese newspapers and Buddhist journals led this campaign.

16. Cd. 8167 of 1916, p. 3.

17. PRO, “Report on the Riots, 26 August 1915,” C.O.54/784, p. 162. This report by R. W. Byrde also said, “The Sinhalese, on the one hand are an extremely conservative people and on the other hand they see the advantage of Western ideals and are anxious to benefit by their adoption. In consequence, the infusion of Western education produces a ferment and conduces to results which are similar to those produced when new wine is put into old bottles.”

There is also some evidence to suggest that the Sinhalese shopkeepers and traders were active in the campaign against their Moor competitors and that many of the "ringleaders" alleged to have been involved in leading the riots were from the rural and urban Sinhalese Buddhist "petty bourgeoisie." In 1909, for example, a member of this class, Piyadasa Sirisena, the popular novelist who was the editor of the *Sinhala Jathiya*, advised the Sinhalese to "refrain from having transactions with the Coast Moor, the Cochin and the foreigner."<sup>18</sup> The *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, run by Dharmapala, was the most vociferous in its attacks on "the increasing misdeeds of the Tamils, Moors and Europeans" who were referred to as "infidels of degraded race." In 1912 this journal wrote, "From the day the foreign white man stepped into this country, the industries, habits and customs of the Sinhalese began to disappear and now the Sinhalese are obliged to fall at the feet of the Coast Moors and Tamils."<sup>19</sup> An official referred to "articles of an extremely seditious nature" appearing in the *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, which published "the out pourings of Anagarika Dharmapala, directed against constituted authority, the white man and every foreigner."<sup>20</sup> Another Buddhist publication associated with Dharmapala, the *Mahabodhi Journal*, referred with disapproval to the "merchants from Bombay and pedlars from South India" who traded in Ceylon, while the "sons of the soil" abandoned agriculture and worked like "galley slaves" in urban clerical jobs.<sup>21</sup> In 1915, when tension was developing between Buddhists and Muslims, a Sinhalese daily paper, the *Lakmina*, referring to the Coast Moors, wrote, "A suitable plan should be adopted to send this damnable lot out of the country," and another daily, the *Dinamina*, condemned "our inveterate enemies, the Moors."<sup>22</sup> Some of the editors of Sinhalese newspapers which carried inflammatory letters making complaints against Moor traders were charged under martial law in 1915, and papers like

18. CNA, "Confidential Report No.14502 of 1915." For a list of alleged ringleaders and their social position see Michael Roberts, "Hobgoblins, Low Country Sinhalese Plotters, or Local Elite Chauvinists? Directions and patterns in 1915 Communal Riots," *Ceylon Studies Seminar* June 1970 (1969/70).

19. CNA, "No.14502 of 1915."

20. PRO, "Report on the Riots, 26 August 1915," C.O:54/784.

21. *The Mahabodhi*, Oct. 1909.

22. CNA, "Confidential Report No.14502 of 1915."

the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* and the *Sinhala Jathiya* were banned by the government.

There was a considerable upsurge of political agitation and nationalist opinion, especially after the outbreak of the war in 1914. The discontent of the young radicals made itself felt through several nationalist organizations formed in 1915, including the short-lived Nationalist Party, and the Young Lanka League (whose activities will be discussed in later chapters). The medium of drama and poetry was also used as an effective way of expressing nationalist sentiments which would otherwise have been regarded as seditious. Playwrights like John de Silva and Charles Dias wrote rousing historical and modern dramas in Sinhalese which, according to a nationalist journal, the *Searchlight*, were intended "to rekindle the dying embers of patriotism."<sup>23</sup> The enthusiastic crowds which packed the Tower Hall where these plays were performed were not restricted to the elite but included the Sinhalese-speaking lower middle class and the urban workers. The political content of plays on Sinhalese kings such as John de Silva's *Sri Wickrema Rajasingha* and *Duttugemunu*, and the provocative anti-British dialogue in his satire *Sinhala Parabava Natya* (which portrayed the decadence of the Sinhalese through foreign influences) attracted the attention of the vigilant Inspector-General of Police, H. L. Dowbiggin. In a report to the Governor on the spread of nationalist activities, he referred to the "series of stirring Sinhalese plays produced by John de Silva with the object of creating a spirit of nationalism."

Poems written by nationalists, articles in Buddhist school magazines, and political pamphlets were also thoroughly scrutinized by the police in 1915, as this was the year that marked the centenary of the extinction of the ancient Sinhala kingdom in Ceylon. A watch was kept on Nancy Wijekoon, who wrote "seditious" poetry, and the police showed concern over the fact that the first issue of the Mahabodhi College magazine, in May, 1915, included a poem by

23. PRO, C.O.54/784, No.43941. Extracts from the *Searchlight* 1914. The sentiments expressed and language used in publications like the *Searchlight* were characteristic of the nationalist opinion of that time. "If in your veins the blood of the lion race does not run, if you are so wanting in patriotism and national self respect, if the glorious past of our beloved Lanka does not appeal to you . . . then by all means be sycophants of the government and drag into the mire, the fair name and fame of ancient Lanka." Ibid.

Scott, "Lay the Proud Usurper Low." Objection was also taken to a schoolboy's article on British rule which said, "Nothing is permanent and everything is transient."<sup>24</sup> In March, 1915, a special issue of the *Sinhala Tharunaya* (The Young Sinhalese), edited by Victor Corea, had the Sinhalese flag on its cover and included a picture of the last king of Kandy. The police paid particular attention to this paper and quoted it as stating: "It is a hundred years since our independence was given away to the King of a foreign land . . . The time is now approaching when we should honestly do what is fit to be done, even sacrificing our lives for the sake of our country and our nation."<sup>25</sup> It is in the context of this political background and the economic tensions of the period that one must consider the participation of the urban workers in the 1915 riots and the repressive action taken against the militant elements of the working class.

### The Role of the Colombo Working Class in the 1915 Riots

The authorities were aware of the political implications of riots among the urban working class and with the spread of the riots from the provinces to Colombo at the end of May, 1915, government officials began to panic. The nature of the rioting in Colombo, in which the urban working class and city poor participated, took on the complexion of "mob" activity rather than religious rioting. This factor was commented upon by the Governor, who held that martial law would have been unnecessary if the outbreak had been limited to the villagers, who were people noted for their "simplicity and ignorance . . . with a sincere devotion to the creed of their fore-

24. PRO, "Confidential Report on Buddhist Schools by the Inspector-General of Police, August 1915," C.O.54/785. One of Nancy Wijekoon's poems, to which the police made special mention, began:

O Lanka, loved but fallen,  
 Fair Queen of the Indian sea,  
 How long shall we see thee bleeding  
 And endure the things that be?  
 For the stranger is now triumphant  
 He sits by our ancient hearths  
 He heeds not thy children's lament  
 Poured forth from their bleeding hearts

CNA, "Confidential Report No.14502 of 1915."

25. Ibid., and PRO, C.O.54/784, No.43941.



fathers." But the eruption in Colombo, he alleged, gave the riots an anarchistic aspect which called for the immediate proclamation of martial law.<sup>26</sup>

The study of "mob" behavior during revolutions, riots, and pre-industrial disturbances has only recently been taken up in detail by historians. Conservative scholars have tended to attribute the violence of city "mobs" during riots and revolutions to the criminal elements of the urban population. For example, "the mob" during the French revolution was referred to by the French historian Taine as being composed of "criminals, vagabonds and down-and-outs," and by Edmund Burke as "cruel ruffians and assassins reeking with blood."<sup>27</sup> The rioting and looting that took place in Colombo in 1915 evoked a similar response. The Colonial Secretary wrote, "the scum of Colombo have seized their opportunity," and a Ceylonese attributed the riots to "street rowdies, looters, habitual criminals and their henchmen who made good use of the prevailing panic to loot and plunder."<sup>28</sup> A closer examination of the evidence tends to show that it was not criminals but rather the urban workers and the city poor who formed "the mob" and directed its activities during the Colombo riots.

The Colombo working class of 1915 was not an organized industrial working class in the modern sense, but an unorganized group of town workers, who, like the urban poor of other countries, were particularly sensitive to unemployment and a rise in food prices, and sometimes expressed their economic grievances by sporadic lightning strikes, and, as in 1915, in riots. In his study, *Primitive Rebels*, Eric Hobsbawm has shown that the movement of food prices was an almost "infallible indicator" of popular unrest in Paris during the French revolution; rioting was often "against unemployment and for a cheap cost of living, famine prices and unemployment normally tending to coincide in pre-industrial periods." He also claims that because the urban poor mainly lived on the verge of subsistence even in normal times, they were "precipitated into catastrophe by any increase in prices or in unemployment" and riots were therefore often "automatic and inevitable reactions to

26. Cd. 8167, p. 32.

27. Quoted in George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, p. 2.

28. PRO, C.O.54/782, No.29056; PRO, letter of R. E. Stubbs, 2 June 1915, C.O. 54/782. Vijayavardhana, *Revolt in the Temple*, p. 122.

such changes."<sup>29</sup> Much the same can be said of the Colombo poor, whose discontent increased with the growth of unemployment and the rapid rise in prices after the outbreak of the First World War. During this critical period, when the Moor trader was alleged to have exploited the situation by raising the price of necessities, communal hostility increased. P. Ramanathan, in *Riots and Martial Law in Ceylon*, has described the economic hardships caused by the war and the severe distress among workers after August, 1914. He quotes C. P. Dias, a member of the Municipal Council: "Since the war began and many people were thrown out of employment, Coast Moors began to be too exacting and insolent towards those customers who were not regular in their payments and relations between the lower classes and artisans and the Moors with whom they had dealings, became strained."<sup>30</sup>

The spark that led to the rioting in Colombo was set by the railway workers of the locomotive workshops. These skilled workers, who had constantly agitated about their conditions of work and had gone on strike in 1912, were the most literate, alert, and militant section of the working class; they were also readers of the Sinhalese press, which at that time was conducting an aggressive campaign against Indian traders and Indian workers in Ceylon. The Ceylonese railway workers, who feared competition from the Indians who were poorer, more docile, and therefore potential "blacklegs," had manifested their hostility to Indian immigrant labor on several occasions. In 1910, for example, the locomotive workers had protested against the influx of South Indian workers on the railways, and in 1913, presenting their grievances before the Railway Commission, the workers complained that Indian Tamils and Malayalis were employed in preference to Sinhalese.<sup>31</sup>

On May 31, some of the railway workers had a quarrel with the Moor proprietor of a teashop located opposite the locomotive work-

29. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 110-11.

30. P. Ramanathan, *Riots and Martial Law in Ceylon*, p. 269. The Colonial Secretary cabled to London asking the Secretary of State for the Colonies to ban the import into Ceylon of Ramanathan's book as its "distribution in the Colony [would be] undesirable." H. A. Cowell of the Colonial Office noted, "I imagine Stubbs wants the export prohibited because of the difficulty of controlling the introduction of copies from India by Mr. Dharmapala's followers," but added that the ban would cause "all the excitement which it is desirable to avoid." PRO, Despatch 9317, 25 Feb. 1916, C.O.54 793.

31. See *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*.

shop in Maradana over an increase in the price of a cup of tea; the workers made allusions to the rioting against Moors in Kandy, returned to their workyard and pelted the shop with stones. The police were summoned and at the end of the day the railway men were asked to pass through the gate in single file so that the culprits could be identified. This they refused to do and showed signs of unrest. When the workers were eventually allowed to leave, many of them had missed their last trains home. This incident attracted "huge crowds of loafers, vagabonds, idle fellows and sightseers" to the locality. The railway workers used their enforced detention in the city to contact other groups of urban workers, and it was reported that the ranks of the workers were soon joined by "the idlers, the unemployed and the habitual criminals."<sup>32</sup> Rioting began—the shops of the Moors in the neighborhood of the railway workshops were attacked and broken into and the rioting and looting, spreading to other parts of Colombo, lasted three days. The railway locomotive men threatened to strike and several of them stayed away from work. The Governor, in a despatch to London written during the Colombo disturbances, said that although the riots in other parts of Ceylon had no political significance, the position was different in Colombo, "*where among the lower classes the spirit of turbulence may possibly still cause trouble, as the always discontented workmen of the railway workshops have refused to remain at work.*"<sup>33</sup>

From several eyewitness accounts of the riots, and from the Governor's despatches and police reports, it can be seen that the rioting in Colombo had hardly any religious motives, that the targets for attack were the shops of Coast Moors and other Muslims, and that there were very few assaults or killing of Moors or desecration of their mosques. Moreover, the rioting was not led by the criminals of Colombo, but by members of the working class who were joined by the floating population of the unemployed and the urban poor. The rioting in Colombo seems to have followed a similar pattern in all parts of the town. The usual procedure was for the crowd, armed with crowbars and sticks, to raise cries of "loot" near a Moor shop, thereby causing the owner to run away; "the ruffians would then enter the shop and throw the goods on to the pavement . . . and

32. *The Memorial . . . of the Sinhalese*, pp. 4-5.

33. Cd. 8167, Despatch of 1 June 1915, emphasis added.

the needy men and women who were about would carry the things away." The "mob" would then move to another part of Colombo and attack Moor shops in that area. A police inspector reported that rioters came from Maradana to Borella in a tram car: "I observed the poorer classes of the residents in the neighbourhood including Sinhalese fish-mongers, dhobies and rowdies making for the junction . . . looting began . . . it was the men who came in the tramcar who broke open the boutiques, and immediately the resident rowdies rushed in and looted the goods." A well known employer, H. L. de Mel, who was also a member of the Municipal Council, describing the looting of Moors' shops said that apart from "the rowdies and bullies," the damage was done by the Sinhalese workers of the Commercial Company, Walker and Greig, Victoria Mills, and other British firms. "I saw several acts of mobbing and noticed that the crowds were composed of the labouring classes, bullies, habitual criminals and the unemployed." A Ceylonese clergyman visited the Secretary of the railway workers' trade union to ask him to use his influence over the rioting workers, but the Secretary reported that the workers were beyond control.<sup>34</sup>

It is to be noted that though there were some instances of killing, wounding and assaults on Moors, and of attacks on mosques in other parts of the country, the "mob" in Colombo was not bent on attacking the Moors themselves, or pillaging their places of worship on religious grounds, but rather on plundering the shops of the Moors, which represented the hardships caused by profiteering and unfair trade practices. In parts of Colombo where the Moors were strong in numbers there was fighting between Sinhalese and Moors, but eyewitnesses agreed that in Colombo the crowd "seemed to aim at destroying the Coast Moor boutiques" rather than injuring the Moors, and that "actual death from violence by the mob was small."<sup>35</sup> The Governor admitted that the riots in Colombo were a "sympathetic but independent outbreak, which while retaining the anti-Mohamedan stamp of the original Kandy outbreak was essentially more turbulent and criminal in character, *actuated by little or no religious impulse* and bent on plundering and on

34. Ramanathan, *Riots*, pp. 25, 27, 275, 282.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 275., quoting H. L. de Mel.

wounding or killing the Moor traders."<sup>36</sup> Police reports also showed that the crimes committed during the disturbances were "not the work of habitual criminals."<sup>37</sup>

### The Exiling of the Militant Railway Workers

After the outbreak of the riots in Colombo, the prospect of a railway strike was viewed with alarm by the government, as the despatch of troops and communications between trouble spots in the island depended largely on the railways. These fears were expressed in the report on the Colombo riots made by the Government Agent for the Western Province. Describing the railway men as a group of workers who, in the course of years, had got badly out of hand and had sparked off the Colombo riots, he wrote, "The foci of disturbances on the 1st of June viz. Colombo, Angulana, Veyangoda and Mirigama—point to the intimate relation between the Railway and the Riots. The leaders realised to the full the advantage given to them by a means of transport which permitted their emissaries being distributed rapidly throughout the district."<sup>38</sup> A rumor spread that the railway workers would strike after they received their pay on June 22. On the 21st, the locomotive superintendent was asked to name the ringleaders and troublemakers among the railway workers; of the twenty-eight who were picked out and jailed

36. Cd. 8167, Despatch of Governor, 7 June 1915. Emphasis added. The Governor stated that in most parts of the country where rioting occurred, the form it took was "the sacking of the boutiques of Moslems by a crowd of Cingalese who seem to have carefully abstained from any other damage . . . the looting consisted in smashing any furniture and fittings . . . making a bonfire of these and of any other merchandise . . . very little theft except by local bad characters. Ibid., Despatch of 1 June 1915.

37. "Report of the Police," *Ceylon Administration Reports 1915*, p. 136. In 1915, there were 5,315 habitual criminals in the island, of whom only ten were convicted by the courts martial for offenses during the riots: The figures of the injury to persons show that 25 Moors were killed during the riots and 189 were injured, which indicate that the riots were not solely directed at killing Moors. The police figures for offenses tried during the riots in the Western Province, which included Colombo, show that of a total of 1,102 serious offenses, 826 were offenses against the state, 210 were offenses against property and only 66 were offenses against persons. Ibid. Taking the figures for the whole island, the government estimated that the damage to property was in the region of Rs.5 millions; 17 Mosques were burnt and 86 damaged, and 4,075 Moor shops were looted. Cd. 8167, p. 48.

38. PRO, "Report on the Riots," C.O.54/784.

from June 21 to 27, nineteen were from the locomotive workshops, the center of labor unrest. Of the workshop men, the General Manager of Railways, in a confidential report, wrote that the majority held "responsible posts in supervision over workmen . . . and were absent during the earlier days of the riots."<sup>39</sup>

The Buddhist temperance leaders who had been office-bearers of the Workers' Provident Association, C. Batuwantudawe, Arthur Dias and D. C. Senanayake, were jailed, and the Secretary of the Association, E. R. Wijesooriya, was sent to Trincomalee. The Inspector-General of Police alleged that these temperance workers were not only "leading Buddhists who took a prominent part in the agitation against the Moors," but were also officials of the Railway Workers' Union responsible for threatening to call a railway strike during the riots, when "bridges and culverts on the roads were to be blown up with dynamite" to prevent troop movements.<sup>40</sup> At the end of June, the twenty-eight imprisoned railway workers were exiled to the East Coast (Batticaloa). The Governor described this action as a "most valuable advance made in obviating the very real danger of a strike by Sinhalese workmen, not only in the railway factory, but also throughout the entire railway system." Along with the exile of the "ringleaders," 140 of the "most disaffected men" were dismissed from the railways, and the workshops were picketed by a detachment of Indian soldiers which, the Governor claimed, had "a salutary effect on the men's minds." In his correspondence with the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Governor explained the reason for these severe measures and indicated a need to alter the racial balance of those employed on the railways: "The Colombo outbreak originated with these factory men who are said to consider that in their 1912 strike, victory rested with them. In order to safeguard the future it may be advisable to modify substantially the present proportions, which show 1,000 Sinhalese out of a total of 1,600 employees."<sup>41</sup>

It is important to note that the railway workers whose actions had led to their dismissal, imprisonment, exile, and blacklisting were the first workers' leaders to emerge from the working class itself.

39. CNA, "Riots and the Deportation of Railway Workers," Confidential File No.34.

40. *Ibid.*, Confidential Paper No.22053 of 1917.

41. Cd. 8167, Despatch of 1 July 1915.

Apart from the names of a few printers who formed a union in 1893, William of the firm of Caves, and Haramanis the laundryman (whose names are known because they were prosecuted after strikes), almost nothing has been recorded of the strikers who in the late 19th century and early 20th century made courageous attempts to redress their grievances.<sup>42</sup> During the railway strike of 1912 the police and the railway authorities, who had become keenly aware of the potential dangers of the 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, the "marked" men who had been involved in strikes and trade-union activity were singled out for punishment. A study of the dossiers and records against these workers and the evidence given by workers before the Railway Commission of 1912 affords some impression of the background and the personalities of the most assertive of the workers. The twenty-eight railway workers who were exiled to Batticaloa were all skilled workers, some of them earning the maximum salary for their grades. They included fifteen fitters, two overseers, three boilermakers, two head carpenters, one patternmaker and one blacksmith. Nine of these workers were committee members of the Workers' 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.<sup>43</sup> Speaking of these skilled workmen, the Inspector-General of Police observed that it was unsafe during such "troubulous times . . . to grant bad characters and evilly disposed persons their liberty," and supported their deportation on the grounds that they would then be unable to "influence loyal Railway hands."<sup>44</sup>

The most militant of the deported Railway workers was Marshall Wickremasinghe, a fitter earning Rs.1.37 a day, who was one of the workers' leaders during the 1912 strike and was referred to by the

42. For details about the type of person who came out on strike between 1893 and 1923, see Kumari Jayawardena, "Pioneer Rebels among the Colombo Working-class," *Young Socialist* (Nov. 1968).

43. See CNA, "Riots and the Deportation of Railway Workers," Confidential File No. 34; *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*.

44. CNA, File T/6/26.

railway authorities as "a creator of disturbances and an agitator." His signature had headed the list on the petition presented by the workmen in 1912, and he was one of the leaders of the movement against Indian workers and an active committee member of the Workers' Provident Association. Another deported worker, K. L. George Silva, was described by the management as "an agitator of the worst type." He was a fitter earning Rs.1.25 a day, had been fined for idling, and was punished for assaulting Indian workers. His manner of giving evidence before the Railway Commission had been fearless—on the question of fines, he made complaints against the foreman and the method of fining and answered questions relating to the wages and hours of work of all classes of labor in the workshops, showing how closely in touch he was with skilled and unskilled labor; 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." Another skilled worker who was deported was J. Solomon Perera, a patternmaker earning Rs.3. a day, who was described by the Locomotive Superintendent as "the man who is making all the trouble." Perera, whose family had been skilled workers on the railway for three generations, was a committee member of the Workers' Provident Association and had been active during the strike; he had protested against working conditions, and gave detailed evidence at the Railway Commission, during which he complained of the employment of Indians, the system of fines, the lack of ventilation and washing facilities, and the favoritism shown by the foremen. During the course of the evidence he also said, "*I do not speak only for myself, I speak for the rest of the men,*" thereby showing his standing as an unofficial leader and spokesman for the workers. Another committee member of the Provident Association who was deported was Marthelis Perera, an overseer with 22 years' service earning Rs.4. a day, the maximum pay for his grade. 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."<sup>45</sup>

By 1915, then, the Colombo working class, and especially the

45. From evidence at the Railway Commission, *Sessional Paper 1 of 1913*; CNA, Confidential File No. 34, emphasis added.



higher grades of skilled workers, had begun to acquire a degree of militancy, self-assertion, and class consciousness characteristic of an urban proletariat.

### The Aftermath of the Riots

The background to the resurgence of labor activity after the setback of 1915 was the increasing political unrest in the country. The riots of 1915, although associated with religious provocation, did not leave behind any strong feelings of religious animosity. After the riots, the anger of the Sinhalese Buddhists was not directed against the Moors but against the British, and any religious resentment that existed was superseded by nationalism.

There were several areas of tension and conflict after 1915, including the development of contradictions among the British in Ceylon and the increased antagonism between the British and Ceylonese. Officials quarrelled among themselves over basic issues of policy, and there was a further cleavage between British residents and some senior government officials. The Ceylonese were embittered with the British over the excesses committed at the time of the riots of 1915, and during this period the demands for constitutional reform became sharper and more persistent. The British officials showed a great resistance to nationalism, and also a new awareness of the "dangers" of trade unionism. In the years following the riots and the First World War, the anxiety of the government officials over the rapid advance of "seditious" ideals was not unexpected. The peace and calm of the Edwardian era had been shattered by the four-year holocaust of the First World War; a revolution had taken place in Russia; there were nationalist outbursts in Ireland, India, China, Turkey, and Egypt, and industrial unrest in many parts of the world. In Ceylon, colonial officials who had lived through an era of imperial glory found it difficult to adapt to the postwar changes in the political climate.

Although the government hoped that the strict measures taken in 1915 would crush the nationalists, the injustices which the Ceylonese had suffered during martial law led to an intensification of nationalist sentiment. The imprisonment of well-known Buddhist

political and temperance leaders had caused a sensation, more so because persons belonging to the English-educated middle class had not previously been jailed for offenses against the state. For several years after the riots, demands for the redress of grievances were the constant theme of books, pamphlets, newspaper comment, and public meetings. The summary shootings of Sinhalese villagers that had been carried out by planters, including A. D. Sly, L. Bayley and A. L. Baines; by commercial executives like P. N. Sudlow of Forbes & Walker; and by civil servants such as A. J. Wickwar, Deputy Surveyor-General, and Henry Monck Mason Moore, who became Governor of Ceylon in 1944, led to a general outcry among the Ceylonese. In this campaign of protest, they were helped in London by the Labour Party and trade-union officials, by some members of Parliament (notably the Irish nationalist Lawrence Ginnell and Colonel Josiah Wedgwood) by radical journals like the *New Statesman*, and the *Review of Reviews*, by humanitarian societies such as the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, and the Native Races and Liquor Traffic Committee, and by individuals including F. Booth Tucker of the Salvation Army, and Leonard Woolf and T. W. Rhys Davids, former Ceylon civil servants. In Ceylon, numerous public meetings were held, the most famous being the Sinhalese Public Meeting in September, 1915, to demand a commission of enquiry, which was attended by between five and six thousand people. Among the numerous petitions giving details of atrocities was the *Sinhalese Memorial*, prepared by leading political figures and taken to London by E. W. Perera. The main demand in this memorial was for a commission to inquire into the shootings; this was strongly opposed by the Colonial Secretary, R. E. Stubbs, who in a confidential letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies said, "Any enquiry would be futile in a country where perjury is rife to an extent inconceivable to anybody unacquainted with the Island and where the fabrication of false evidence has been raised to the level of a fine art." The Colonial Office accepted Stubbs's advice and refused the request for a commission. Ceylon officials even considered taking a defamation action against E. W. Perera for an article published in the *New Statesman*, and Perera's request to meet the Secretary of State met with the comment that "a person

of Mr. Perera's standing would not expect to be received either by the Governor or by the Colonial Secretary in this Colony."<sup>46</sup>

But with the arrival in 1916 of a new Governor, Sir John Anderson, the official suppression of facts concerning the riots came to an end. Like Chalmers, Anderson had joined the Civil Service after a distinguished academic career. At the time of the riots in Ceylon he was Permanent Under Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, where he had closely followed the controversy over the events of 1915. Even before Anderson's arrival, many moderate Ceylonese had expressed the view that justice would prevail, and a few months after the riots the Rev. J. S. de Silva stated, "My faith in England's sense of justice and fairplay has not been destroyed by these things. I am still firmly of opinion that they will not be approved of in England when the facts are known there."<sup>47</sup> Anderson set about making investigations, and in a private letter sent to a Colonial Office colleague soon after his arrival, he wrote, "The promiscuous shooting which took place after the riots were over is very nasty. The fact is that the military got completely out of hand and let some hot-headed young planters shoot almost as they pleased."<sup>48</sup> In his notable despatch to the Secretary of State a year later, in May, 1917, Governor Anderson was even stronger in his condemnation:

Mr. P. N. Sudlow . . . received instructions to deal vigorously with actual disturbances, and seems to have construed them into a commission to administer lynch law . . . and to have considered that their effect was to make him the leader of a posse of vigilantes sent out to deal with desperadoes in the manner depicted in cinema shows and dime novels of the Wild West. It is almost incredible that anyone, unless one who had been schooled by the Germans in Belgium, could have honestly acted on Mr. Sly's interpretation [of the Proclamation].<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, there were strong reactions in the Colonial Office at the realization that the allegations of indiscriminate shooting were true; one official commented, "I think the Colonial Office

46. PRO, Despatch of 4 Nov. 1915, C.O.54/784, No.54609. For an account of this campaign in Britain and Ceylon, see P. T. M. Fernando, "The Post Riots Campaign for Justice," *Journal of Asian Studies* (Feb. 1970).

47. CNA, "Diaries of the Rev. J. S. de Silva," 23 Aug. 1915.

48. PRO, letter from Sir John Anderson to Sir G. Fiddes, 27 June 1916, C.O.54/794, No.35114.

49. Quoted in H. A. J. Hulugalle, *British Governors of Ceylon*, p. 164.

has been rather let down by Sir Robert Chalmers and Mr. Stubbs in this matter." In fact, the feeling at the Colonial Office was that R. E. Stubbs, the Colonial Secretary, had been deliberately misleading in his official reports. There was some indication of regret that questions asked in parliament by Lawrence Ginnell had received curt replies and that he had been told that the facts in the *Sinhalese Memorial* were inaccurate, for as one official of the Colonial Office noted, the accounts of atrocities given in the *Sinhalese Memorial* "in some instances [came] a good deal closer to the facts than could have been presumed from the treatment accorded to the stories by Mr. Stubbs."<sup>50</sup>

As a result of this exposure, several British residents who had been involved in the shootings were deprived of their powers as justices of the peace and unofficial police magistrates, and some attempt was made at compensation by giving relief to the families of those who had been shot without trial. The Governor also appointed a commission of inquiry composed of the Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Wood-Renton, and Justice G. S. Schneider, to investigate the shootings in the Kegalle district. These efforts by Sir John Anderson, while assuaging the bitterness of the Ceylonese, created further problems when the British community in Ceylon—including some of the senior civil servants—began to be openly critical of the Governor. In a memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in September, 1917, the leading British residents in Ceylon, including the Anglican Bishop, protested that the removal from their official responsibilities of those British who were involved in the shootings, constituted "a grave injustice."<sup>51</sup> But this memorial received little sympathy from the Colonial Office, which sarcastically commented, "Major Bayley and his associates got off very lightly; it is clear that but for the Indemnity they would all have had to stand trial before the civil courts. As it is they get off with a loss of prestige and reputation and even this will apparently not affect them in their own community."<sup>52</sup>

50. PRO. Minute of H. A. Cowell, 9 July 1916, C.O.54/794, No.32358. Eight months earlier Cowell had written, "The Governor [of Ceylon] does not deal exhaustively with all Mr. Perera's legends. To do so would have involved an immense waste of stationery." Ibid., Minute of 30 Nov. 1915, C.O.54/785, No.54609.

51. Ibid., Memorial of 25 Sept. 1917, C.O.54/806, No.57569.

52. Ibid., Minute of H. A. Cowell, C.O.54/806, No.51176.

The publication of the Governor's despatch of May, 1917 (which had attacked Sudlow and others) also caused great resentment among the British in Ceylon. The Brigadier-General complained to the Secretary of State about the tone of the despatch, and even the Chief Justice (who had been on the Kegalle Commission of Inquiry) protested that Sir John Anderson's censures were unjustified. "No man of self-respect will consent to assist the Colonial government in an inquiry of this kind, if such differences of opinion are to be expressed in words, the use of which would not be tolerated for a moment in private life."<sup>53</sup> The European community sent a second memorial to London complaining of the "terms of opprobrium used by His Excellency and the public ignominy imposed by him on men widely known and of high repute . . . couched in language which can only be regarded as undignified and intemperate, and without parallel in any public official despatch."<sup>54</sup> The Governor, in this connection, admitted that his language was "no doubt unusual in official communications," but he added, "so were the circumstances which appeared to me to call for it."<sup>55</sup> The Colonial Office also rejected the second European memorial and sharply added, "Sly and Bayley have merely suffered an indignity; their victims are dead."<sup>56</sup> The clamor of the British in Ceylon did not cease even after the Governor's death in March, 1918, and a further memorial of May, 1918 stated that the serious illness of the Governor, "must have so affected his constitution as to impair his capacity for sound judgment."<sup>57</sup> The Colonial Office was clearly annoyed by this memorial and one official wrote: "It is hardly necessary to answer this attack on Sir John Anderson's judgment. Even if his despatch had not been written, a similar opinion of the action of Messrs. Bayley etc., could have been, and was formed from the report of the Commission of Enquiry *which did everything possible to whitewash them.*"<sup>58</sup>

53. *Ibid.*, letter from the Chief Justice A. Wood-Renton to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, C.O.54/810, No.9946.

54. *Ibid.*, Memorial to the Secretary of State from the European Community of Ceylon, C.O.54/806, No.62768.

55. *Ibid.*, confidential letter of Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 Dec. 1917.

56. *Ibid.*, Minute of H. A. Cowell.

57. *Ibid.*, Memorial from the European Association 29 May 1918, C.O.54/810, No.38682.

58. *Ibid.*, Minute of H. A. Cowell, emphasis added.

One important result of the riots was the sharpening of divisions among the Ceylonese. The conservative Ceylonese supported the British action during the events of 1915 and even carried stories to British officials against certain moderate Ceylonese political figures. The evidence that such information was conveyed by several Ceylonese has been investigated by Michael Roberts, who describes one of the best known tale-carriers as a diehard whose "contempt and hostility" towards the new rich was openly expressed. Roberts adds, "In view of his connections with the centres of British officialdom, one would not be surprised if he used the opportunity to deliver a body-blow at the newly emergent political activists."<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the conservatives, the Ceylonese moderates took a firm stand against arbitrary government and repressive laws. The moderates led the campaign of protest in order to vindicate themselves as a class, and to obtain redress for those who had been victims of injustice. The exoneration of Ceylonese leaders and the release of prisoners sentenced for riot offenses was achieved by 1918. But the limitations of the moderates' campaign must be noted. They were willing to agitate for justice, but they were at the same time keen to dissociate themselves from extremists and radicals. For example, there was open hostility to Anagarika Dharmapala from both conservative and moderate Ceylonese. In 1913, the editor of *Lakmina* complained to the Colonial Secretary about one of Dharmapala's "seditious" articles and added, "I shall not be surprised to hear one morning that Mr. Dharmapala is in the vicinity of Colombo with an army of Sinhalese Buddhists." The next year the same editor wrote, "This paper, owned by Hon. L. W. A. de Soysa and Mr. E. L. F. de Soysa, has exposed Mr. Dharmapala . . . and I am glad to say Mr. Dharmapala is not today the hero he used to be."<sup>60</sup> Several well-known political figures also disowned Dharmapala. Francis de Zoysa, writing to the government in his capacity as Secretary of the Sinhalese public meeting of protest, stated, "As regards Dharmapala, who is known to be a crank, his writings and

59. See Michael Roberts, "Hobgoblins, Low-Country Sinhalese Plotters or Local Elite Chauvinists?" *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, June 1970 (1969/70). In this paper Roberts discusses the allegations against several diehard Ceylonese, commonly known to have carried stories against the moderates to the British authorities.

60. Guruge, ed., *Return*, p. lviii.

utterances have been generally repudiated.”<sup>61</sup> The point was also made in a letter to the Secretary of State by a British temperance organization which was in constant touch with the Ceylonese moderates who had been imprisoned. “So determined were these Buddhists to keep free from Dharmapala and his society that they have repeatedly refused his application to become a member of the Colombo Total Abstinence Central Union, the central authority for the Buddhist temperance movement throughout the Island.”<sup>62</sup> What is also clear is that the British made a distinction between political “agitators” who were demanding a greater share in the government of the country, and radicals and working-class “agitators” who were taking the demands a stage further. Whereas the moderates alleged to have been implicated in the riots were exonerated by the government, Dharmapala was debarred from returning to Ceylon for five years after the riots. In the case of the twenty-eight railway workers who had been exiled during the 1915 riots, it took twelve years for the survivors to get redress. The contrast in the treatment of the middle-class Ceylonese and the railway workers was noted by a civil servant:

The grounds on which they [the workers] were deported were the same grounds on which D. B. Jayatilaka, D. S. Senanayake and W. A. de Silva were imprisoned during the riots viz. that they were influential and therefore suspect. An amnesty has been accorded to other persons. . . . 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.<sup>63</sup>

There was a clear class bias in the government’s attitude, for the officials realized that it was easier to come to terms with moderate nationalists, who were less of a threat to the British, than with the radicals and working-class rebels. The officials therefore blocked all attempts by these railway workers to seek reemployment. The matter was brought before the Legislative Council in 1921 and lost by 25 votes. In the House of Commons, Colonel Wedgwood raised the question and in this connection the Governor wrote, “No good purpose would be served by an inquiry . . . the men were picked as

61. *The Memorial . . . of the Sinhalese*, p. 5.

62. CNA, Despatch 173 of 1916, Native Races & Liquor Traffic Committee to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18 March 1916.

63. CNA, Deportees to Batticaloa, File T/6/26.

being the most dangerous and troublesome persons." In 1925, when it seemed likely that there would be a majority in the Legislative Council on this issue, the government relented and lifted the bar on reemployment of 10 of the workers. The bar on John Perera and George Silva, who subsequent to the riots were active in labor agitation, was only lifted in 1927.<sup>64</sup>

The riots of 1915 can be viewed as the end of the era when incipient nationalism was expressed through religious methods of protest. In the years after 1915, nationalist groups led by moderates and radicals gave an openly political content to the campaign against the British.

64. *Ibid.*



Part II

Labor and Nationalist Politics,  
1915-1933



## Chapter 8

# Nationalism, Social Service, and the Moderate Labor Movement

*There is no fervid desire on the part of the Ceylon Workers Federation to enter into a trial of strength with the forces of capital or of the Government. The Federation does not exist to organise or even countenance spasmodic strikes. It is more a weapon of defence than of defiance.*

*Ceylon Daily News, January 29, 1921*

Although arbitrary periodization of history can often be misleading, the riots of 1915 can be taken as a useful dividing line in Ceylon's modern history. Between the riots of 1915 and the general strike of 1923, the pattern of labor and political agitation underwent a distinct change. The nationalist and trade-union movements became secular in outlook, and religion, which had played a key part in the earlier period of political and labor unrest, took on a role of secondary importance, though it was not a factor that was ever completely dormant. The Buddhist revival, which had been under way for thirty-five years, was an established part of the Ceylon scene, and the movement was no longer regarded as a daring challenge to authority. Of the bold radicals of the Buddhist crusade, Anagarika Dharmapala was under police supervision in India, and his co-worker, Walisinha Harischandra, had died in 1913. A. E. Buultjens, the Buddhist militant who had pioneered the labor movement, died in 1916.

Although the Ceylonese middle class had emerged in the late 19th century as a distinct class with an economic base in certain

export crops and service industries, it was in the years around 1915 that this class began to assert itself politically in an organized form. The middle class, which had increased and consolidated its economic power, began increasingly to feel the disparity between its economic strength and political weakness. Economically, in spite of some wartime fluctuations, there was a striking increase in exports during the second decade of the 20th century. During these years the local capitalists made sudden headway; in 1915, graphite had record prices, and the Administrative Report for that year referred to the remarkable prosperity in the export trade and made special mention of the success of "native industry and native capital" in the graphite, coconut, cinnamon, cocoa, and citronella oil industries. In 1916 the value of exports exceeded Rs.300 million for the first time; world prices rose sharply and many quick fortunes were made by Ceylonese mainly because of the phenomenal success of the graphite industry. At the end of the First World War, with the increasing world demand for coconut produce, it was the turn of the Ceylonese coconut planters to amass fortunes, which were often reinvested in urban property.

This development of capitalism in turn resulted in the spread of "bourgeois" attitudes on freedom. The result was an increasing clamor by the middle class for political representation, freedom of expression, and equality of opportunity—it was a classic case of a middle class pressing its demands in the name of liberty and equality. In the political field, the middle class moderates and radicals led the fight for democratic reforms. In this battle they had to face the opposition of the British officials and the conservative pro-British Ceylonese. From 1908 until 1915 the demands for reforms became more insistent and every possible means was used to express opposition to the government. Debating clubs became political discussion centers, ostensibly religious methods of protest like the temperance movement were used for politics, and no occasion was lost to criticize the government. The radicals went even further and were aggressively hostile to the government, even encouraging strikers to resist authority, as in 1912.

Up to 1915 the emergent middle class had been involved in constitutional forms of struggle—meetings, conferences and petitions

—but in 1915 it was to experience a taste of violence and repression, including death sentences, trials by courts martial, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, confiscation of property, and harsh indemnities. These privileged persons, who in the past had never openly collided with the British rulers, were in 1915 the victims of the repressive powers of the state. The sense of shock this evoked has been described by the Rev. J. S. de Silva, who visited the imprisoned political and temperance leaders during the 1915 riots: “I broke down at the sight of them in their pitiful plight, these wealthy, influential men . . . what a pathetic sight it was to see those who have been used to great affluence and comfort, in ordinary prison garb, locked up in cells.”<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between moderates and radicals became more pronounced during the period of political agitation after 1915. In politics, there was open conflict between the two groups, resulting in the victory of the moderates who controlled the main nationalist organization—the Ceylon National Congress—thereby politically isolating the radicals. But in the field of trade-union activity the moderates failed to win the support of the workers, and the leadership of the militant labor movement passed into the control of the radicals. Of the two opposing strands of nationalists, the moderates believed in negotiation along properly constituted channels and used the memorial and the deputation as methods of action. Their political target was a greater measure of responsible government based on a restricted franchise. In contrast, the radical nationalists, who were influenced by the Indian “extremists,” regarded purely constitutional methods of agitation as ineffective and advocated such tactics as civil disobedience, boycott, and passive resistance; their aim was complete self-government based on universal suffrage, and any compromise with this goal was regarded as a betrayal. Corresponding to these wings of the national movement were two distinct kinds of labor and trade-union activity. Whereas the supporters of moderate trade unionism emphasized the role of negotiation and arbitration and denounced strikes, the radicals advocated militant trade unionism and encouraged strike action. In the years

1. CNA, “Diaries of the Rev. J. S. de Silva,” extracts of 11 July 1915 and 29 Aug. 1915.

immediately after the First World War, the moderates formed labor organizations, but by 1923 the radicals had gained the total support of the Colombo urban workers.

It is in the context of the increased economic power and political self-assertion of the middle class that the nationalist and labor movements of the years 1915 to 1920 should be discussed. The most notable events during this period were the formation of the Ceylon National Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Federation. This chapter will consider the events that led up to their formation, the reaction of the government to rising nationalism, the labor unrest of the period, and the way in which the labor movement was linked with social service and nationalist organizations.

### Agitation for Constitutional Reform

The upheaval of the war years (1914-1918) caused changes in the political life of the country. At a time when Britain was preoccupied in Europe, the Ceylonese, while making proclamations of loyalty, realized that it was an opportune moment to press for constitutional reforms. In support of their demands they pointed out that the Allies were fighting for the vindication of the rights of small nations. After the armistice in 1918, for example, the Ceylon Reform League and the Ceylon National Association passed a resolution expressing "loyal homage to the King . . . and joyful congratulations upon the success of the British and Allied arms in overthrowing the Central powers and in upholding the British ideal of liberty, self-development and self-determination for all peoples, great and small."<sup>2</sup> But the radical Ceylonese were far more blunt in their assessment of the war; their journal claimed that the war was a blessing in disguise for Asian countries as it was "instrumental in annihilating the antiquated prejudices of the past [and] the galling yoke of total political subjugation to a foreign power," and it expressed the hope for "a better world" based on President Wilson's principles of the rights and liberties of small nations.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1915 and 1920 there was an increase in the demands by

2. Bandaranaike, ed., *Handbook of the Ceylon National Congress*, p. 119.

3. *Young Lanka*, July 1918.

the Ceylonese for measures of self-government similar to the Montague-Chelmsford reforms in India. At this time the Legislative Council of 22 members had an official majority, and even of the ten unofficials, six were nominated by the Governor. The leading personality of these years, who dominated both the political reform movement and the labor movement, was Ponnambalam Arunachalam (1853–1924), who, although president of several organizations composed of the more moderate Ceylonese, was essentially a radical in outlook. Arunachalam, who had been the most eminent Ceylonese civil servant of his day, retired from government service in 1913. The address he delivered in 1917 to the Ceylon National Association on “Our Political Needs” was an event of historic significance. Arunachalam made out a detailed case for self-government and advocated the need for a thorough shake-up in every branch of the administration including local government, the civil service, the judiciary, and the education system. Arunachalam asserted that Ceylon was “practically under benevolent despotism wielded by a Governor who [was] responsible only to Downing Street and [who] exercised his powers through a bureaucracy predominantly European.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1917, the middle class made a stronger bid for reform. In May, 1917, under Arunachalam’s inspiration, the Ceylon Reform League was formed to secure political reforms and to encourage “the study of questions bearing on the political, economic and social condition” of the people, and Mahajana Sabhas (People’s Associations) were formed all over the country.<sup>5</sup> A notable advance was made in December, 1917, when the Ceylon Reform League and the Ceylon National Association held a joint conference on political reforms attended by 144 delegates from member associations. The conference sent a memorial to the Secretary of State but it met with no response, and in September, 1918, a cable was sent requesting that Ceylon be granted reforms *not less liberal* than those granted to India.<sup>6</sup> In December, 1918, the Second Reform Conference passed a resolution calling for “a vigorous development of self-governing institutions with a view to the realization of responsible govern-

4. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 9.

5. *Handbook of the CNC*, p. 98.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 116, emphasis added.

ment in the country" and this time asked for reforms "*more liberal* than those deemed necessary for India," (an elected majority in the legislature, an elected Executive Council, and higher appointments in the Civil Service for Ceylonese).<sup>7</sup> The Colonial Office dismissed these demands as "so extravagant that they seem hardly worth discussion,"<sup>8</sup> and Governor Manning, in a private letter sent to a senior official at the Colonial Office wrote, "The Reform League has drawn up a set of resolutions after an immense amount of talk; some of it very foolish and most of it of the extremist type. I trust they will not get a tithe of what they ask for."<sup>9</sup> In a confidential despatch, the Governor grudgingly conceded that some reform would have to be granted "since the infection of political reform from India has reached Ceylon . . . it would be difficult to give adequate reasons for refusing some political advancement to Ceylon."<sup>10</sup> In September, 1919, a joint committee of the Ceylon Reform League and the Ceylon National Association sent a memorandum entitled the "Case for Constitutional Reform" to the Secretary of State. But there was no promise of reform from Britain, and the Colonial Office commented on the "offensive criticisms of the Government" contained in the document.<sup>11</sup>

An important advance in the history of constitutional agitation was made in December, 1919, when the various political organizations joined together to form the Ceylon National Congress with Ponnambalam Arunachalam as the first President. By this date the agitation had increased and Congress demands for a wider measure of constitutional reform included a Legislative Council composed of 50 members, of whom four-fifths were to be elected on a wide male and restricted female franchise, and one-fifth to be officials and unofficals representing minority interests. The demands included full control of the budget by the Legislative Council, an Executive Council with half its members chosen from the elected Ceylonese, and a Governor who possessed English parliamentary experience. These demands of the Ceylon National Congress were not confined

7. *Ibid.*, p. 128-29; C.O.54/818, No.15217, emphasis added.

8. PRO, Minute of H. A. Cowell, C.O.54/818, No.15117.

9. *Ibid.*, private letter of Governor Manning to Sir G. Fiddes 31 Dec. 1918, C.O.54/814, No.7243.

10. *Ibid.*, Confidential Despatch of 7 Feb. 1919, C.O.54/818.

11. *Ibid.*, Minute of H. A. Cowell, C.O.54/821, No.61152.



to political changes but included other broad democratic demands for labor legislation, trade-union rights, more equitable taxation, greater expenditure on education and the establishment of a University. Although all these demands were liberal, it must be noted that the Ceylon National Congress clearly represented the interests of the propertied and professional classes. The constitutional reforms were intended to ensure political representation for a limited section of the population. The extent of the class bias in Congress can be seen from the fact that universal franchise was never a demand of the Congress, and was granted in 1927 in spite of Congress opposition. There was also no attempt by the Congress to make the nationalist movement a mass-based movement. Like the Liberals in Victorian England, the interests of the middle class were considered to be paramount, with occasional gestures being made to the workers in terms of labor laws. But even on the question of labor, the Ceylon National Congress was lukewarm. It was Arunachalam's influence that directed Congress attention to labor problems at the 1919 sessions, but after his retirement from politics such matters were dropped, and the Congress leaders adopted a policy of open hostility to the new leaders of the working class who emerged in 1922. The narrow class interests of the Ceylon National Congress were clear even from its inception. For example, E. T. de Silva, commenting on the financial support given to the Indian National Congress by merchants and landowners, made an appeal to their Ceylon counterparts: "I want everyone to realise that material prosperity follows the wake of political freedom and that even from a commercial point of view it is good business to support us."<sup>12</sup> It was clearly "good business" for the Ceylon middle class to support Congress, because this class aimed at political power which in turn could ensure the necessary conditions for economic prosperity.

In spite of the continuous agitation after 1915, the constitutional reforms that were eventually granted in 1920 proved, as in 1912, to be far short of the expectations of both moderates and radicals. Although the Legislative Council for the first time was to have an unofficial majority, of the 37 members, only 16 were to be elected—14 were officials and 7 were nominated by the Governor, thereby assuring the government of a majority. In addition, the unofficials

12. *Handbook of the CNC*, p. 184.

on the Executive Council were not to be chosen from the elected members. The Ceylon National Congress rejected the reforms as inadequate and reactionary and condemned the constitution on the grounds that it denied even the beginnings of responsible government. The Congress at first decided to boycott the new Council, but Governor Manning skillfully maneuvered a deputation of Congress moderates led by Sir James Peiris and promised them that further reforms would be granted if Congress participated in the Council. The offer was accepted by the Congress leaders although Arunachalam and the radical elements in Congress were against such a compromise. After a difference of opinion on territorial representation, Arunachalam retired from political activity. The promised changes in the legislature were made in 1923-1924 when the Legislative Council was enlarged to include 37 unofficials, of whom 23 were to be elected by territorial constituencies, 11 by communal constituencies and three to be nominated; the number of officials was reduced to 12. But the Governor had reserve powers, and if he considered a matter to be of paramount importance, only the votes of the 12 officials were to be counted. The moderate politicians forgot their dissatisfaction and were content to get themselves elected to the Legislative Council on a restricted franchise, based on only 4 percent of the population. But among the radicals there was considerable frustration that the agitation and political activity of the earlier years had not led to self-government and that a strong anti-British movement comparable to that of India had not taken root in Ceylon.

### Government Policy—The Fear of Nationalism

In the years between 1915 and 1923 there was an aggravation of the conflict between the British ruling class in Ceylon and the Ceylonese who were demanding greater measures of self-government. In this struggle for political rights, there was bound to be disagreement between the moderates on the one hand and the British rulers and local conservatives (who were closely associated with the British) on the other. This clash allowed the Congress to take a liberal posture; "The forces of reaction have reared their hated heads" said

M. A. Arulanandan at the Congress Sessions in 1919 in his attack on the officials in Ceylon and their local sycophants:

The grant of responsible government will come to us from Britain whatever local bureaucrats may say. When has a bureaucracy willingly divested itself of power? And when have those fattened on the favours of the bureaucrats, ceased cursing the rising tide of popular liberty? The *Times* has already begun to entertain fears of Bolshevism in Ceylon and is setting up the bogey of "sedition, disorder and anarchy."<sup>13</sup>

The hostility of the middle-class reformers to British officialdom increased after the death of Governor Anderson, when the brief "liberal interlude" came to an end. The new Governor, Brigadier-General Sir William Manning, had served like many of his predecessors in the Indian Army. His years of fighting service included the Second Burmese War and expeditions in the North-West Frontier and Central Africa. He had held high military appointments in British Central Africa, Somaliland and Nyasaland, and he was involved in fighting against the Mahdi in the Sudan. With such a varied military experience against colonial peoples, it was unlikely that Manning could show the foresight of his predecessor or feel much sympathy with demands for self-government. In this policy he had the staunch support of the most determined conservative of them all, R. E. Stubbs, who remained Colonial Secretary until 1919.

Some of the confidential despatches and private letters sent to Colonial Office colleagues by officials in Ceylon reveal the extent of their hostility towards Ceylonese "agitators." During Governor McCallum's term of office (1907-1913), bitter feelings had developed between British officials and Ceylonese nationalists, and with the events of 1915 and the demands for self-government that followed, the animosity increased. For example, the Government Agent of the Western Province denounced the nationalists as "nouveaux riches who have too much money and too few principles, who desire to shine or at any rate to attain notoriety."<sup>14</sup> However, the most intemperate attacks came from the Colonial Secretary, who referred to the Ceylonese leaders imprisoned during the riots of 1915 as a set of skunks; in July, 1919, in a memorial on the reform

13. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

14. PRO, "Report on the Colombo Riots by J. C. Fraser, Government Agent, Western Province," C.O.54/784, No.48392.

proposals he wrote, "The most marked characteristic of all Ceylonese of whatever race is an amazing vanity . . . which makes it impossible to rely on any one of them to do anything which will render him unpopular."<sup>15</sup> The British officials also expressed their dislike of individual Ceylonese; the political reformers were seen as a threat to British rule, and those agitating on behalf of labor were considered to be a potential challenge to the economic stability of the country. It must, however, be emphasized that the officials themselves made a distinction between "moderate agitators" and the "radical fanatics" whom they regarded as an immediate threat to law and order. The largest amount of invective was reserved for Anagarika Dharmapala and for the "notoriously disloyal Corea family." But even the moderate Ceylonese were not spared. The despatches of the period abound in blunt abuse, and terms such as "cowards," "drunkards" and "unscrupulous half-castes" were freely used in describing Ceylonese political figures. These outbursts were perhaps a reflection of the tensions felt by colonial administrators when faced with the new phenomenon of militant nationalist activity in India and the clamor for reforms in Ceylon.

It is also now evident that the British officials in Ceylon, while being always on the alert against "seditious" activity, used the existing divisions in Ceylonese society to try and prevent the development of nationalism and labor agitation. In this they were helped by the religious, racial, and caste differences among the Ceylonese, which provided ample opportunity for a policy of "divide and rule." The Inspector-General of Police was a keen advocate of such a policy and in a confidential minute in 1915 he warned, "The term 'Ceylonese' was not heard ten years ago and I submit it is a mistake to use it. *The different classes are best managed by being called by their different names.*"<sup>16</sup> Not only were the various groups best managed by emphasizing their differences, but their disunity was also politically advantageous, a fact to which Governor Manning gave expression in a private letter sent in December, 1918, to Sir G. Fiddes of the Colonial Office: "I am interested to see that an opposition is springing up against the proceedings of the Reform League. . . . In such a community as this *there is naturally plenty of*

15. *Ibid.*, Memorandum of R. E. Stubbs, 2 July 1919, C.O.54/819, No.35477.

16. CNA, "Confidential Report on the Riots," No.14502 of 1915, emphasis added.

*racial strife and jealousy and that will be of value in deciding the composition of the Council.*"<sup>17</sup>

There appears little doubt that Governor Manning was more than interested in exploiting both the opposition to the demands for constitutional reform and the communal strife that existed. The opponents of the Ceylon National Congress were actively helped and urged on by the authorities, and there is now some evidence of the personal interest shown by the Governor in the famous Secret Memorial sent in 1922 by a group of minority representatives against the reform proposals of the Ceylon National Congress.<sup>18</sup>

More startling was the officials' use of caste labels to describe and denounce well-known Ceylonese nationalists. In reporting to the Colonial Office on the Conference of the Reform League in 1918, Governor Manning wrote: "The Conference is the view of a small section of the Colombo bar and a small section of Western educated men, mostly of low caste, who appear to be endeavouring to secure by political agitation a public prominence which they would otherwise have no hope of attaining."<sup>19</sup> The Governor even argued against the elective principle on the grounds that it was unlikely that "those of higher castes would consent to contest . . . where a man of lower caste was also standing."<sup>20</sup> After the Ceylon National Congress held its sessions in 1920 and rejected the proposed reforms as "inadequate and reactionary," the Criminal Investigation Department made a report to the Colonial Secretary on the composition of the delegates and described them as "well known extremists . . . mainly low-country Sinhalese of inferior caste . . . notoriety seekers and political aspirants who mainly from lack of birth and from disappointment in obtaining government office, seek to establish themselves in the public eye by means of their extreme political views."<sup>21</sup>

17. PRO, letter of 31 Dec. 1918, C.O.54/814, No.7243.

18. Ibid., private letter of Governor Manning, May 1922, C.O.54/851, No.13223. "The delay is because I wished to obtain something definite from the minority communities in regard to their views. The minorities have succeeded in settling their differences and I shall shortly send you the results arrived at. The proposal I am about to send you is certainly a well thought out scheme. . . . The Kandians, I am afraid, have thrown in their lot with their Sinhalese low-country friends, . . . We shall hope however to protect them even against themselves in the long run."

19. Ibid., Confidential Despatch of 7 Feb. 1919, C.O.54/818, No.15217.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., Report of 28 Nov. 1920, C.O.54/835, No.62793.

## The Social Service Movement

Certain common influences combined to interest both the moderate and radical sections of the middle class in labor activities. One factor was the growth of a national consciousness, combined with a liberal humanitarian attitude which led to an interest in the economic needs of the poorer sections of the community. The temperance campaign, for example, although a semipolitical movement, also highlighted social issues like drunkenness and brought many middle-class Ceylonese into contact with the urban and rural masses. The problems caused by poverty had hitherto been tackled by voluntary charitable organizations that gave temporary relief to persons in distress; these bodies were mainly run by foreign missionaries and British residents. The result of the national awakening was that the Ceylonese began to feel that instead of leaving such problems to foreigners, they themselves had the duty to form social service organizations, which would dispense relief and bring pressure on the government to take action on social and economic questions.

The labor activities of the moderates progressed from general work in the social-service field to the formation of organizations to represent the workers. Among the middle-class Ceylonese, social service became increasingly linked with political ideals. A journal widely read by English-speaking Ceylonese stated that social service was one of the chief duties of a patriot, and that "self-help through social service" formed the basis for self-government:

Social service is not charity but brotherhood. We are responsible for the social inequalities and injustice in our midst . . . the insufficiency of our economic, sanitary and educational provision for the people is principally our own fault. . . . none has the right to wealth if other men remain poor from the very causes that have enriched them. One of the most hopeful features of the national awakening of the people of Ceylon is their growing desire to engage in efforts for the social, moral as well as political uplift of their countrymen.<sup>22</sup>

22. Article on Social Service, *National Monthly of Ceylon*, Aug.-Sept. 1918.

One influence on the social-service movement was that of G. K. Gokhale, the moderate Indian nationalist, who laid great stress on the importance of personal service and sacrifice. Gokhale was the principal of Ferguson College, Poona, where the teachers had renounced lucrative careers to provide higher education to poor students. In 1905, Gokhale became the President of the Indian National Congress when the moderates were in control, and the same year he formed the Servants of India Society for the spread of free education in India. Many Ceylonese had been impressed by Gokhale, and his work was often commented upon in Ceylonese journals.

But even social service and moderate political and labor organizations needed an enthusiastic radical to give the initial impetus to these movements. The leadership came from Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who after retiring from government service in 1913 devoted his energies to the political reform movement, social service and to labor activities. Even during his period as a government servant, Arunachalam openly identified himself with many of the progressive causes of his day in spite of official disapproval. He was perhaps the only senior government official to encourage the Buddhist revival and the subsequent temperance agitation. In 1880, when he was Police Magistrate in Kalutara, Arunachalam was host to Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, and was referred to by Olcott as "one of the most intellectual and polished men we have met in Asia."<sup>23</sup>

As a young man, Arunachalam had been an admirer of Gladstone and the British Liberal party and in later years he staunchly supported the British Labour Party. In his student days in Cambridge, Arunachalam was a close friend of the Socialist writer and poet Edward Carpenter, through whom he came into touch with Socialist and Liberal thought and the trade-union movement; he, in turn, introduced Carpenter to Eastern philosophy. The Labour M.P., Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, described Arunachalam as "the perfect cultured, liberal-minded English gentleman of the 19th century . . . with a love of justice and fairplay, and a hatred of slavery and cruelty."<sup>24</sup> But Arunachalam was more than cultured and liberal-

23. H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, p. 172.

24. Wedgwood made his remark in his foreword to Arunachalam's *Speeches and*

minded; he was radical in both his politics and his approach to labor. In many of his public speeches on political and social issues, he had to restrain his views in order to accommodate the more conservative opinions of other Ceylonese political leaders. For example, speaking in 1921 at a reception to Colonel Wedgwood he said, "Unfortunately many of us English-educated folk who profess to be leaders have been so demoralized by generations of rule by others, have had our spinal cord cut so that we cannot stand up erect, we have hardly the self-confidence and courage of our common people and are frightened and shocked at the idea of self-government."<sup>25</sup>

Arunachalam believed that reformist action with the cooperation of the Ceylonese moderates was possible, however, and he therefore went ahead with his plans for social reform. Even as a government servant Arunachalam had shown interest in social welfare measures. For example, when he was Registrar-General he founded a benevolent society for the clerks in his department. The work he did in connection with the report on vital statistics, the registration of deaths, and the Census of 1901, gave him an insight into some of the social questions of the time. Arunachalam commented upon the high death rate, which he attributed to unsanitary slums and the inadequate drainage system. Moreover, he did not hesitate to express his disagreement with the government on the salaries scheme of 1912. The interest Arunachalam took in labor conditions was revealed at the time of the 1912 railway strike, when he made a remarkable dissenting report, thereby annoying both the Governor and the Colonial Secretary. In 1913, while on a visit to England, he

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*Writings.* Edward Carpenter, who was active in Socialist circles in Britain in the 1880's, is remembered as the author of the song "England Arise!", the "Marseillaise" of British Socialists, and a book entitled *Towards Democracy*, which advocated a simple, back-to-nature Socialist pattern of life. He also wrote *From Adam's Peak to Elephanta*, an account of his travels in India and Ceylon. In his memoirs, *My Days and Dreams*, pp. 250-53, Carpenter, writing of his "almost life-long friend Arunachalam," states, "I feel that I owe a great debt to him because long ago, he gave me a translation of a book, then little known in England, the *Bhagavat Gita*—the reading of which curiously liberated and set in movement the mass of material . . . which was then waiting to take shape as *Towards Democracy*. As when a ship is ready to launch, a very little thing, the mere knocking away of a prop, will set her going: so—though it was something more than that—did the push of the *Bhagavat Gita* act on *Towards Democracy*."

25. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 240. In 1921 Arunachalam also stated, "I dread to think of the consequences, if some of us who were advocates of full self-government had proposed the name Home Rule or Swaraj League. It would have scattered to the four winds many of the big men in our camp." *Ibid.*, p. 163.



studied the work of the London County Council; he was impressed by the mass education system and paid visits to hospitals and work-houses, recording in his diary the great need for social services in Ceylon: "Must organize a movement of service for the people. There is much to be done to house the poor in Colombo, primary education of the masses and emancipation of the coolies from their present slavery."<sup>26</sup> In November, 1914, he emphasized the urgent need for a social-service movement to tackle problems of mass education, medical relief, and economic improvement, and to agitate for compulsory insurance and minimum wages.

On Arunachalam's initiative, the Ceylon Social Service League was formed in January, 1915. Of the founders, Arunachalam and C. H. Z. Fernando were known for their radicalism, but the other office-bearers were moderate nationalists. The activities of the League included slum visiting, lectures on first aid and hygiene, medical relief for the poor, milk to mothers and children, and night schools for workers. An exhibition on health, with exhibits and lectures on maternity and child welfare, tuberculosis, hookworm, and the evils of alcohol, was visited by 25,000 people. The League was also active during periods of crisis. After the floods of 1916 it collected and distributed over Rs.11,000. to the victims; relief was also given during the influenza epidemic of 1918, and the League opened free food depots in Colombo at the time of the rice shortage of 1919-1920. On the question of an elementary education for the poor children of Colombo, the League constantly urged the government to take action, claiming that about 11,000 children were "quite unprovided for, many of them running wild in the streets." In a letter to the Colonial Secretary in May, 1916, Arunachalam complained of "the utter absence of elementary education for the poorer classes of Colombo . . . who have been totally neglected for over half a century, [and] have a first claim on the attention of Government. Their continued illiteracy constitutes a public danger as well as a scandal."<sup>27</sup>

26. *Ibid.*, p. 186. For a short biographical account of Arunachalam's life, see *Ponnambalam Arunachalam—Scholar and Statesman*. The author of this unsigned work is James T. Rutnam.

27. *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 187-91. The office-bearers of the Ceylon Social Service League included D. R. Wijewardene, H. L. de Mel, Hector Van Cuylenburg, D. B. Jayatilaka, Donald Obeysekera, and A. Mahadeva.

Arunachalam's radical politics and his Hindu-Tamil background made him particularly interested in the conditions of immigrant plantation workers, and he directed the attention of the Social Service League to the plight of these workers. It should be stressed that an important aspect of Arunachalam's thinking was his refusal to conform to the mores of the Anglicized elite, and his active concern for the revival of Hinduism and Buddhism. Even as a Cambridge undergraduate he had protested, in 1871 in a letter to the *Spectator*, against some remarks made by the Archbishop of York about Indian religions.<sup>28</sup> In 1880 he pointed out "the mistake people in Ceylon are making in abandoning everything that is valuable in their civilisation in their eagerness to adopt indiscriminately every detail of European life." During his travels in India he had "acquired a violent disgust for the way we have got into of adopting European modes of living which are quite unsuited to the climate, inconvenient, expensive and utterly devoid of taste."<sup>29</sup>

Arunachalam was also politically influenced by the Indian national movement and its leaders. As early as 1880, he wrote, "I sometimes think I should like to settle in a place like Poona and organize a political and social movement. But the government will I fear, persecute me."<sup>30</sup> In private letters he expressed his views on British rule in India, "I wonder if England will ever realise the terrible condition of India, and try to make amends. *What* a jewel in the crown of England!, famine-stricken, perishing India!"<sup>31</sup> In another letter on the same topic he wrote, "It is impossible to see and not to express one's opinion on the horrible injustice perpetrated by the English in and out of India towards the people. We cannot be ex-

28. Ponnambalam Arunachalam—*Scholar and Statesman*, p. 3.

29. Letters to Edward Carpenter, Carpenter Collection, Sheffield City Library, MSS. 271, Nos. 28 and 29. Arunachalam expressed himself very frankly to his close friend Carpenter: "One thing in Ceylon always worries me and makes me wish to go to India. European civilisation, or rather a travesty of it has acquired such a ascendancy here that there is no toleration of one who questions its perfection and its suitability to us or ventures to assert that there are things in our own civilisation worth preserving and cherishing. A long and arduous struggle is necessary to overcome, if it be indeed possible, this prejudice . . . I often wonder if I might come and settle in England. . . . To leave Ceylon and India seems now a desertion of my post. I feel I could be more useful here than elsewhere. Would the thought torment me with remorse if I went away?" *Ibid.*, No. 28.

30. Letter to E. Carpenter, 1880, Carpenter Collection, Sheffield City Library, MSS. 271, No. 28.

31. P. Arunachalam and E. Carpenter, *Light From the East*, p. 75.

pected to be always singing Hallelujahs in praise of English rule.”<sup>32</sup> Arunachalam referred to the “priceless services” of the “Sainly Gandhi, the noblest personality in the public life of India” and praised “the illustrious Gokhale” who was engaged in the reform of Indian society.<sup>33</sup> He also protested against the “cruel treatment of patriots like Tilak” by the British authorities in India.<sup>34</sup> Arunachalam had close ties with associations in South India that were agitating on behalf of immigrant workers. For example, in 1916 he spoke on the subject of Indian emigration when he presided at a lecture by T. K. Swaminathan, the editor of the *Indian Emigrant* and founder of the Indian Colonial Society, an organization to safeguard the interests of immigrants. Arunachalam was the first Ceylonese politician to agitate on behalf of the plantation workers, whom he described as not only poor, ignorant, and helpless, but also unable to protect themselves against unscrupulous recruiters and bad employers. In 1913, Arunachalam urged the abolition of child labor on plantations, the creation of minimum wages boards and the regulation of hours of work. He deplored the fact that these matters were left to “the inexorable law of supply and demand” and said “what this means you may imagine as between the poor, ignorant immigrant labourer and the rich and powerful employer . . . the wages on the plantations rarely reach a shilling a day for a male adult, and are much less for women and children . . . nor are there any regulations as to the hours of labour that may be extracted even from children.”<sup>35</sup>

Even before the formation of the Social Service League, Arunachalam had tried to secure the abolition of the notorious penal clauses of the Labour Ordinance of 1865, whereby a breach of contract by workers was a criminal offense. Under this ordinance the court could order the convicted person to return to the employer after serving his sentence. The number of workers sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for such labor offenses rose from 1,160 in 1912, to 1,462 in 1913.<sup>36</sup> In this year, Arunachalam complained to

32. Letter to E. Carpenter, 1878, Carpenter Collection, MSS. 271, No. 31.

33. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 6.

34. Arunachalam and Carpenter, *Light*, p. 66.

35. *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 204-05.

36. Attorney General A. Bertram, Memorandum, 23 Oct. 1916, in File on Ordinance 41 of 1916, Legal Draftsman's Department, Colombo.

the Secretary of State for the Colonies that cases had occurred where women workers on plantations were repeatedly jailed for refusing to go back to their employers, and where workers who protested at insufficient or wrong pay were imprisoned for insolence.<sup>37</sup>

The campaign against the labor laws begun by Arunachalam in 1913 and taken on by the Social Service League in 1915 was a source of irritation to the government, which regarded the legitimate sphere of the League to be social service and not agitation for changes in existing laws. The Attorney-General, Anton Bertram, complained to the Colonial Secretary that Arunachalam had unfortunately converted a society "founded for the unobtrusive and uncontroversial work of 'social service' into a society concerning itself with what may be called 'social reform', the essence of which is necessarily controversy and advertisement," and he referred with disapproval to the tone of the League's letters:

It is scarcely desirable that any private society should be allowed to draw Government into a discussion of difficult and controversial questions by the simple process of addressing to it an argumentative letter. I would therefore suggest that the reply should be that the various questions raised in the letter will receive the due consideration of Government.

The difference in attitude to labor questions between the Colonial Office in London and the officials in Ceylon was clearly revealed during this controversy on the Labour Ordinance. Whereas the Colonial Office was amenable to reform of the penal clauses, the Ceylon authorities, who were more sensitive to the opinion of planters, were reluctant to make any drastic changes. Thus, in July, 1914, in response to criticism, the Secretary of State advised Governor Chalmers to consider amending the penal laws and stated that it was "undesirable that the penalty of imprisonment for offences of this nature should apply to women and children." In Ceylon, the official thinking on this issue was reflected by the Attorney-General, who took an unenlightened stand on the penal clauses. In a memorandum to the government on labor offenses, he wrote:

It has of late been represented that the very existence of these offences is a breach of some fundamental principle. It is suggested that in no case should breaches of a civil contract be made a criminal offence. This

37. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 202.

point of view is wholly theoretical and has reference to economic conditions of a totally different character from those which prevail in this island.<sup>38</sup>

But in response to the Secretary of State's request, a draft ordinance was drawn up by the Attorney-General which abolished the penal clauses for women and children but added a proviso that a female of 16 or over could be imprisoned on a second conviction for drunkenness, insolence, or other misconduct. According to the reasoning of the Attorney-General, to exempt women altogether from imprisonment would "prove detrimental to discipline on estates" because "the labourers employed on estates are very primitive and a woman may be quite as capable of giving trouble as a man."<sup>39</sup> As Chairman of the Social Service League, Arunachalam protested that the reform was inadequate and requested that the government should "at one stroke eliminate this cruel and degrading form of punishment entirely from our labour laws." He made a critical survey of labor legislation and said:

It is much to be deplored that an appreciable number of employers depend, not on good wages and considerate treatment, but on the power of imprisonment for the management of their labour. . . . The accused in labour cases are usually poor, ignorant and undefended, and the Magistrate is unable to see their point of view and [is] impatient of their 'petty grievances.'<sup>40</sup>

The Social Service League continuously petitioned the government, the Secretary of State and interested Members of Parliament in Britain on the question of labor laws, which were described as "barbarous and iniquitous, unworthy of any civilised administration,"<sup>41</sup> until the final abolition of the penal clauses was achieved in 1922.

### Moderate Labor Organizations

Arunachalam held strong views on the need for separate workers' organizations and stressed the inadequacy of social service which the

38. See the Legal Draftsman's Department File on Ordinance 41 of 1916 for the correspondence on this controversy.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 219-21.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

rich indulged in to ease their guilt and as a peace-offering to the poor. He even claimed that political reforms alone were of no value unless the problems of poverty were tackled. The Social Service League—which had concerned itself with labor legislation and such activities as granting relief to vagrants, beggars, slum dwellers, and the victims of natural disasters—was not capable of effectively tackling the problems of the urban working class. The demands of the workers could not be relieved by sporadic charity; their grievances were over terms and conditions of work, which included low wages, long hours, deductions and fines, bad working conditions, and harsh treatment from employers. Arunachalam was influenced by the social legislation that had been introduced in Britain under the Liberal Government, and he was keen that workers in Ceylon should benefit from legislation to control hours of work, fix minimum wages, and provide sickness and old age benefits.

Convinced that the workers needed a separate organization to represent their interests, Arunachalam and other members of the Social Service League formed the Ceylon Workers' Welfare League in 1919. The aims of the new organization included the protection of the interests of the working class and the improvement of social and industrial conditions. The League was open to persons over 21 years of age on the payment of a subscription of Rs.1. a year. Arunachalam was the President of the League and the Secretary was Peri Sunderam, a Cambridge graduate and Barrister who, being from a plantation background, was especially interested in plantation labor problems. The first committee of the League was a cross section of the Ceylonese elite and included several Cambridge graduates, some lawyers, a doctor, a well-known journalist, and a Buddhist preacher, all persons who in the years before the formation of the Workers' League had in one way or another shown an interest in social service and labor problems.<sup>42</sup> The Ceylon Workers' Welfare League was the fourth attempt to form an association for the benefit of the workers. The previous associations had been trade unions which dealt with the needs of specific sections of the working class, namely the printers, carters, and railway workers. The Work-

42. The Committee was composed of P. Arunachalam, Peri Sunderam, K. Thiagarajah, Martinus Perera, Armand de Souza, C. H. Z. Fernando, Sam J. C. Kadirgamar, S. R. Wijemanne, A. S. John, Dr. I. David.

ers' Welfare League was not a trade union, but an organization composed mainly of radical and moderate middle-class Ceylonese who were interested enough to agitate or mediate on behalf of labor.

The Workers' Welfare League took over the campaign started by the Social Service League against the penal clauses in the Labour Ordinance of 1865, and in this connection it sent a delegation to England in 1920 and organized a visit to Ceylon by the Rev. C. F. Andrews, who was well known for his work on behalf of Indian workers in India, South Africa, Fiji, and Malaya. When the first sessions of the Ceylon National Congress were held in December, 1919, the League was represented by a large delegation. In his Presidential address, Arunachalam said that the Congress would be memorable "as the first occasion on which the voice of Labour [would] be heard in assertion of its rights and with the full sympathy and support of all Ceylon."

Labour must be assured of adequate remunerative employment under proper working and living conditions. . . . Labour is not a mere article of commerce, a commodity to be bought and sold. The life of the labourer through the centuries has been indeed a 'via dolorosa.' His sufferings have forced him to form powerful organizations which are now able to protect him in Western countries. But our own labourers are disorganized, weak and helpless, and it is our duty to protect them until they are able to protect themselves.<sup>43</sup>

The Workers' Welfare League sponsored one of the main resolutions at the Congress sessions, demanding that the conditions of labor in Ceylon should conform to the section of the Versailles Peace Treaty concerning the rights of the workers: the resolution called for the repeal of the penal clauses in the Labour Ordinance, the abolition of child labor under 12 years, the fixing of minimum wages, the regulation of working hours and working conditions, the granting of maternity benefits, and the recognition of the right of association.

As the Workers' Welfare League did not have adequate working-class representation, it was decided, in February, 1920, to form a wider and more ambitious organization, the Ceylon Workers' Federation, to include both manual workers and white-collar workers who were described as "equally helpless and suffering." The inau-

43. *Handbook of the CNC*, pp. 205-06.

gural meeting was attended by a large number of workers and Arunachalam was elected President. Among the office-bearers of this new organization, the difference between the moderate and the radical approaches to labor was evident. The moderates insisted that the new body was not to be a trade union which would champion strike action and industrial unrest, but a benevolent association mainly concerned with the "welfare" of the worker. For example, D. B. Jayatilaka urged that there were too many divisive factors in Ceylon society such as race, caste, and religion, without another between labor and capital being added to the list. He claimed that unlike Europe, there was no "antagonism between labour and capital" in Ceylon and that strikes were unnecessary; the real need was for "*unity, moderation, reasonableness and a high sense of justice.*" Another moderate, G. A. H. Wille, stressed the responsibilities of the worker and said he would not encourage workers to oppose their employers as the interests of master and servant were identical. It was not strikes and agitation that were essential but "*sober habits, honesty and thrift.*"<sup>44</sup> Similar warnings of caution were given by some newspapers. The *Ceylon Daily News*, which expressed the fear that the worldwide wave of industrial unrest had caused "a trifling but distinct ripple even in this Island," said that the Workers' Federation was not formed for the purpose of making labor in Ceylon "more clamant, selfish and implacable" or to create "sharper cleavages between labour and capital":

We will not attempt to liken the new Federation to the faint beginnings of local trade unionism. It is neither necessary or expedient to transplant movements nurtured in an alien atmosphere . . . the improvement of himself as a labourer should be placed above all considerations of personal comfort and convenience when [the worker] demands better conditions and more reasonable hours of work.<sup>45</sup>

These views contrasted sharply with the more radical approach of Arunachalam, who made a strong plea for trade unions:

You must not depend so much on help from others but must depend mainly on yourselves and for this purpose you must organize yourself into Unions. It is only by organization that you can be strong and win

44. *Ceylon Daily News*, 9 Feb. 1920, emphasis added.

45. *Ibid.*



success. A dozen or a hundred men one by one are easily overcome, but if they join together and work together they are strong and difficult to overcome.

Arunachalam described the grave labor unrest all over the world, and predicted that conflicts between workers and employers in Ceylon were very likely to occur; he therefore urged the workers to "make haste and form associations everywhere," and advised them that when other means had failed, and they had just cause and adequate funds, strike action could be taken against employers.<sup>46</sup> But the moderate viewpoint prevailed and the Workers' Federation failed to meet the need of the working class for militant trade unionism. Nevertheless, from 1920 to 1922, the Federation was the only organization which campaigned for certain democratic rights for workers and took up some of their grievances.

In the first year of its existence, the membership of the Workers' Federation, which rose from 1,600 to 5,000, was composed mainly of skilled workers from the railway workshops, the Government Factory, and the leading engineering firms of Colombo. Several workers were elected to the committee of the Federation, including three fitters and two railway workers who had been exiled in 1915.<sup>47</sup> A provident fund was started by the Federation to promote thrift and give relief to workers in time of sickness and death. The Federation was also active in mediating and settling individual disputes that arose between worker and employer. It took up the case of the 28 railway workers who had been exiled during the 1915 Riots, and several appeals were made to the Colonial Secretary for their reinstatement. In March, 1921, Arunachalam asked that they be given liberal compensation for wrongful arrest, exile without trial, humiliating treatment as criminals and for loss of employment. In describing their enforced stay in Batticaloa, he wrote:

No provision was made for their subsistence or employment and they were left to shift for themselves. The men experienced very great hardships for want of work and food. Their sufferings were aggravated by anxiety for their wives and children who were far away and in a state of destitution on the exhaustion of their little savings.

46. *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 331-32.

47. "Minute Book of the Ceylon Workers' Federation," in the possession of Mr. James T. Rutnam.

Arunachalam complained to the Colonial Secretary that on their return from Batticaloa, these workers were given certificates of discharge from the railways, which stated that intending employers should apply to the railways before giving them employment. Arunachalam stated that these skilled workmen, many with hereditary connections with the railway, and service ranging from 10 to 40 years, had great difficulty finding employment elsewhere and were "living a hand to mouth existence without provision or hope for their old age." But the Colonial Secretary refused compensation and claimed that the action taken against the workers was justified "judging from reports on the character and conduct of these men."<sup>48</sup>

The Workers' Federation was also in the forefront of the meetings and receptions held in Colombo to honor Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, the Labour Member of Parliament who visited Ceylon in 1921. Politically active Ceylonese had always retained links with the British Labour Party, and at a Workers' Federation meeting for Wedgwood, Arunachalam expressed the gratitude of the Federation to the Labour Party for its concern about their "helpless brother-workers in India and Ceylon," and to Wedgwood for his intervention on behalf of the Ceylonese during the 1915 Riots, the temperance campaign, and the agitation for political reforms.<sup>49</sup> In reply, Wedgwood urged the need for proper organization and "a real class consciousness" among all sections of the workers so that strike action, if necessary, would be successful. He also advocated agitation for the extension of the franchise to include the working class.<sup>50</sup> Many of the ideas put forward by Wedgwood were too radical for the conservative elements of the Workers' Federation, but their impact was not lost on future trade-union leaders—including A. E. Goonesinha and George E. de Silva—who were present at the meeting.

### Strikes and Labor Unrest, 1915-1920

During the riots of 1915, the "agitators" who had been active in the years between 1912 and 1915 underwent punishment, which

48. See CNA, File T/6/26.

49. *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 227-28.

50. *Ceylon Daily News*, 28 Jan. 1921.

included the imprisonment of the temperance and labor leaders and the exile of the militant railway workers to the east coast. Although for some years after 1915 there was no organized attempt at reviving labor agitation, the signs of incipient trade unionism did not escape the notice of the authorities, who remained alert to the possibility of such a development. Whereas political movements had to be recognized and tolerated by government officials and memorials for constitutional reform had to be accepted, discussed, and communicated to Whitehall, the authorities firmly refused to officially recognize or encourage any form of activity that suggested trade unionism. But the increase in the cost of living during and after the First World War, and especially the sharp rise in the price of essential foodstuffs without a corresponding increase in wages, led to an upsurge of urban labor discontent. The significant features of this period were the influence of the British labor movement on the Ceylon workers and the resulting spread of unrest to the higher grades on the railways, and the mounting discontent of the daily-paid urban workers. The inability of the Ceylon Workers' Federation to assume the leadership of the Colombo workers became clear and the way was set for the emergence of the radicals as trade-union leaders.

A novel development was the spread of agitation—inspired by events in Britain—to the British engine drivers, foremen, plate-layers, and inspectors who had been recruited for service in Ceylon on a contract basis and were known as “covenanted” workers. This campaign was regarded by the government as a dangerous precedent. It had always been a part of British policy that either political activity in favor of self-government, or labor agitation by British residents in the colonies, amounted to a betrayal of imperial interests and was to be avoided at all costs, and it frequently happened as in Ceylon, that so-called “undesirable Europeans” were deported. In 1915, the covenanted engine drivers petitioned about salaries, leave, and conditions of work. The alarm of the government at this turn of events is seen from the complaint of the General Manager of Railways to the Colonial Secretary that it was not the contents of the petition that were objectionable but “the manner in which it was got up and the wording adopted”; for instead of the petition being signed in the usual way by the individual signatories, it was

sent by David Sparks, the "Corresponding Secretary." But in reply to the government's objection that the petition was irregular in form, the drivers insisted that Sparks had authority as he had been "elected Secretary at a gathering of the men." The General Manager of Railways warned the government that there was no doubt that the engine drivers "in submitting their grievances in this particular form wish to represent themselves as a Trade Union." Referring to the danger of labor trouble spreading on the railways, he added that if employees were to be allowed to submit grievances in this form it would be the "thin end of the wedge," as other grades on the railways would act in a similar manner. The fear that the British drivers, who had experience of trade unionism in Great Britain, would organize a similar movement in Ceylon was also expressed by the General Manager of Railways, who, referring to the Triple Alliance of miners, dockers, and railway workers in Britain, wrote, "In view of the recent amalgamation at home of the three large Trade Unions, including that of the Railways, the question is a serious one of local policy." The recognition of trade unionism in Ceylon was felt to be highly undesirable and the Colonial Secretary (Stubbs) even considered the advisability of deporting the engine drivers, whom he called "low-grade Europeans." The Colonial Secretary referred to a driver named Taylor, who had led one of the engine drivers' deputations, as an "eloquent man of the labour agitator type" and added that it would be "a good thing to get rid of Taylor as he was trying to work himself into the position of a trade union leader."

The agitation of the drivers continued, and they refused to modify the wording of their memorial, even suggesting that if their demands were not accepted they would get the question raised in the House of Commons by the Labour Party. In 1917, some of the demands concerning overtime were granted, but the drivers stated that they were "deeply disappointed" with the authorities and kept up their campaign of constant petitions. The high wages earned by munition workers and their wives in England, and the war bonuses granted to railway workers there, made the covenanted engine drivers dissatisfied with their terms and conditions of work in Ceylon. In December, 1917, the drivers received further concessions—free return passages for three persons after five year's

service, free housing and a duty allowance—but they remained dissatisfied as they did not receive either an increase in their salaries or improvement in conditions of work. Their success in obtaining some concessions, however, led to demands by other groups of British-recruited workers on the railways, including the foremen and platelayers. As predicted, the Ceylonese drivers and firemen also started to voice their grievances. They complained in a memorial in 1918 that in respect of intelligence and responsibility they were equal to the covenanted drivers and their work was identical, but on questions of salary, good conduct pay, and housing, the Ceylonese were in a position “inferior to the other group.” The government agreed to grant the Ceylonese drivers and firemen free housing; a request for an interview with the Governor was refused, and the General Manager of Railways complained that the tone of the memorial was “improper and not conducive to discipline” and that the assumption by the driver Tissera of the title “Honorary Secretary, Local Memorial” was not in accordance with proper procedure.<sup>51</sup>

Although this agitation among the higher grades of railway workers did not result in the formation of unions among this section, the lower grades on the railways started the first postwar railway workers' union in December, 1919. The inaugural meeting, attended by 700 workers, was presided over by Armand de Souza, the editor of the *Morning Leader* and founder-member of the Ceylon National Congress. De Souza, a nephew of Dr. Lisboa Pinto, had once worked as a railway clerk and had been active in anti-Christian associations and various political and social service movements. The railway workers' meeting was addressed in Sinhalese by C. H. Z. Fernando representing the Social Service League, in Tamil by Peri Sunderam representing the Workers' Welfare League, and in Malayalam by C. M. Jacobs. Although the organizers made it clear that they were against strikes and that the union was to be mainly concerned with giving provident society benefits, the government was alarmed by the new development, although anxious not to act too sternly. On this issue, the General Manager of Railways presumed “that government would decline to give any recognition” to trade unions on the railways. Governor Manning, however,

51. For details, see CNA, File No.2243 of 1915.

advocated "the greatest discretion," and cited the situation in Britain; "There is a union of post office workers and other unions of government workers in England, and any statement that unions in government service here would not be recognized must be carefully considered." The Governor's concern was evident from his instructions, which said, "There will be time enough when such a union takes action to decide whether government will permit [it] to be taken as representative of the men or not," and he warned, "Do not let these papers out of your office."<sup>52</sup>

The Railway Union seems to have been short-lived, but such agitation on the railways was a reflection of the discontent among all sections of urban workers including clerical workers. About this time the Government Clerical Services Union was formed with G. Phoebus as its President, but being a union of government workers, it did not publicize its activities. In 1919, an eight-hour-day movement spread among the daily-paid government workers. In Great Britain after the end of the First World War, the question of hours of work had become the main demand of the trade unions, and by 1919 the majority of the organized workers had obtained the eight-hour day or the forty-eight-hour week. The success of the British workers in obtaining shorter hours had an impact on the most highly skilled and active members of the Ceylon working class of the postwar period, namely the workers of the railway locomotive shops, the harbor engineering department and the Government Factory. In Ceylon in 1919, the daily-paid workers employed in government and private factories worked a 52-hour week, or a nine-hour day on week days and seven hours on Saturday. In 1919, workers at the Government Factory petitioned for a reduction in working hours and asked for an eight-hour day and a forty-eight-hour week, and the railway locomotive workshop men demanded an eight-hour day and a forty-five-hour week. They complained that they worked from 6:30 A.M. to 4:45 P.M., "too long in a climate like that of Colombo, where hard physical exertion imposes an unendurable strain . . . and entails frequent failure of health." In the Harbour Engineers' Department the hours of work had last been altered in 1897, when the working day was changed from 11 hours to 10 hours; according to the Harbour Engineer, from that

52. CNA, Railway Workmen's Unions, File 42608/19; *Morning Leader*, 9 Dec. 1919.

date these hours were worked "without change and without complaint." In 1919, the fitters, carpenters, blacksmiths, and boiler-makers of the Harbour Engineers' Department petitioned for an eight-hour day and a gratuity after 20 years' (instead of 25 years') service, which would be payable to the next-of-kin in the event of the worker's death. The Harbour Engineer in forwarding this petition stated that the workers, having heard or read about the eight-hour day in Britain, considered that by simply making the same demands they would be entitled to the concession. He added that the workers in Britain, and especially the dockers, were justified in forming trade unions because of the great misery that prevailed there, but he claimed that in Ceylon there was no necessity for trade unionism because workers had the "amenities of a tropical city." The Harbour Engineer also warned that the workers' petition was "the beginning of the introduction of the principle of trade unionism" into Ceylon. However, as a result of the agitation the leading government enterprises—Railways, Harbour Engineers' Department, and Government Factory—adopted an eight-hour day and forty-five-hour week.<sup>53</sup>

The eight-hour-day movement and the resulting disquiet in official circles over the possibilities of trade unionism led to an important change in government policy. During earlier periods of labor discontent the government had on two occasions appointed commissions of enquiry to investigate grievances—the commission to enquire into police corruption after the carters' strike of 1906, and the railway commission after the railway strike of 1912. But in 1919, when there was increasing discontent among workers, the Chairman of the Port Commission recommended the creation of a "small body of experts to investigate labour questions." The Government agreed, and in October, 1919, the Labour Advisory Committee was formed with the Controller of Revenue as Chairman; its members included the heads of the important government departments (public works, railways, etc.) and a few large private employers. The Committee, which was intended as a means of countering industrial discontent, had the power to consider all questions affecting urban labor and to report and make recommen-

53. CNA, Labour Advisory Committee, File R.O.PF.2899C. There is a reference to the government clerks' union in the *Times of Ceylon*, 25 May 1921.

dations on these matters. For a decade after its formation the Labour Advisory Committee and its subcommittees investigated demands for wage claims, working conditions and hours of work, and when called upon by the government, reported on strikes that took place in Colombo.<sup>54</sup>

These developments in the field of labor between 1915 and 1920 were a prelude to a sudden upsurge of militant agitation by the Colombo workers which began in 1920 and reached a climax with the general strike of 1923. The failure of the Ceylon Workers' League and the Ceylon Workers' Federation to fill the role of a trade union was evident during the railway and harbor strikes of 1920. This new phase of working-class unrest was the result of post-war economic dislocation which adversely affected the living standards of the poor. In Ceylon, rice being the staple food, any slight increase in its price caused hardship and had often led to public demonstrations of discontent. The failure of the rice crop in India in 1918 and 1919 led to the curtailment of rice exports from South India; there was also difficulty in obtaining rice supplies from other sources because of the shortage of shipping just after the war. Whereas Ceylon had imported 400,000 tons of rice in 1916, only 275,000 tons were imported in 1919, which necessitated the introduction of rice rationing by the government. There was an unprecedented increase in the price of rice, and the Administration Report of 1919 claimed that the country was "for the first time not far off starvation."<sup>55</sup> In March, 1920, the *Times of Ceylon* reported that people had died of starvation on the streets, that the number of beggars had increased considerably, and that many of the "respectable poor" were subsisting on one meal a day. Some charitable organizations opened free food kitchens in the poorer districts of Colombo and free rice was distributed to the destitute.<sup>56</sup>

In 1920, the rise in the cost of living severely affected the workers in Colombo whose wages had not risen proportionately. The locomotive workshop employees, the most active section of the working class, asked for a temporary wage increase of 30 percent to offset the increase in the price of rice. They claimed that the minimum wage

54. Ibid.

55. "Report of the Government Agent, Western Province," *Administration Report for 1919*.

56. *Times of Ceylon*, 3 March 1920; *Ceylon Daily News*, 9 March 1920.



needed for a worker with a family of four or five children was Rs.2. a day, but that the majority did not earn this amount and were living on one meal a day. The locomotive workers also complained that they received no regular increments in wages and that those among them with ten or more years of service had not been granted increases. But the workers were merely told that their demands would be considered by the Railway Commission appointed in 1920 to go into all questions concerning the Ceylon railways.<sup>57</sup>

During the rice crisis of 1920, the Governor cabled the Secretary of State to express concern over the implications of the increase in the price of rice, which he estimated at 45 percent: "Without doubt the shortage in rice supply in the year has imposed very severe strain on the population which has been borne with remarkable patience up to date. Recent advance in price has largely increased the strain and breaking point may be close at hand."<sup>58</sup> The Governor's forecast about the "breaking point" proved to be true. On February 26, 1920, the railway workers discovered that more than half their pay had been deducted at source to cover the cost of rice advanced to them. The next day 1,800 workers of the locomotive workshops struck work. The strike spread to the signalmen, bridgemen, and platelayers of the Way and Works Department, the workers in the Kelani Valley repair shop, the fitters, fuellers, and cleaners of the running shed, and the workmen of the running sheds of Kandy and Nawalapitiya.

The strike marked a revival of militant action among railway workers and revealed the existence of leaders among the working class who were prepared to direct the strikers. The most active of these was Marshall Wickremasinghe, known as Marshall Appuhamy, a former railway workshop fitter who was the workers' leader during the 1912 strike and had been dismissed and exiled to Batticaloa for his activities during the 1915 riots. A committee was formed composed of Marshall Appuhamy; William Singho ("Hamban" William), a carpenter described by the police as "the ring-leader of the railwaymen"; Thomas, a boilermaker also called a "ringleader and spokesman"; and Sam, who was said to go "forward as a spokesman among the men and give his views on the cost of

57. *Ceylon Daily News*, 28 Feb. 1920.

58. PRO, telegram of 12 March 1920, C.O.54/830, No.14319.

living and the general condition of the railway workmen."<sup>59</sup> However, the committee was not prepared to send a deputation of strikers to the railway authorities, being aware of the victimization suffered by the militant railway workers in 1915; instead, it made a collection of 50 cents from each worker and delegated a lawyer, Clement de Jong, to present the strikers' demands to the General Manager of Railways. After the failure of the lawyer to obtain any concessions for the workers, the Ceylon Workers' Federation was approached. A deputation from the Federation interviewed the Colonial Secretary, but the government refused to make any promise until the workers went back to work. The workers' lack of confidence in the Federation was seen from the fact that this body was not approached for advice before the strike; and when that advice was finally sought, the Federation merely presented the workers' case to the Colonial Secretary, advised the men to return to work and condemned the strike as "ill-advised."<sup>60</sup> The advice was not accepted by the workers, who were determined to hold out until they obtained an increase in wages. The strikers refused the government proposal of a commission to inquire into the cost of living of all government servants, but were persuaded to accept a second proposal of the government that a subcommittee to specifically consider the cost of living of railway workers be appointed. The workers' lawyer persuaded the strikers to return to work, stating that the subcommittee was composed of a much respected lawyer, the Sinhalese member of the Legislative Council, and "two sympathetic Europeans." He also said that the government would award any recommended increase of wages promptly and that this amounted to "a definite promise to better their conditions." The strike was called off after a guarantee was given by the railway authorities that there would be no victimization.<sup>61</sup>

Following the example of railway workers, the first major strike in the Colombo port of 5,000 workers took place on March 10, 1920. Labor in the harbor was employed on a contract basis, with the wharfage companies delegating the loading and unloading of cargo to contractors who hired the necessary labor. The main grievance

59. CNA, Confidential Minute Paper 35967 of 1920.

60. Letter to the editor, *Ceylon Daily News*, 3 March 1920.

61. *Ceylon Daily News*, 11 March 1920.

in this case, too, was that the rise in the price of rice had not been accompanied by an increase in wages. The agitation began among the workers known as "coal coolies" who were employed in transporting bags of coal and were referred to by one newspaper as "notoriously fierce fellows." They were also described as doing "very hard work of a kind such as all will not undertake" and comment was made of "the turbulent element" among them. The coal coolies were joined by other harbor workers, including lightermen, warehousemen, and others, and work in the port came to a standstill. The harbor workers at that date had no outside leaders and the strike was said to have been organized by "some of the tougher types"; a meeting of the strikers was held and a fund started to engage a lawyer to plead their case before the authorities.<sup>62</sup>

Significantly, the harbor workers also did not consult the existing workers' organization before calling a strike, but relied on their own resources. An attempt at mediation was made by the Ceylon Workers' Federation, whose office-bearers reprimanded the workers for not consulting them; workers were told that they were ignorant of what they were doing and were urged not to forget that their grandfathers had never struck work. Three members of the Workers' Federation had a conference with the employers and the contractors, who agreed to grant a 50 percent increase in basic rates of pay. The strikers accepted this and returned to work the next day. On March 12 there was a second strike in the harbor when the workers discovered that the 50 percent increase was only being given to those working on the ships and lightermen's boats, but that the shoremen were excluded. The renewal of the strike led the wharfage companies to appeal successfully to the government for convict labor and 200 convicts were brought for work in the harbor. A conference of the agents of the shipping lines was held and a revised scale of wages for harbor workers was drawn up; the bunkermen and lightermen were given a 50 percent increase, to date from their resumption of work, and the shoremen were given a small increase on every ton unloaded.

The railway and harbor strikes of 1920 revealed the existence of serious discontent among the unorganized workers, and the disillusion of the Colombo working class with moderate leadership. The

62. *Ceylon Independent*, 11-12 March 1920.

failure of the Ceylon Workers' Federation was the failure of the moderates to adequately represent the militant feeling of the workers. This situation was remedied by the appearance on the scene of radical leaders who were able to supply a new and forceful leadership to the labor movement. But it is worth noting that the Ceylon Workers' Federation, which had proved too moderate and conciliatory for the Colombo workers, was regarded by the government with suspicion, because the authorities at that time were unwilling to acknowledge that even a moderate workers' organization could have any purpose other than a seditious one. After the railway and harbor strikes, the Secretary of State for the Colonies had asked for a report on the Ceylon Workers' Federation. In reply, Governor Manning sent a confidential despatch denouncing the office-bearers of the Federation as hostile critics of the government who could "in no way claim to be representative of labour, but were more or less political agitators." Manning also alleged that the activities of the Federation were mainly directed to the reform of the constitution rather than the interests of labor, and said, "The Workers' Federation is a society consisting of some of the artisans of Colombo, guided by well-known local political orators and agitators."<sup>63</sup>

But who could have foreseen that the same organization whose members were denounced as political agitators in 1920 would be hailed by the government less than three years later as the only true representative organization of the Colombo workers? Nothing had drastically changed in the Ceylon Workers' Federation to bring about this reversal in attitude; the policy of the Federation remained the same and the leading members (except for Arunachalam, who had retired from political and other activities) were the same group of moderate politicians. What had changed was the emergence in 1922 of a radical labor organization, the Ceylon Labour Union, with a militant leader, A. E. Goonesinha.

63. PRO, Confidential Despatch of 13 Oct. 1920, C.O.54/834, No.54739.

## Chapter 9

# From Radical Politics to the General Strike

*Changes must come and are coming. The people are beginning to think and when the time comes they will act. Common men will show increased enthusiasm in political and social affairs which concern them.*<sup>1</sup>

A. E. Goonesinha, 1914

*Moderation in politics is the safety valve of the coward and the convenient creed of the slave.*

*Young Lanka*, February 19, 1920

After 1915, there emerged a new group of radicals who were more concerned with overt political activity and labor agitation than with the religious and temperance issues of an earlier period. Many of the new generation of young radicals were from Buddhist schools where they had been taught by foreign liberals and had received a nationalist-biased education. A high proportion of them belonged to professions such as law, journalism, and teaching; many of them came from prosperous families, but several of the most prominent radicals were from urban or rural lower middle-class origins. Influenced by the political unrest in India and other countries, they had become increasingly impatient with the lack of dynamism among Ceylon's political leaders. The discontent of these "Young Turks" of Ceylon against the moderate nationalists was given an organizational basis when a group of fifteen young men, mainly lawyers, formed the Young Lanka League on March 2, 1915, the date which marked the extinction of the Kandyan king-

1. A. E. Goonesinha, "Dawn of a New Era," *National Monthly of Ceylon*, Feb.-March 1914.

dom. A public meeting was held in Colombo to launch the League, and at a secret meeting held at midnight the same day, the founder members signed in blood and pledged to work for the liberation of Ceylon from foreign rule. From 1915 to 1922, the Young Lanka League and its journal *Young Lanka* aimed at injecting new life into the nationalist movement, which was felt to be languishing under the leadership of the "old guard" politicians. The Young Lanka League, which was the first radical political association to be formed with an openly anti-British policy, represented the "extreme" wing of the nationalist movement and was the immediate forerunner of the first militant trade union in the island.

Whereas the moderates derived their inspiration mainly from British liberalism and the conservative wing of the Indian National Congress, the radicals of 1915 were influenced by the wave of revolutionary agitation and extreme nationalism in many parts of the world. "This is pre-eminently the age of young men, and in Turkey, China, Egypt and India they are considered a potent factor, a powerful instrument in the work of uplifting their country," wrote a member of the Young Lanka League in 1918, contrasting these countries with Ceylon, where "fossilised old fogeys" condemned any agitation on the part of the young nationalists.<sup>2</sup> The strong influence exerted by revolution and movements of liberation on the minds of the Ceylonese radicals can be gauged from an editorial in the *Young Lanka* in 1922 which said, "The world today is in a state of great transition. The cosmic tides of democracy are stalking through every land, hurling down those institutions that for centuries remained the impregnable fortresses of brutal tyrants and heartless autocrats."<sup>3</sup>

Of the foreign upheavals, the radicals were influenced by the zeal of the "Young Turk" movement which had ousted the despotic Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1909; they admired the Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk, who had imposed drastic political and social reform on the country, and referred to him as "the Man of the Hour." The overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in China and the proclamation

2. Article on birth of New Ceylon, *Young Lanka*, July 1918. The founders of the Young Lanka League included A. E. Goonesinha, Victor Corea, E. A. P. Wijeyeratne, A. P. Thambiayah, Valentine S. Perera and C. H. Z. Fernando.

3. *Young Lanka*, 19 Feb. 1922.

of the Republic in 1912 were also acclaimed by the Young Lanka League, and Sun Yat Sen, the first President of the Republic, became one of the heroes of the Ceylonese radicals. The rebellion in Egypt against the British (led by the Wafd party) was supported by the League's journal, which expressed its sympathy with Egyptian nationalism and wrote that "Egypt rings with the cry of independence."<sup>4</sup> Another violent struggle against British domination which aroused the radicals was the Irish independence movement. The turbulent events in Ireland, which included the passing of the Home Rule Bill in 1914, the Ulster rebellion, the proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 and the resulting Anglo-Irish war, in which the Irish Sinn Fein movement led the resistance to the British, were followed in great detail in Ceylon. In 1922 the *Young Lanka* wrote of "martyred Ireland" which after a "passionate struggle of centuries [was] now well within the path of freedom's goal."<sup>5</sup> The Russian Revolution of 1917, which was denounced by the Ceylon moderates, caused a wave of excitement among the local radicals as marking the end of the oppressive Czarist regime. One of the leading members of the Young Lanka League, writing in July, 1918, on "A Vision of the Future," claimed that Russia would "once more emerge into public notice now that the Russians have recognized the veritable stability of a government of the people, by the people, for the people."<sup>6</sup> A few years later, the *Young Lanka*, commenting on world events wrote, "Czardom that for ages manacled human liberty has vanished from unhappy Russia with the heralding of the dawn of a better day."<sup>7</sup>

But by far the most important political influence on the Young Lanka League was the Indian national movement and its leaders. During the First World War there had been a resurgence of nationalist activity in India. The "extremists" and "moderates" in the Congress reunited in 1916, and the same year the Congress and Muslim League reached an agreement on a common program of reform agitation. The Muslims had become very anti-British during

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Article by Valentine S. Perera, *Young Lanka*, July 1918. For a detailed account see Kumari Jayawardena, "The Impact of the October Revolution on Ceylon 1917-1935," *Ceylon Observer*, 16 Nov. 1967.

7. *Young Lanka*, 19 Feb. 1922.

this period because of their sympathy with the Turks, whose empire had been whittled away during the World War. The pro-Turkish Khilafat movement in India associated with Mohamed and Shaukat Ali made the Muslims more politically conscious. The Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 were rejected by the Congress and a new wave of political unrest swept the country when Mahatma Gandhi launched a campaign of noncooperation against the British; this campaign included the calling of *hartals* (mass stoppages of all activities), the boycott of the legislatures, the boycott of foreign goods and official functions, the renunciation of titles, and the refusal to pay taxes. The repression that followed was severe: at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, General Dyer's troops massacred an unarmed crowd, and martial law was declared in the Punjab. In 1921, during the visit of the Prince of Wales, which was marked by a *hartal*, there were mass arrests of nationalists all over the country, including Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders. A year later, Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment. The events in India, and especially the noncooperation campaign, stirred the Ceylonese radicals, and in 1922 the *Young Lanka* said, "the hundreds and thousands that voluntarily march into H.M.'s jails demonstrate the determined will of the Indian people to secure the liberties of their land."<sup>8</sup>

Although the Young Lanka League was influenced by Indian nationalism and tried to introduce Indian methods of political agitation into Ceylon, their efforts met with little response because of the conservatism of the leaders who dominated the nationalist organizations. It is interesting to note how the Young Lanka radicals attempted to infuse some of the militancy of the Indian agitation into Ceylon and the disappointing results they obtained. The political program of the Young Lanka League was complete self-government: "Are we to be eternally governed by the English . . . are we to the end of time to remain the premier colony of the British Empire?" queried its journal in 1919.<sup>9</sup> Following the Indian example, the League called for *swaraj* and advocated *hartals*, boycotts, passive resistance and noncooperation; it also made a call for a boycott of the Governor's social functions as a protest against Gov-

8. *Young Lanka*, July 1918.

9. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1919.



ernor Manning's attitude on the question of constitutional reform, but this met with no response. The League also unsuccessfully tried to launch a campaign for the boycott of British goods, but as the *Young Lanka*, in an article entitled "Is Ceylon fit for non-co-operation?" complained, "The Ceylonese have become woefully denationalised. They pride in thinking, eating, dressing and talking like the foreigner . . . no country in the East tolerates such a roaring sale of English made goods."<sup>10</sup>

The admiration of the Young Lanka League for Indian nationalists is to be contrasted with their contempt for the majority of the Ceylonese leaders. There were, however, two exceptions—Pon-nambalam Arunachalam and Anagarika Dharmapala. Although many of the Young Lanka rebels were secular in outlook, they admired the militancy of Dharmapala's religious and political crusade, his trenchant social criticisms, and his continuous battle with officials in India and Ceylon. It was well known that Dharmapala was the man the authorities feared most. Some idea of this official fear can be gauged from the telegrams, confidential despatches and correspondence between Ceylon, India, Japan, and the Colonial Office in London on the subject of Anagarika Dharmapala's "seditious" and "revolutionary" activities and his role as a "foreign agent." Many of the highly-colored stories against Dharmapala were provided by British secret agents in other parts of the world, and by local informers in Ceylon. One of the alarmist telegrams sent from India to the Colonial Office was communicated to the Governor of Ceylon in May, 1916. This report, headed "Most Secret—Indian Seditious" stated:

Indians connected with Berlin have decided on further seditious activities among which Dharmapala is to visit Japan and the Emperor and Count Okuma and confer with Buddhist Bishops. He is asked to take an Indian, Lajpat Rai as helper in Japan. When Dharmapala arrives in Japan, money and a fuller programme will be sent there to him. In Siam, Prince Chandradetta [brother of the King] and colleague of Dharmapala is to be used to influence the King. In Ceylon the High Priest Suman-gala is to be persuaded to join in. Probably the instructions and letters of German agents will be conveyed to them in thin glass tubes about 2 inches long fused at both ends.<sup>11</sup>

10. *Ibid.*, 10 Dec. 1922.

11. PRO, secret telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor, 19 May 1916, C.O.54/798, No.23266.

This information led to correspondence between Bengal and Ceylon. The Colonial Secretary wrote to the Chief Secretary of Bengal suggesting that the closest possible watch should be kept on Dharmapala as there was reason to believe that he was "engaged in intrigues with disaffected Indians," and was likely to be used as an intermediary between them and "foreign powers." The Bengal Chief Secretary in July, 1916, stated that according to the Criminal Intelligence Department, "the German Indian party contemplate working through the Japanese and that party relies on Dharmapala to play an important part in the scheme. . . it is anticipated that Dharmapala intends to make another visit to Japan. I am to enquire whether the Ceylon government would prefer to have this man under their own control." The Colonial Secretary's reaction was, "better not to have him in Ceylon, where, through his brother he would get into touch with all the disloyal elements."<sup>12</sup> The next year, in January, 1917, another flurry was caused in London by the British Vice-Consul in Yokohama who sent a secret report on Dharmapala, "the Cingalese Revolutionary":

This man is said to be well acquainted with a number of influential Japanese and is credited with being the head of the movement directed against British rule in Ceylon. He is said to be receiving supplies of arms and ammunition from Japan and elsewhere and to have secreted a large quantity on the Island.<sup>13</sup>

In view of these allegations, Dharmapala was debarred from Ceylon until 1920. The Ceylon authorities feared that Dharmapala would link up with the young radicals of the Young Lanka League, some of whom had earlier been associated with him in temperance activity. When appeals were made in 1919 to allow Dharmapala to return, the Colonial Secretary refused on the ground that Dharmapala was closely associated with Annie Besant "and Indian sedition generally," and would, if permitted to come to Ceylon, "*stir up some trouble among the young hotheads.*" Even Governor Manning intervened in the matter in 1919 and categorically stated, "On no pretext whatever will I permit this man to return to Ceylon while it lies in my power."<sup>14</sup>

12. CNA, Confidential File P(5)3, Vol. 1, Minute Paper 5373/12.

13. PRO, C.O.54/807, No.16998.

14. CNA, Confidential File P(5)3, Vol. 1, Minute Paper 5373/12, emphasis added.

The Young Lanka group also respected and admired Ponnambalam Arunachalam for his bold politics and his radical approach to labor problems. In 1921, when Arunachalam was sixty-eight years old, he advised the young men of Ceylon not to “pay excessive deference to the opinions and wishes of their elders.”<sup>15</sup> On the question of mass participation in politics, Arunachalam went against the current of middle-class thinking. In 1920 he criticized some of the Congress leaders because they had “little trust in the masses of the people and regard them as only fit subjects for a parental despotism,” and a year later he declared, “I have absolute faith in the native untutored instinct of the vast mass of my countrymen.” Arunachalam openly condemned the Ceylonese moderates: “our people desire to be saved from the tender mercies of a Ceylonese as much as of a European bureaucracy and to have real power in their hands and not in the hands of a privileged few.”<sup>16</sup> It is from the frank expression of opinion in his private correspondence, however, that one gets a clear view of Arunachalam’s strong position. That he was far more radical than many of his contemporaries is seen from a letter sent in 1917 during the First World War to Edward Carpenter:

The only hopeful thing about the present war is the refusal of the Russian people to fight and I do hope the common people of all countries will do likewise. In no other way will this slaughter cease, unless you get together all the ‘statesmen’ and capitalists and the rest of the ruling classes (who sit at home at ease and send out the youth in their millions to be slaughtered) and dispose of *them* somehow. It is difficult for us to know what is really going on in Europe, as the outspoken papers are not allowed to come here. Financial distress is becoming acute, owing to want of freight to send our produce abroad and to lack of money. But it serves everybody right for being so dependent on the foreigner and not on ourselves. The whole system is rotten.<sup>17</sup>

The Young Lanka group eagerly endorsed the view that the whole system was rotten and they sharply criticized the moderates as “designing knaves who barter their country for a few yards of blue ribbon or gold lace.”<sup>18</sup> They suggested that these Ceylonese should

15. *Speeches and Writings*, p. 173.

16. See *ibid.*, pp. 151, 181, 241.

17. P. Arunachalam and E. Carpenter, letter of 29 Aug. 1917, in *Light From the East*, p. 79.

18. *Young Lanka*, July 1918.

spend some time in India "training themselves for public life under Gandhi, C. R. Das, Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru or some such great Indian patriot."<sup>19</sup> None of the moderate Ceylonese leaders were spared by the Young Lanka critics: James Peiris was compared to an Irish "traitor" belonging to a period that was fast passing away; D. B. Jayatilaka was accused of cowardice and F. R. Senanayaka was denounced for having insulted a Young Lanka heckler (A. E. Goonesinha) at a public meeting. "In vain," wrote the *Young Lanka*, "does one look for great selfless patriots as India or Ireland has produced."<sup>20</sup> When B. G. Tilak, the Indian "extremist," visited Ceylon in 1919, he was treated as a heroic leader by the Young Lanka League, which organized a public meeting in his honor. The visit of the Prince of Wales to Ceylon in 1922 was an occasion for the Young Lanka members to come out in opposition to the visit and condemn the Ceylonese moderates. They contrasted the Indians, who "refused to join in the mockery," with the Ceylonese who, in their "silk suits, frock coats, top hats, gowns and Brussels lace" lavished attention on the Prince at Queen's House, the races, and golf links.<sup>21</sup> In this connection an editorial in the *Young Lanka* denounced the Ceylonese moderates for being "low and cringing" and compared them to "helpless coolies" who "howled and showed loyalty when they should have acted with dignity and manly independence."<sup>22</sup>

The political conflict between the radicals and moderates became acute after 1919, when the Young Lanka League affiliated itself to the Ceylon National Congress, which had been formed that year. Although they had great admiration for Ponnambalam Arunachalam, the members of the League assumed the role of a radical pressure group within the Congress and constantly opposed the policy of the Congress leaders. The criticism of the moderates by the Young Lanka group had been carried on even before the formation of the Congress. For example, when the Ceylon National Association and the Ceylon Reform League presented their "Case for Constitutional Reform" in 1919, the Young Lanka League

19. *Ibid.*, 26 March 1922.

20. *Ibid.*, 19 Feb. 1922.

21. *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1922.

22. Editorial, *ibid.*, 26 Nov. 1922.

called it "a very timid document lacking force or vigour and full of quotations from Knox and the *Times of Ceylon*."<sup>23</sup>

The formation of the National Congress had led the Young Lanka members to hope that there would be a radical reversal of what they called "the old inefficient methods of agitation" because there was no need for "undue timidity and moderation,"<sup>24</sup> but when the Congress accepted the 1920 reforms after a compromise negotiated between the Governor and the Congress leaders, the tensions between the two groups were aggravated. The League was in favor of Congress boycotting the 1920 reforms and adopting a policy of noncooperation, but Sir James Peiris, at the special Congress sessions in 1920, stated, "We do not recommend a policy of non-cooperation with the Government. . . . we would most unhesitatingly condemn such a proposal as contrary to the traditions of the people of this country . . . we should deprecate it, as it savours of obstruction to Government. . . . every step we take [should be] perfectly constitutional." On this same occasion, D. B. Jayatilaka spoke of the need for restraint and moderation, which provoked A. E. Goonesinha of the Young Lanka League to call out "cowardice."<sup>25</sup> Two years later, the Congress President, H. J. C. Pereira, declared, "We do not say Independence, we never claimed it . . . our aim is to become Britishers in the broad sense of the word," to which the infuriated Young Lanka members shouted "No, No."<sup>26</sup> The bitterness of the feeling against the moderates can be seen from some of the personal invective used in the *Young Lanka*, in which the Congress leaders were called "political scarecrows" and "miserable purse-proud poltroons" who were pawning the "sacred liberties of the land."<sup>27</sup> The *Young Lanka* group not only challenged the individual leaders of the Ceylon National Congress, but also attacked the very foundation of Congress policy which was based on a moderate approach to political agitation. But in spite of its vigorous political attitudes, the Young Lanka League never became a popular organization; it operated as a small pressure group of radicals and even by 1921 it

23. *Ibid.*, Sept. 1919.

24. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1919.

25. Banadaranaika, ed., *Handbook of the CNC*, pp. 230, 238.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

27. *Young Lanka*, 19 Feb. 1920.

had only 124 members.<sup>28</sup> The importance of this group should not be underestimated, however, for it produced the leadership of the first militant trade-union organization in Ceylon.

### A. E. Goonesinha and the New Unionism

In earlier chapters it was noted that those who were influenced by the Buddhist revival and had adopted a radical outlook on political questions were more willing to assume the leadership of a working-class movement than their moderate counterparts. By the end of the First World War this distinction between radicals and moderates became very marked in the political field, and by 1922, the foremost radical political group—the Young Lanka League—emerged as the champion of militant trade unionism. The chief personality of the new unionism was Alexander Ekanayaka Goonesinha (1891-1967), who came to the labor movement through his involvement in religious and political questions. The influences on his early years were the Buddhist education movement, the temperance and social service campaigns, and the crusade of Anagarika Dharmapala, as well as Western radical thought, and foreign nationalist and revolutionary movements. Goonesinha was educated at Dharmaraja College, Kandy, a Buddhist Theosophical school, where the combined influence of the Buddhist revival and foreign radicalism left their mark on him. Many of the leading Ceylonese Buddhists and foreign Theosophists used to visit the school and give talks to the students. Goonesinha was particularly impressed by the rousing patriotism of Dharmapala, who often spoke at the school, and specifically by the lecture given at Dharmaraja College in 1907 by Annie Besant extolling the virtues of the Buddhist religion and urging the students to be patriotic and to play their part in making Ceylon “a great land, and its people a great people once more.”<sup>29</sup> Even during his schooldays, Goonesinha possessed a reforming zeal and started a society to discourage schoolboys

28. Report on activities in 1921 by A. E. Goonesinha, *Ibid.*, 19 Feb. 1922.

29. Annie Besant, *Buddhist Popular Lectures*, p. 129. On the visit of Annie Besant, A. E. Goonesinha, in a personal communication of 11 Dec. 1961, wrote, “I accompanied the Principal to meet Mrs. Besant at Kadugannawa when she was coming to Kandy. She was a brilliant speaker and created a great impression.”

from smoking. Goonesinha came to Colombo in 1910, and was for a short time employed as a railway clerk; he later took to journalism, writing articles regularly for *The Searchlight*, a weekly journal in English which dealt with social and political issues.

Through the liberal education given in the Theosophist schools, Goonesinha also became interested in European politics and was a reader of radical British journals like W. T. Stead's *Review of Reviews*. Goonesinha has stated that while a teenager he was also influenced by "that stirring book," *The Rights of Man*, by Thomas Paine.<sup>30</sup> A revealing account of the books that absorbed his interest as a young man has been given by Goonesinha himself, who stated that they dealt mainly with the "struggles and the patriotic upsurge of men who fought valiantly for the emancipation of their countries." A book on the life of Sun Yat Sen was presented to him by Anagarika Dharmapala with the words, "This is the kind of work you should be engaged in." Goonesinha also read books on Joseph Mazzini, Garibaldi and the liberation of Italy, and accounts of the Irish freedom movement and its leaders. The latter included the life of the Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSweeney (who died after fasting for 72 days), a book of speeches by Irish leaders under sentence of death entitled *Speeches From the Dock*, and the life of Eammon de Valera, whose escape from the death cell was described by Goonesinha as "an inspiring episode in the course of the struggle for Irish independence."<sup>31</sup>

Like many of the educated young Ceylonese of the time, Goonesinha was attracted towards social service work. In 1911 he started the Dehiwela Young Men's Association, which met weekly to discuss literary and political subjects and also did social work, helping to relieve the distress caused by the severe floods in 1913, and collecting money for the Deaf and Blind School. In 1913 Goonesinha and several others who admired Gokhale and his Servants of India Society formed a Servants of Lanka Society. Its activities included the founding of the first night school for adults in Colombo and a campaign of social service among the slum dwellers of the city. One of the strongest influences on Goonesinha was the example of the agitation conducted by Anagarika Dharmapala. During the years

30. A. E. Goonesinha, article, *United National Party Journal*, 7 July 1961.

31. A. E. Goonesinha, "My Life & Labour," *Ceylon Observer*, 4 July 1965.

around 1912, Dharmapala was very active in the temperance movement and also devoted time to education, journalism, and his free ayurvedic clinic. The young Goonesinha frequently had discussions with Dharmapala and borrowed books from his library. Becoming absorbed in the current political agitation in Ceylon and influenced by Indian nationalism, Goonesinha began to interest himself in politics. Along with some Indians in Ceylon, he founded the Gandhi Sangham, an organization aimed at propagating the ideals of Gandhi. In 1914 he was elected Secretary of the Congress of Literary Associations, which was mainly concerned with political issues. As a result of his Buddhist background and interest in social and political questions, Goonesinha was an active participant in the temperance movement. He was a member of the main Buddhist temperance organization, the Total Abstinence Central Union, and throughout his career he always advocated temperance.<sup>32</sup>

At a time when the Ceylonese nationalist leaders were making moderate demands for reforms, politically-minded young men like Goonesinha, who were influenced by foreign nationalist movements and especially by the Indian "extremists," became frustrated with the slow pace of political agitation in Ceylon. During this period, Goonesinha emerged as one of the leaders of the younger generation who were dissatisfied with their leaders and with existing conditions of society. In an article in 1914, entitled "Dawn of a New Era," he declared: "There is a spirit of restlessness in the rising generation which shows without doubt that the people of this country are at last awakening to the fact that if Ceylon is to be well governed, the control of government must reside in the people themselves."<sup>33</sup>

Goonesinha was the most scathing critic of the leaders of the Ceylon National Congress, and his bitterness was probably aggravated by the fact that the wealthy moderates used to taunt Goonesinha about his humble social origins. "Toleration of everything is weakness" Goonesinha claimed in 1914 and added, "cowards are bad enough, traitors we must not endure. Today many men consider it an honour to desert the ranks if they might obtain a title

32. For details, see Bhikku D. Sri Dharmalankara, *Goonesinha Veeravaraya*.

33. *National Monthly of Ceylon*, Feb.-March 1914.



or a ribbon. When the public begin to look upon such men as mean and execrable few would covet their position.”<sup>34</sup> The year 1915 was an eventful one for Goonesinha. He was one of the founder-members of the new radical organization, the Young Lanka League, formed in March, 1915, and during the Buddhist-Muslim riots a few months later he was jailed. At the outbreak of the riots, the young radicals had come under suspicion and Goonesinha was subject to considerable harrassment by the authorities. His house was searched by the police, who confiscated his personal books and the minute book of the Young Lanka League. On June 20, 1915, Goonesinha was arrested after what he describes as “frantic efforts by the police” to implicate him in the rioting. He was charged before a court martial with conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline (by failing to render help to Captain E. W. Jayawardena), and with holding a secret meeting “between the hours of sunset and sunrise of 7 or more persons with a view to the carrying on of a society, nominally political, but in fact seditious.” Goonesinha’s fifty-two days in jail left him embittered and stronger in his opposition to British rule.<sup>35</sup>

Goonesinha was by far the most active and militant member of the Young Lanka League. He abused the Congress leaders in language to which they were unaccustomed, calling them cowards and traitors. It was Goonesinha, moreover, who directed the activities of the Young Lanka members towards making the League the only body which showed real concern over working-class wages and conditions, and drew attention to official apathy on these questions. Under Goonesinha’s inspiration, the journal of the League often carried accounts of the hardships faced by urban workers. “Our artisans [are] ill paid and denied work, our countrymen in government employ given only a pittance in response to their legitimate demand for increments . . . and the hapless lower classes [are] dying by the dozens through dire need and starvation,” wrote the *Young Lanka* in 1920.<sup>36</sup> In many instances the Young Lanka League used political questions to highlight the economic and social conditions

34. Ibid.

35. A. E. Goonesinha, “My Life & Labour,” *Ceylon Observer*, 4 July 1965.

36. *Young Lanka*, Jan. 1920. Such unsigned articles were probably written by Goonesinha.

of the workers. For example, the visit to Ceylon of the Prince of Wales was bitterly denounced in the *Young Lanka*:

The unfortunate people of this country have to pay an enormous bill for all these functions. Is the Prince being sent here to increase or decrease the miseries of the people of this country? The permanent population of the country is dying through lack of proper nutrition. If the money that is being so lightly voted away in connection with the Prince's visit were to be spent on food for the children of the poor, what a saving of infant lives there would be.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most spectacular public actions of the Young Lanka League which brought the members of the League into direct contact with the poor of Colombo was the political issue of the anti-poll-tax campaign. By an ordinance of 1891, all adult males who did not pay a poll tax of Rs.2. a year had to work on the roads for six days. Inspired by Gandhi's civil disobedience movement, the League started a campaign against the payment of this tax. Of the League members, A. E. Goonesinha led the work on the roads in Colombo, and Victor Corea went to jail after refusing either to pay the tax or to work on the roads. This movement was hailed as a successful attempt at nonviolent resistance. At a big demonstration held to mark the completion of six days' stone breaking on the roads, Goonesinha declared that "the real people" of the country were the workers. "It is nothing but right that they should be astir and not allow matters to be managed by denationalized and ambitious scoundrels . . . . This campaign marks a new era, for the masses have embarked on the road of political endeavour."<sup>38</sup> The anti-poll-tax campaign, held annually until the tax was abolished, was a popular success and attracted much attention among the masses of Colombo, who for the first time were to witness the spectacle of English-educated "gentlemen" in Western dress joining the workers in manual labor on the roads. It was during this campaign that Goonesinha learned the grievances of the works at first hand:

In the course of [road] work during four years, I came in close contact with the labouring classes. A labourer working in the harbour from 6.00 A.M. to 6.00 P.M. received only one rupee per day and the conditions

37. *Ibid.*, 26 March 1922.

38. *Ibid.*, 7 May 1922.

prevailing in various other firms were equally bad. I then resolved to do something to improve the conditions of the working-class.<sup>39</sup>

Because of his awakened interest in working-class conditions, Goonesinha joined the Ceylon Workers' Federation. He soon became disillusioned, however, by the policy of that organization, which advocated restraint and obedience to the law and proved itself unwilling to give militant leadership to the workers. Goonesinha recalled how he attended a Federation meeting held at the house of one of the office-bearers:

The trousered lot were seated in chairs and all the workmen were standing in the garden. I was indignant that such snobbery could prevail in an institution that was supposed to help the workers. That was the last meeting I attended and I made up my mind to organise a separate Union on thoroughly democratic lines.<sup>40</sup>

Goonesinha alleged that the officials of the Ceylon Workers' Federation, who were the moderate politicians of the Ceylon National Congress, were betraying the workers in the same way that they were betraying the political movement. "There is a class of men who, calling themselves leaders, want you to follow like dumb driven cattle . . . they are at the head of every organization and they want to rule you with an iron hand."<sup>41</sup> Goonesinha described the Workers' Federation as a hollow mockery and said that it had contributed more to the demoralization of the workman than to his uplift; he accused its leaders of "effeminacy and inaction" and of fostering a "slave mentality." As an example, he cited the case of railway workers who had been exiled in 1915 and claimed that the Federation, instead of getting Sir James Peiris to make representations in the Council on this issue, should have called a strike.<sup>42</sup>

The turning point came on September 10, 1922, when the active elements of the Young Lanka League inaugurated the Ceylon Labour Union with Victor Corea as President and A. E. Goonesinha as Vice-President. The new union was the outcome of Goonesinha's determination to form a separate workers' organization which

39. Goonesinha, "My Life & Labour," *Ceylon Observer*, 25 July 1965.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Young Lanka*, 17 Sept. 1922.

42. Article on strikes by A. E. Goonesinha, *Ibid.*, 20 Aug. 1922.

would break away from the paternalistic approach to labor. The first meeting of the Ceylon Labour Union was presided over by E. R. Tambimuttu, a member of the Legislative Council who had shown some interest in labor matters. At this meeting Tambimuttu extolled the virtues of self-help, and condemned the resort to strikes, but Goonesinha did not mince his words, describing the hardships suffered by workers who could be "turned out from their posts at the sweet will and pleasure of the employer," and vigorously attacking the Ceylon Workers' Federation for having done nothing for the workers.<sup>43</sup>

The formation of the Ceylon Labour Union did not cause alarm among the employers, and Tambimuttu's condemnation of strikes was approved by the press. The *Ceylon Independent* supported the union and said that in its efforts towards the improvement of labor conditions, it would "have the cordial support of all right thinking men, be they employers or workers."<sup>44</sup> The *Young Lanka*, however, visualized the new union as a fighting organization truly representative of the workers, in contrast to the Ceylon Workers' Federation "guided and controlled by a capitalist clique" dispensing patronage:

Let us dismiss cant and humbug and seriously ask the question, what will help the labourer to free himself from the misery and wretchedness enveloping him today? . . . Are [the workers] to sit with folded arms counting upon the benevolence of the government? Are they to go from house to house begging the patronage of the 'leaders'? Where has mendicancy ever wrought out the freedom of the people? When has cowardice elevated man? The Ceylon Labour Union must learn by the mistakes of the Federation that vacillation and imbecility have rendered that body useless.<sup>45</sup>

The attacks by the radicals on "moderation" and "cowardice" in both trade-union policy and politics achieved spectacular results soon after the formation of the Ceylon Labour Union. In the first few months of its existence the union had less than 100 members, but by the beginning of 1923 it had taken over effective command of the Colombo workers, a position it was able to retain for a decade under A. E. Goonesinha's leadership.

43. *Ibid.*, 17 Sept. 1922.

44. *Ceylon Independent*, 11 Sept. 1922.

45. *Young Lanka*, 24 Sept. 1922.

## The General Strike of 1923

The most important aspect of the general strike that swept the city of Colombo in February and March, 1923, only five months after the formation of the Ceylon Labour Union, was the emergence of a new type of militant trade unionism under the leadership of a radical political personality. The economic and political discontent of the postwar years form the background to the general strike, which was the biggest labor upheaval to that date. The period was one of rising living costs, wage stagnation, and an increasing willingness of the urban workers to resort to direct action. Politically these were the years during which both the radicals and moderates had been disillusioned by the constitutional reforms granted in 1920, and though a compromise solution was attempted by the moderates, the mood was one of bitter frustration against the government. Any opportunity to embarrass the authorities was eagerly seized upon, and one such occasion arose over the issue of the Salaries Commission in 1922.

There had been discontent among all sections of the working population after the World War because the sharp rise in the cost of living had not been accompanied by wage increases. The pinch was felt not only by the lower paid workers but also by British officials in the colony. In 1922, the British police sergeants in Ceylon made their claims in such a forceful manner that a rapid adjustment in their pay had to be made before the visit of the Prince of Wales to Ceylon. A Salaries Commission, composed of Sir Alexander Wood-Renton and Dr. H. M. Fernando, was appointed in 1922 to consider government servants' pay, but its recommendations, like the Salaries Schemes of 1905 and 1912, caused a storm of protest among the Ceylonese on the ground of unfair discrimination between the awards made to British and Ceylonese government servants. The finance committee of the Legislative Council, which had an unofficial majority, adopted by seventeen votes to eight certain amendments (including a housing and rent scheme) which favored the Ceylonese. The Legislative Council passed the Salaries Scheme and rejected the finance committee's report by a majority of one, rely-

ing on the votes of the official members in the Council. This led to a walkout from the Council of 14 elected members, who cabled the Secretary of State for the Colonies protesting against the Salaries Scheme and the use of officials' votes. The Colonial Office, however, supported the Governor on this issue. One civil servant in London termed the episode an "anti-European attempt to embarrass and impede British rule in Ceylon," and another blamed it on "the very active press agitation that has been carried on for some time and which is largely anti-European in its intention and [is] ill-tempered and ill-informed in attacks on Europeans generally."<sup>46</sup>

During this crisis the radicals led the popular agitation against the Salaries Scheme, which by then had become a political issue between the government and the Ceylonese. A. F. Goonesinha organized a mass signature campaign in support of the elected members' walkout. The dissatisfaction over the Salaries Scheme was not limited to the middle class, but in turn spread to the daily-paid workers in all government departments, for whom the Scheme had provided no relief. A government officer in August, 1922, referred to "the general feeling of unrest" among daily-paid labor in most government departments, and the Harbour Engineer stated in 1923 that concessions such as better pay, leave, and free railway passes that had been obtained under the Salaries Scheme by monthly- and daily-paid clerical workers had resulted in other daily-paid workers being incited by politicians to strike.<sup>47</sup>

The general strike was sparked off by the militant railway locomotive workers, who had developed a tradition of protest which included the resort to strike action. The locomotive workshops—where the workers were skilled, literate, politically conscious, and vociferous in airing their demands—had been the scene of serious labor trouble in 1912, 1915, and 1920. In the years after 1920 there was continuous agitation among these workers and numerous petitions were sent to the railway authorities listing the workers' grievances. There was also dissatisfaction on the question of leave of absence. Previously the workers had obtained the right of 14 days' leave a year with pay on the production of a medical certificate. In

46. PRO, Salaries Scheme, C.O.54/854, No.49005.

47. General Manager of Railways (GMR), letter of Prisons Officer to G.M.R. 19 Aug. 1922, File No.S.22251. Also, Ceylon Labour Department, Labour Advisory Committee letter of 20 Sept. 1923, File No.16.

1921 this was rescinded, and a rule introduced whereby a worker who was absent for more than seven days without leave would forfeit his right to an increase in pay.

On February 15, 1923, 1,730 workers of the Railway Locomotive Department struck work and went in a body to the office of the Works Manager to state their grievances. The immediate cause of the strike was a notice posted that any worker absent for even part of the day without leave would have to report to the Works Manager or the foreman, who had the power to punish or even dismiss the worker. After the strike, the Works Manager called for two spokesmen, but the workers refused to comply for fear that these men would be marked as ringleaders. The strikers next approached the General Manager of Railways, G. P. Greene, who promised to see them on his return from lunch. According to the Inspector-General of Police's version of events, "Mr. Goonesinha who happened to be passing at the time, seeing his opportunity as Vice-President of the Labour Union, stepped in and took charge of the men. When Mr. Greene came back he found Goonesinha waiting as the men's representative."<sup>48</sup> A. E. Goonesinha took the workers' case to the General Manager, who promised to give the matter "due consideration" and asked that the strikers return to work. It was at this point that Goonesinha, unlike the moderate leaders of previous years who had always advocated conciliation, showed his flair for militant popular leadership, thereby gaining the confidence of the workers as no leader had done before. He urged the railwaymen not to return to work and said he would rather go to jail than return to work under existing circumstances.

Under the leadership of Goonesinha, the Ceylon Labour Union urged other government daily-paid workers to come out on strike. The response was immediate and there were strikes among 1,500 workers in other railway departments, 700 workers from the Government Factory, and 1,200 skilled and unskilled workers in the Harbour Engineering Department who demanded arrears of wages under the Salaries Scheme, 14 days' full pay leave, free railway passes, and extra allowances similar to those of government servants. On February 20 Goonesinha went to Nuwara Eliya to discuss the strike with the Colonial Secretary, Sir Cecil Clementi, and on his

48. GMR, Report of I.G.P., 29 March 1923, File S.22251.

return the next day he was greeted by several thousand strikers at the railway station. Goonesinha claimed that the Colonial Secretary was willing to do all he could to alleviate the sufferings of the workers and had fixed a further interview with Goonesinha. The strike was therefore called off. But on the 24th, the Colonial Secretary cancelled the interview on the grounds that Goonesinha had made serious misrepresentations. The result of this rebuff was a mass meeting of workers at which Goonesinha alleged that the action of the Colonial Secretary had been due to the intervention of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. "Will you listen to the Commanders, J.P.'s, C.M.G.'s and Knights or be loyal to your Union?" he asked the workers. The reply was unanimous and the strike was renewed and developed into a general strike.<sup>49</sup>

All the government daily-paid workers who had struck before came out again, and the strike spread rapidly to all the leading firms in the private sector. This unparalleled outburst of industrial unrest reflected the pentup demands of the workers in Colombo, who had nursed their grievances for many years. Work on the railways and at the port ceased; all the workers at the leading engineering firms (Walkers, Browns, Hoares, Colombo Commercial Co., and others) struck work, along with 1,500 workers at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills and other private firms (Hayley & Kenney, Harrisons, Liptons, Mackies, etc.). Many workers at other concerns also came out, including bakery workers, hotel staff, workers at the municipal stores and the government lake development scheme. At the height of the unrest, on March 16, the police estimated that over 20,000 workers were on strike.<sup>50</sup>

The government and the employers made no effort to reach a settlement with the Labour Union. The Colonial Secretary stated that "the policy of making no promises during the strike, and of leaving the works open to encourage men to return to work was the wisest course which could have been adopted by employers."<sup>51</sup> A show of force was carried out by the British Navy, which marched through Colombo, and, according to Goonesinha, the employers spent large sums of money bribing workmen to return to work and

49. For details, see *Ceylon Daily News*, *Times of Ceylon*, *Ceylon Observer*, Feb.-March 1923.

50. See CNA, File 4200/23, for details.

51. *Ibid.*, letter of Colonial Secretary, 1 April 1923.



bringing "blacklegs" into Colombo to fill the places of the strikers. Goonesinha also alleged that a leading Sinhalese newspaper had published false reports that the strikers were going back to work. The strike lasted a month, but the Labour Union was not in a position to hold out financially despite the daily collections of money it made and its distribution of food to the strikers. A slow drift back to work began—by March 17 there were 13,000 on strike; by the 23rd the number had fallen to 3,000.<sup>52</sup> Faced with defeat, Goonesinha issued a circular on March 23 stating that since an undertaking had been given by the Governor to Legislative Councillor E. R. Tambimuttu that the workers' grievances would be enquired into, all factory, harbor, engineering men and others employed in government workshops should resume work. There was an unconditional return to work but 700 workers were dismissed as a result of the strike.

### Political Importance of the General Strike

The general strike of 1923—exactly thirty years after the printers' strike—was an indication of the growth of the urban working class, its increasing maturity, and its willingness to resort to widespread militant action. The new union, under the leadership of a radical like A. E. Goonesinha, enabled the Colombo working class to forcefully assert itself as a class for the first time by making a spectacular show of strength and bringing the economic life of Colombo to a standstill. The postwar discontent among the workers culminating in the general strike also reflected the political unrest in the country. In this connection it is interesting to note that the Chairman of the Port Commission also blamed foreign influences:

The strike seems to have been due entirely to the influence of an agitator and 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; I have no doubt that the present labour unrest is merely a reflex action resulting from agitation which has prevailed of late in this Island *and is due to the influence of ideas which have found their way into Ceylon from other countries.*<sup>53</sup>

52. *Ibid.*, File 4200/23.

53. Ceylon Labour Department (CLD), File No.16/L.A.C., emphasis added.

The strength of the new union was derived from political factors. It presented a challenge not merely to individual employers but to the political and social stability of the country. The new labor leader directed his attacks against British rule in general and in particular against the local authorities, including the police, the Ceylonese moderate politicians, and the leaders of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. The fact that Goonesinha was championing the workers, and denouncing the government and the Ceylonese "privileged classes," met with an immediate response from the workers, and Goonesinha's gift for powerful invective made him a popular hero.

As the leading employers in Colombo and the heads of various government departments, including the senior police officials, were British, Goonesinha used the occasion of the strike for anti-British propaganda. He attacked the railway officials, and described the claim of the Works Manager that the daily workers had no grievances, as an "impertinence" and an "audacious falsehood."<sup>54</sup> He alleged that the wages of the workers were "far below the monies expended by heads of Departments on their horses and dogs,"<sup>55</sup> and in tones reminiscent of Anagarika Dharmapala, he made derogatory references to "whites" who "eat the flesh of animals and drink brandy." Goonesinha was also in continuous conflict with the police, who kept a detailed record of his speeches and rather conspicuously followed all his movements during the strike. Goonesinha denounced the Inspector-General of Police and called the constables of the Criminal Investigation Department "low, mean, perfidious outcastes" who were following him "like dogs."<sup>56</sup>

It was during the general strike of 1923 that the split between moderate and radical elements of the middle class became very evident. Whereas on political issues both sections were anti-imperialist in varying degrees, on the issue of working-class agitation the rift was more acute, the moderates coming out openly against strikes and the radicals championing militant action. The moderate politicians of the Ceylon National Congress, who had refused to support the strike, were targets of Goonesinha's attacks. He accused the Legislative Council, in which there was a majority of Ceylonese—many of them Congress members—of having callously ignored the

54. *Young Lanka*, 25 March 1923.

55. *Ibid.*, 18 March 1923.

56. CNA, Police Report, 7 March 1923, File 4200/23.

grievances of the workers, and also alleged that the President of the National Congress, H. J. C. Pereira, had neither contributed to the strike fund nor "said a word against the tyranny of the Government that for nine years [had] not raised the wages of workmen"; Goonesinha added that instead of supporting the fight of the workers, "the so-called leaders of the country [were] leaving no stone unturned to make the workman a slave and kill that spirit that [was] asserting itself in him."<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to the moderates, the radicals supported the strike. Goonesinha was helped by the nationalists of the Young Lanka League, by several Buddhist monks who addressed the strikers' meetings, and also by Anagarika Dharmapala. Dharmapala, who regarded strikes by Ceylonese workers as a manifestation of the "national spirit," encouraged Goonesinha by contributing to the strike fund. Another militant nationalist, C. E. Corea, congratulated Goonesinha for having effectively demonstrated how a nonviolent campaign of noncooperation against the authorities could be carried out in Ceylon. An attack on Goonesinha by the *Times of Ceylon* and a denunciation of the Labour Union by M. J. Cary of the Chamber of Commerce, who called the union "an organization of mushroom growth . . . risen up to take advantage of the situation," led to a sharp retort from Victor Corea, who wrote to the *Times*, "If the natives of Europe in our Island do nothing to clear themselves of the charge of being anti-Ceylonese, I shall take pride in being anti-European . . . Asia being still under the heel of Europeans I suppose it would be absurd for me to expect either you or Mr. Cary to exercise the 'privilege of gentlemen' and apologise for this libel." To the charge by the *Times* that Goonesinha was interfering between employer and employee, Corea replied "you might as well ask an advocate what business it is of his to interfere between complainant and accused."<sup>58</sup>

Another important aspect of the strike was Goonesinha's encouragement of militant action by the strikers and his awareness of the political potential of the working class. This led to his advocacy of a system of government based on universal suffrage—an issue that was to become one of the key questions of the 1920's. During the course

57. *Young Lanka*, 6 May 1923.

58. See *Times of Ceylon*, 24, 26 Feb. 1923.

of the strike several workers had attracted police attention by leading processions, speaking at mass meetings, and urging the Colombo workers to defy the authorities. Among these working-class leaders reputed for toughness were "Hamban" William of the railways, who was the chief spokesman of the 1923 strikers and a veteran of earlier strikes. The others were "Yakka" John, another bold leader of the railway workers; Albert Silva, a seaman who had served in the in the World War and had participated in a strike in Britain; Kandasamy of the Spinning and Weaving Mills; and Podisingho of the Government Factory. Writing during the strike, Goonesinha commented on this new spirit among the workers:

The wondrous manner in which the great masses of our artisan class have emerged from their age long lethargy to vindicate their rights has been a matter of much comment. Never before in the history of the Island has the mass mind displayed such capabilities, as it manifests today. . . . The spirit of sacrifice that was lacking in the so-called educated man . . . who talks of patriotism and nationalism is marvellously portrayed by the ordinary man today.<sup>59</sup>

Goonesinha claimed that the 1923 strike proved "the remarkable aptitude of the workman to suffer and undergo all miseries for a common cause." Declaring that he had failed to find any true patriots among the "English-educated trousered young men, doctors and lawyers and Congress wallahs who have studied Greek and Latin . . . and know so much about the French Revolution and the War of Independence," Goonesinha said that in contrast the "truly great men" were to be found among the unsophisticated workers. The experience of the 1923 strike not only convinced Goonesinha that "the political salvation of the country would come through the sincere efforts of our masses," but it also encouraged him to become the first full-time trade-union leader in Ceylon.<sup>60</sup>

### The Recognition of Trade Unionism

The general strike of 1923 marked the dividing line between the liberal, humanitarian approach to labor problems based on patron-

59. *Young Lanka*, 18 March 1923.

60. *Ibid.*, 1 April 1923.

age, and the new era of aggressive trade unionism founded on radical politics and nationalism. The decline in influence of the Ceylon Workers' Federation and the meteoric rise of the Ceylon Labour Union posed the important issue of the recognition of the new union. In previous years the Ceylon Workers' Federation had been denounced by the government, but after the general strike of 1923, and with the appearance on the scene of a militant and potentially more dangerous workers' union, the attitude of the authorities underwent a hasty change. The same leaders of the Ceylon Workers' Federation whom the Governor had condemned as "political orators and agitators" in 1920 were referred to by the Inspector-General of Police in 1923 as "intelligent men of standing, level headed men working with the idea of securing rights constitutionally on behalf of their workers."<sup>61</sup> This change of opinion was no doubt prompted by the hope that by encouraging the moderate organization, the strength and effectiveness of the Ceylon Labour Union would be reduced. But the events of the general strike showed that the Ceylon Workers' Federation had lost its support among the working class. During the strike, the Workers' Federation organized a meeting at the Tower Hall at which the strike was condemned as being unconstitutional and hasty; Goonesinha, who was present on this occasion, challenged the speakers and walked out taking the majority of the audience with him. A spokesman of the Federation claimed that no responsible person connected with the organization was in sympathy with the strike and added significantly that "no complaints were brought by the workers to the Federation."<sup>62</sup> The *Times of Ceylon* corroborated this by stating that most of the men hitherto regarded as labor leaders had been "completely ignored on the present occasion."<sup>63</sup>

The change in official attitude towards the Workers' Federation can be seen from the unusual cooperation that was forthcoming between civil servants at the Colonial Office in London and the leaders of the Federation, two of whom, D. B. Jayatilaka and James Peiris, were in England when the strike began. On hearing of the strike in Ceylon, they promptly made several visits to the Colonial Office, denied all responsibility for the strike, and claimed that it had been

61. CNA, Confidential File 4943/23.

62. *Times of Ceylon*, 19 Feb. 1923.

63. *Ibid.*, 20 Feb. 1923.

engineered by an irresponsible agitator. On this occasion a civil servant in London made the following minute:

Mr. Peiris and Mr. Jayatilaka . . . are not at all pleased by the intervention of this new body, the Ceylon Labour Union, and look with some apprehension on the extension of its activities to the incitement of lightning strikes among the workers of private firms. They agreed generally that the government had acted in a proper manner in regard to the strikes.<sup>64</sup>

The authorities had been caught unawares by the general strike of 1923 and there was no clear policy on how to tackle the situation. Railway officials and civil servants acted independently and without coordinating or discussing their line of action with other government officials. The result was that there was serious disagreement among senior government officials on the question of the recognition of the new union and its leaders. In this connection the Colonial Secretary, Sir Cecil Clementi, and the General Manager of Railways, G. P. Greene, were severely criticized for acting in a manner which might have indicated that recognition had been given to the new union. The discussion in Nuwara Eliya between the Colonial Secretary and A. E. Goonesinha, and Goonesinha's statement in the press that the Colonial Secretary had not only promised to consider the workers' grievances but had also granted a further interview to the labor leader, caused considerable consternation among officials. The Principal Collector of Customs, F. Bowes, consulted Governor Manning and then phoned the Colonial Secretary, who said, "Tell them it is a damned lie." Writing about this incident, Bowes, in his memoirs, comments frankly on the Colonial Secretary: "The man was clearly 'inexperienced.' To have a private conversation with an unknown agitator—to have no one present—and then to think that he merely had to contradict the account given by the other party proved him to be as devoid of practical sense as he was intellectually eminent." Bowes also had harsh words for Greene, whom he called "a charming Irishman with a talent for doing the wrong thing." Greene was admonished for consenting to have a full discussion with Goonesinha, who was described by Bowes as an "irresponsible agitator and a clever scoundrel—glib of tongue and pen—with nothing to lose and everything to gain by embittering the

64. PRO, Minute of H. A. Cowell, C.O.54/859, No.17703.

dispute.”<sup>65</sup> The police, too, were annoyed that Greene had not resorted to the simple expedient of checking on Goonesinha’s police record before negotiating with him as the workers’ representative. An Inspector of the C. I. D. wrote, “It is regrettable that Goonesinha should have been in any way accepted as the representative of the workmen . . . [he is] a man with a thoroughly bad record which could very easily have been obtained from this office.”<sup>66</sup> The authorities made it clear that recognition of A. E. Goonesinha was impossible because he was a politically dangerous agitator. The Inspector-General of Police described the new labor leader as a “thorough bad character who came into prominence in the Riots of 1915, and [had] been an agitator ever since of a particularly mean and low kind.” Goonesinha was further accused by the police of “attempting to rouse all labour with the object of being a second Gandhi among the local labourers.” The police noted that while the strike was in progress Goonesinha and his supporters had stated that swaraj should be Ceylon’s goal and had praised Gandhi, Tilak, and Sarojini Naidoo. The police also reported that Goonesinha had been influenced by “methods of non-co-operation and strike agitations” which he had read about, and by the “type of talk which strike leaders use in addressing their followers.”<sup>67</sup>

Attempts were also made to show that Goonesinha did not deserve recognition as he was a person of no significance who was trying to cash in on labor trouble in order to gain cheap notoriety. The press led this campaign; the *Times* called him a “busy body interfering in matters which did not concern him,”<sup>68</sup> and the *Ceylon Independent* described the Ceylon Labour Union leaders as an “aggregation of irresponsible non-descripts . . . cunningly contriving to keep in domination a large number of honest but simple men.”<sup>69</sup> The police, in one of their numerous reports on the new union and its leader, portrayed Goonesinha as a “man of no means, of no profession, of no permanent occupation, who lived on his wits and did not mind particularly how he did so,” and remarked that the greater the number of strikes, the greater the new labor leader’s

65. “Bows and Arrows.” Typescript memoirs of F. Bowes, in Rhodes House Library, Oxford. I am grateful to Dr. Michael W. Roberts for the extracts quoted.

66. CNA, Police Report, File 4200/23.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Editorial, *Times of Ceylon*, 24 Feb. 1923.

69. *Ceylon Independent*, 20 Feb. 1923.

notoriety.<sup>70</sup> Governor Manning agreed with this biased impression of Goonesinha which the police had succeeded in creating, and in a confidential despatch to the Secretary of State of the Colonies, said, "[Goonesinha's] action in this matter has apparently been taken with no sincere motives, but for his own self-glorification, and possibly with a view to his own pecuniary benefit. Mr. Goonesinha himself is a man of straw, but has at the moment considerable influence with the uneducated workmen and coolies."<sup>71</sup>

The critics of Goonesinha were always eager to imply that he had no concern for the welfare of the workers and that he was using labor agitation as a means of making money. This accusation, first made in 1923, was used as a method of discrediting Goonesinha for as long as he remained the key figure in the labor movement. In 1923, the police alleged that the workers had to pay Goonesinha 50 cents each as entrance fee to the Labour Union and 10 cents a month as subscription, adding that to "Goonesinha in financial straits, the strike was a godsend." The Inspector-General of Police also claimed that Goonesinha's motive in leading the strikers was "to make money out of unfortunate workmen who did not have the sense to realise that they were being led by a scoundrel," and he prophesied that "sooner or later this individual [would] get himself into serious trouble."<sup>72</sup>

### The Issue of Communism

During the general strike of 1923, the authorities became concerned for the first time with the possibility of communism getting a foothold in Ceylon. The fear was heightened by the support that was given by Moscow to Asian nationalist and revolutionary movements. Soon after the revolution, Lenin had placed emphasis on the importance of the revolutionary struggle in Asia, and many Asian nationalists visited Moscow, thereby giving the colonial governments and the police a new source of alarm. Two Asians were elected to the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Sen Katayama of Japan in 1921, and M. N. Roy of India in 1922.

70. CNA, Report of the I.G.P., 21 March 1923, File 4200/23.

71. PRO, Confidential letter of 20 March 1923, C.O.54/859, No.11703.

72. CNA, Report of 16 Feb. 1923, File 4200/23.



Roy, who was the leading Indian Communist of the time, published revolutionary papers and pamphlets from abroad and kept in touch with Indian Communists, who had begun to organize themselves from 1921 onwards.

Between 1921 and 1923 there was great unrest in India. The authorities had to deal not only with the mass civil disobedience movement led by Gandhi, but also with the sudden upsurge of industrial unrest and the growing influence of the Indian Communists in the nationalist and the trade-union movements. The All-India Trades Union Congress had been formed in 1920 with nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai, a friend of M. N. Roy, as the President. In 1921 there was unprecedented labor unrest in India, with strikes involving over 600,000 workers. In that year the Red International of Labour Unions sent greetings to the Indian Trades Union Congress, which in turn passed a resolution "calling upon the workers of the world to help Russia in her struggle for peace."<sup>73</sup> The attempts by Communists to influence nationalists and trade-union leaders made the British government keen on curbing Communist influence in India. The activities of the Indian Communists together with the widespread industrial unrest in that country made the Ceylon officials feel that Goonesinha might also cause political and industrial turmoil in Ceylon. The Ceylon police were particularly vigilant in keeping an eye on the movements of persons they regarded as politically dangerous, because at this time Colombo was used as a convenient escape route for Indian Communists travelling abroad, and as a port from which Communist literature could be smuggled into India. In 1922, D. M. Manilal, an Indian Communist who had previously tried to organize Indian labor in Fiji, came to Ceylon, but was deported soon after.<sup>74</sup> A strict censorship was imposed on "subversive" literature coming from abroad, which had the effective result of preventing the spread of Communist ideas. Goonesinha was closely watched by the police, and his mail from abroad was censored as it included "Bolshevik literature" from India and Europe.<sup>75</sup>

As Goonesinha's activities raised the question of the influence of communism, Governor Manning, in a confidential note to the

73. See S. D. Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India*, p. 91.

74. See below, pp. 339-40.

75. CNA, Minute of I.G.P. 19 Feb. 1923, File 4200/23.

Inspector-General of Police, asked if there was any connection between the strikes in Ceylon and "Communist propaganda in the Straits Settlements and Malaya."<sup>76</sup> A well-known Ceylonese employer, H. L. de Mel, also sent a letter to the government commenting on the lack of sympathy between workers and officials in government departments, resulting in "Bolshevik ideas . . . being put into the minds of the workers."<sup>77</sup> In reply to these fears, the Inspector-General of Police, while admitting that at one of Goonesinha's meetings "the spirit of Bolshevism" had been demonstrated, held that there was no deep organization behind the general strike. Communist ideas, he said, were distasteful to the Ceylonese as "they like making money and buying land and value the possession of land and houses more than anything else. The idea of everything being state-owned would not appeal to the majority at all."<sup>78</sup>

In these years, Goonesinha was basically an anti-imperialist who had been deeply influenced by the Indian nationalist movement. He was able to closely follow developments in India through the press, and he was in contact with all the Indian nationalists who visited Ceylon. But whereas Goonesinha had welcomed the end of Czarism and had expressed great admiration for Lenin, the rigid policy of the immigration and postal authorities prevented Goonesinha from having any contact with foreign Communists or having access to Marxist literature. There was no socialist ideology behind Goonesinha's activities. He was essentially an aggressive nationalist and reformer, a critic of society rather than a revolutionary. In the early 1920's he represented the most radical section of the Ceylon middle class, leading the anti-British agitation for political change and championing the democratic demands for trade-union rights, universal suffrage, and welfare measures. Although Goonesinha never spoke of revolution or Socialism and continued to proclaim himself a Buddhist teetotaler and a believer in nonviolence, he was a fighter against oppression, a determined opponent of the privileged classes and their moderate politics, and a dynamic man of action who gave the urban working class the militant leadership they were looking for.

76. *Ibid.*, Minute of 18 Feb. 1923, File 4200/23.

77. *Ibid.*, Memorandum of H. L. de Mel, Confidential File 4943/23.

78. *Ibid.*, Minute of 19 Feb. 1923, File 4200/23.

## Chapter 10

# Labor and Politics, 1923-1929

*Labour may rest assured that its interests are being carefully watched by this Congress and by Congressmen in the [Legislative] Council.*<sup>1</sup>

E. W. Perera, President of the Ceylon  
National Congress, 1926-1927

*The franchise qualifications have been so framed as to deny it to the working-class of this Island. . . . No wonder nothing of a positive nature has been done by the legislature to safeguard [the workers'] interests. The Ceylon Labour Union . . . insists upon universal adult franchise . . . without any discrimination because of sex, race, religion or caste.*<sup>2</sup>

A. E. Goonesinha, 1927

The years between 1923 and 1929 form a period of economic boom and political change. The Ceylonese middle class which benefited from the economic prosperity of this period furthered its claims for self-government. The working class, which made use of the opportunity to improve its economic position through trade-union activity, also began to assert itself as a political force. It was a period during which politics predominated and it was no longer necessary to disguise political activity behind a religious facade. The religious fervor of an earlier epoch had subsided; the temperance movement had petered out, anti-Christian propaganda lost its initial momentum, and the leading Buddhist crusader, Anagarika Dharmapala, lived mainly abroad. However, the link between

1. Bandaranaike, ed., *Handbook of the CNC*, p. 768.

2. The Special Commission on the Constitution of Ceylon 1927, "Memorandum of the Ceylon Labour Union," in "Written Representations, Vol. IV." Available in the Commonwealth Relations Office.

religion, politics, and labor unrest in the 1920's was maintained by A. E. Goonesinha, who remained a strong supporter of temperance and other Buddhist causes.

But it was in political activity that A. E. Goonesinha made his mark and became the leader of the radicals. After 1923 there was further aggravation of the differences between the moderates and the radicals which had repercussions on both the political and the labor movements. But what did the term "radical" mean in the context of the 1920's? Politically it reflected a stronger nationalism than that professed by the moderates, and economically it implied a certain concern for the needs of the peasantry and urban workers. But there was no ideological basis behind the radicals. Although they were neither committed to socialism nor attracted by Marxism, they formed the "left wing" of the Ceylonese middle class because they were willing to take the agitation for liberal democratic rights a step further to include certain basic political and economic rights for the working class.

One characteristic of the radicals of this period was their great disillusionment with the moderate policies of the Ceylon National Congress. Some radicals rallied around S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who had returned from Oxford in 1925. A Progressive Nationalist Party with Bandaranaike as its President was formed in 1926, and was supported by many of the young nationalists because it advocated full self-government. The new party aimed at fostering "a spirit of true nationalism" and widening the scope of political agitation which had "hitherto been the monopoly of a few."<sup>3</sup> But this attempt to unite the radical forces failed; Bandaranaike continued his political career in the Ceylon National Congress, and contested and defeated A. E. Goonesinha in the Colombo Municipal elections in 1927. Another group of young rebels, mainly law students and supporters of Goonesinha who called themselves the "Cosmopolitan Crew," were involved in a protest against the collections made annually on November 11 (Poppy Day) for soldiers who had fought in the First World War. The dispute began when A. W. H. Abeyesundera wrote to a newspaper in 1926 complaining that although a poor country like Ceylon was sending out large sums of

3. *Ceylon Independent*, 6 Sept. 1926.

money in the form of Poppy Day proceeds, only an insignificant portion of the money went to Ceylonese ex-servicemen. At a meeting held to condemn the use of "the influence and authority" of government servants in collecting these funds, the main speakers were James Rutnam, Valentine Perera, and P. Givendrasinghe, all associates of A. E. Goonesinha. On Poppy Day 1926, the "Cosmopolitan Crew" put up posters and distributed hand bills saying "Let us not help the Poppy Day funds; Ceylon's needs are greater. Charity begins at home."<sup>4</sup> But these attempts at "rebellion" were isolated protests. The main hope of the radicals lay in A. E. Goonesinha's labor organization, which had a mass base in Colombo.

Those radicals who had led the 1923 general strike believed that independent political activity was a necessary supplement to labor agitation if the goals of the labor movement were to be achieved. The Ceylon Labour Union therefore attempted to consolidate its position as the dominant influence over urban labor, while at the same time it felt strong enough to dissociate itself from the politics of the moderates and branch out to form a separate political movement. Although in the years following the 1923 general strike the Labour Union became both the leading trade union in the country and the most radical force in Ceylon politics, the organization of the Union was rudimentary. The members belonged to the one central union in Colombo or to a few allied unions, such as the Ceylon Chauffeurs' Union, the Ceylon Printers' Union, the Hotel and Domestic Workers' Union, and the Ceylon Mercantile Union. Branch associations of the Labour Union were formed by George E. de Silva in Kandy, by S. H. Dahanayake in Galle, and by A. P. Thambiayah in Jaffna, and there were also small branch unions in other towns including Badulla, Nawalapitiya, Rambukkana, and Anuradhapura. The finances of the union depended on the monthly subscription of 50 cents per member. A. E. Goonesinha claimed that union membership rose from 100 in 1923 to 40,000 in 1926, but this is probably an estimate of "supporters" rather than paid members.<sup>5</sup> The union also had a volunteer corps, known as the Red Shirts, a disciplinary body of selected workers (led by "Captain" Richard

4. *Ibid.*, 4, 13 Nov. 1926.

5. The Special Commission on the Constitution of Ceylon 1927, "Oral Evidence, Vol. III," p. 27.

Wickremasinghe) who wore red caps and shirts and kept order during strikes, meetings, and processions, and when necessary protected the workers from the police.

The whole organization of the Union centered around the leadership of A. E. Goonesinha, who was the first person in Ceylon to devote himself exclusively to trade-union activity. But in spite of his militancy, Goonesinha remained a Buddhist and never denounced religion. Goonesinha from his early years had been influenced by Anagarika Dharmapala's Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and received financial and moral support for his trade-union activities from Dharmapala and from several Buddhist monks. In the 1920's, Goonesinha also joined Dharmapala in his campaign for the restoration to the Buddhists of their places of worship in India which were controlled by Hindus, and in this connection, he visited India along with Buddhist leaders. In his trade-union agitation, the conservative and moderate Ceylonese shunned him, but the politically active radicals rallied to support the Labour Union. During the early twenties many were attracted to the labor movement by Goonesinha's campaign on behalf of the workers. His fiery oratory in Sinhalese and English, and his denunciations of the ruling class, made him one of Colombo's best known figures. James Rutnam, recollecting his school years, writes:

I was influenced by the extreme and militant patriotism of Goonesinha. I remember very well the sound of Goonesinha's thunderbolts as they rent the air from Captain's Gardens [where the Railway strikers had gathered] and reverberated through the class-rooms of St. Joseph's College that was situated almost adjoining the "Gardens". . . . Many of us heard for the first time the compelling call for Freedom when Goonesinha's stentorian voice came crackling into our ears.

One of Goonesinha's most active supporters of the twenties was George E. de Silva (1879-1951), an important figure in the Ceylon National Congress and one of Ceylon's leading politicians of the preindependence era. De Silva began his career as a journalist and became a law student. He participated in the activities of the literary associations and temperance organizations of Colombo. After completing his studies, de Silva practiced law in Kandy and during the 1915 riots he defended several persons accused of instigating the riots. He was a courageous champion of the under-

privileged and a militant fighter against caste discrimination and oppressive social customs in the Kandyan districts. Because of his immense popularity he was known as "our George." Like many of the radicals of the period, de Silva was active in the agitation for political reforms, in social service, temperance, and other reform movements. Even before the formation of the Ceylon National Congress, de Silva was associated with the struggle for political reforms and was influenced by the Indian nationalist movement. During the 1920's, de Silva was one of the leading figures in the Ceylon National Congress, becoming its President in 1930. He visited India frequently for the sessions of the Indian National Congress and was in contact with many Indian leaders. His wife, Agnes, who joined de Silva in all his political activities, pioneered the campaign for women's suffrage, supported A. E. Goonesinha's labor movement, and contested a seat as a Labour Party candidate in 1931.<sup>6</sup>

Another well-known figure in the Ceylon Labour Union was the Legislative Councillor C. H. Z. Fernando, who in his student days in England between 1910 and 1913 had been in contact with various trade-union and socialist leaders. He recalls often meeting John Burns, the trade unionist, and other Labour Party leaders. While a law student in Cambridge, Fernando was Secretary of the Fabian Society of the University, and during the elections in Germany he went to Berlin to work for August Bebel, the leader of the Social Democratic Party. Fernando had also caused a mild furor by a speech he made to the Ceylon students in London advocating dominion status for Ceylon. For this he was sharply criticized by the conservative press in Ceylon, but received a letter of congratulation from A. E. Goonesinha, who was at that time a railway clerk. Fernando, on his return to Ceylon, became absorbed in social service work and political agitation. He was a founder-member of the Young Lanka League and was on the Executive Committee of the Ceylon National Congress. He was also a leading member of the Ceylon Workers' Federation, but later transferred his allegiance to the Ceylon Labour Union. He was one of the most influential radicals of the period, taking up the case of the workers in the Legislative and the Municipal Councils and in

6. James T. Rutnam "Introduction," *Mixed Grill*. I am grateful to the late George E. de Silva's daughter, Miss Minette de Silva, for lending me a manuscript of her father's biography.

the Ceylon National Congress. Other Legislative Councillors who were associated with the new union were Victor Corea, a militant nationalist best known for his anti-poll-tax agitation and opposition to British land policy in Ceylon, and K. Natesa Aiyar, a journalist who later became a plantation union leader. Some of the more radical Muslims also supported A. E. Goonesinha, among them M. L. M. Reyal, a Municipal Councillor, and M. N. N. Haniffa and Cassim Ismail, both lawyers. Other active supporters of Goonesinha were P. Givendrasinghe, a journalist, and Valentine Perera, a lawyer.

If one were to seek a common link between Goonesinha's allies, it would be their association with the main nationalist organizations of the day and with the various movements for social reform. Many of these persons had been disillusioned with the limited horizons of the Social Service League, the Workers' Federation, and the Ceylon National Congress, and had found more scope for their radical tendencies in Indian-inspired organizations such as the Gandhi Sangham, the Servants of Lanka Society, and especially in the relatively militant politics of the Young Lanka League. Although the independent professions of law, journalism, and teaching provided the economic base of the group, some of the radicals belonged to the less affluent sections of the middle class. But even those radicals who were landowners, like C. H. Z. Fernando and Victor Corea, were also lawyers by profession. It should also be noted that the radicals of the twenties were not confined to Sinhalese Buddhists but included many Christians, among them Fernando, Valentine Perera, Victor Corea, and James Rutnam.

The importance of A. E. Goonesinha as a political figure developed after the 1923 strike and in this connection the continuing influence of the Indian nationalist movement should be mentioned. A succession of well-known Indian nationalists visited Ceylon, including B. G. Tilak, Bepin Chandrapal, Sarojini Naidoo, Shaukat Ali, Dr. Kitchlew (of the Khilafat movement) and Mahatma Gandhi. Goonesinha took a prominent part in the public meetings that were held in their honor and at a mass meeting of over 30,000 workers organized by the Labour Union in 1927, Goonesinha presented Gandhi with a donation of Rs.2,500.<sup>7</sup> The contact between Goone-

7. *Ceylon Daily News*, 17 Nov. 1927.



sinha and the Indian nationalist movement was further strengthened when he attended the sessions of the Indian National Congress in 1925 and 1927.

During the years when Goonesinha was consolidating his position as a trade unionist, the political rift between him and the leaders of the Ceylon National Congress widened. As a member of the Young Lanka League, Goonesinha had been active in the Congress and in 1922 the Ceylon Labour Union affiliated with the Congress. Although he had opposed the politics of the Congress leaders, Goonesinha believed that radical associations could act as pressure groups within the Congress. But the Congress of the twenties was dominated by the moderates and, except for C. E. Corea, who was President in 1924–1925, the other Presidents of this period—H. J. C. Pereira, D. B. Jayatilaka, Francis de Zoysa, and W. A. de Silva—followed a policy of caution and moderation. For example E. W. Perera at the Congress sessions of 1926 declared:

I am an old fashioned liberal. . . . Evolution rather than revolution is the creed of the Congress and a violent whirlwind agitation which will sweep like a tornado through the country, inflaming passion and against the government is the last thing the Congress would welcome.<sup>8</sup>

Differences also arose between Goonesinha and the moderates over methods of labor agitation and organization, culminating in Goonesinha's breakaway from the Congress and his formation of a separate political party, the Ceylon Labour Party. In this chapter, various aspects of Goonesinha's evolution as an independent political figure will be examined.

### The Labor Movement and the Ceylon National Congress—Conflicting Approaches

The final break between A. E. Goonesinha and the Ceylon National Congress was a reflection of the conflict between the conservatism of the moderates and the militancy of the radicals which had existed for many years. The leaders of the Congress, many of whom were landowners and capitalists, were basically against the develop-

8. *Handbook of the CNC*, p. 770.

ment of a strong trade-union movement. They regarded Goonesinha as a troublemaker and an irresponsible agitator, and refused to support the Labour Union. The Congress preferred to recognize the Ceylon Workers' Federation—many of whose office-bearers were Congress leaders—as the organization most representative of labor, although it exerted hardly any influence over the workers. The initial interest in labor problems that the Ceylon National Congress had shown in 1919 under Arunachalam was not sustained. The Congress concentrated instead on issues such as political reform and land policy, and the subject of labor was often only briefly mentioned at the annual sessions of Congress. When labor questions were referred to at any length, it was only to counsel moderation in the course of thinly-veiled criticisms of Goonesinha's militancy.

From 1923 until 1928, the lack of enthusiasm among the Congress leadership for labor and trade-union matters was clearly evident. The first open clash on a labor issue occurred in 1923 after the general strike, which was at that time the biggest labor upheaval ever to occur in Ceylon. At the sessions of the Congress in 1923, the president, H. J. C. Pereira (who had helped the printers in the 1893 strike), warned of the dangers of revolutionary activity and condemned the wrongful use of the strike weapon. Pereira's view was that the working class had to be "looked after by others" and that strikes were justifiable only if "properly and rightly used." Pereira warned the radical members of the Congress that the idea of revolution in Ceylon was ludicrous and repellent, and added that the only method of "securing permanent and substantial rights known to civilised people was the constitutional method."<sup>9</sup> These warnings only confirmed the young militants' distrust of Congress leadership; Goonesinha deplored the role of the Congress during the 1923 general strike and referred to the Congress President's speech as "a servile and hypocritical address, vulgar adulation of the powers that be." "The Congress today is a glorious farce," he said, "a lie and a humbug . . . let us destroy this fraud and instead build a real national Congress."<sup>10</sup>

9. *Ibid.*, p. 495.

10. *Young Lanka*, 6 May 1923.

In the year following the general strike, the President of the Congress was D. B. Jayatilaka, one of the office-bearers of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. In his presidential address, Jayatilaka warned against the dangers of class warfare. The condition of the working class, he stated, was a matter calling for careful inquiry and sympathetic consideration; since class conflict "between capital and labour hardly existed" in Ceylon, it was the duty of patriotic Ceylonese to see that these distinctions "which in other lands [had] been the cause of bitter strife and hatred," were not introduced into the country. The hostility of Congress officials towards trade unions, strikes, and labor agitation continued. The President of the Congress from 1925 to 1926, Francis de Zoysa, included a very brief and desultory reference to labor in his presidential address: "Another important question which is always with us is the question of labour. We have discussed this question . . . have repeatedly passed resolutions . . . but the condition of the labourer remains almost where it was before and requires speedy amelioration."<sup>11</sup> A similar lack of interest in issues affecting the working class was seen the next year when E. W. Perera, the Congress President for 1926-1927, in a lengthy annual report in which all questions of public interest were mentioned, dismissed the problem of labor as one of the "other matters of moment which I have no time to touch upon," and assured the working class that its interests were being carefully watched by Congress members in the legislature.<sup>12</sup>

But even if the interests of labor were "carefully watched," very little positive action on behalf of labor was taken by the Congress. In 1927, during the serious strike at the harbor led by the Ceylon Labour Union, the Congress merely urged the government to appoint a commission to enquire into labor questions, but gave no active support to Goonesinha. Another of Goonesinha's major grievances was the apathy of the Congress members in the Legislative Council who had ignored questions such as minimum wages, workmen's compensation, unemployment relief, and the right to form trade unions. This blatant disregard by Congress of matters affecting labor increased the radicals' antagonism towards Congress.

11. See *Handbook of the CNC*, pp. 603, 690-91.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 768.

*Differences on the Franchise Question*

The political differences between A. E. Goonesinha and the Ceylon National Congress came to a head on the crucial franchise question which, from 1927 to 1929, became an important political issue. Universal suffrage was also the testing ground on which the radical view of politics could be distinguished from the moderate approach. The franchise in Ceylon under the Order in Council of 1923 was a doubly restrictive one, being granted only to males possessing both literacy and property (or income) qualifications. Under this law, the right to vote was possessed by males over 21 who could read and write English, Sinhalese, or Tamil, and who earned either Rs.600. or more a year, or owned immovable property valued at not less than Rs.1,500., or occupied premises assessed for rates at not less than Rs.400. in towns and Rs.200. in the country. The result was that only 200,000 persons, 4 percent of the total population of nearly 5 million, qualified as voters. Since illiteracy and poverty were a bar to the franchise, only a few literate workers who earned above Rs.50. a month possessed the vote.

A. E. Goonesinha, from his earliest years in the Young Lanka League, had advocated universal suffrage and had urged the Ceylon National Congress to accept this principle. But whereas the radicals were willing to press ahead and fight for basic democratic rights such as the right to vote, the moderates were not willing to concede this right to the masses. In 1924, the Ceylon Labour Union unsuccessfully submitted a resolution at the Congress sessions claiming that the country was ripe for manhood suffrage and calling upon the government to grant the right to vote "at least to every male over 21 years of age able to read and write any language."<sup>13</sup> Even by 1927, the opinion of Congress on this issue remained unchanged; at the sessions that year A. E. Goonesinha's proposal on manhood suffrage was put to the vote and lost, and another resolution by P. Givendrasinghe and George E. de Silva that the franchise qualifications be reduced to include those with a monthly income of Rs.25. was unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup> But though the Congress consistently opposed man-

13. *Ibid.*, p. 659.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 851-52.

hood suffrage, it was not opposed to middle-class women obtaining the vote; at its 1925 sessions, the Congress passed a resolution by the Mallika Kulangana Samitiya, proposed by Mrs. Aseline Thomas and seconded by Mrs. Agnes de Silva, that "a limited suffrage be immediately extended to the women of this country."<sup>15</sup>

New developments in the debate on universal suffrage took place in 1927 with the arrival in Ceylon of a commission led by Lord Donoughmore to examine the question of the reform of the constitution. It became clear that the Congress hierarchy feared that any extension of the franchise might lead to an erosion of its positions of privilege. The deputation of the Ceylon National Congress, led by the President, E. W. Perera, gave evidence before the commission opposing a major extension of the suffrage, but advocated granting the vote to women over 25 with school-leaving certificate, or with property of their own worth Rs.10,000. The Congress deputation insisted that the existing income qualification of Rs.50. a month, represented "the competent adult population who were fitted for the franchise," and claimed that this sum was in any case low, as the country was undergoing conditions of economic boom; if the right to vote was given to men earning less than Rs.50. a month, the result would be to produce voters "of whom a great proportion would not use responsibility in the exercise of the vote."<sup>16</sup> One of the commissioners, the Labour Member of Parliament Dr. T. Drummond Shiels, expressed his disappointment that Congress did not attach more importance to the franchise question and asked how the Congress could justify its demand for responsible government if only 4 percent of the population had the vote. To this, E. W. Perera replied that the franchise question "required further discussion," and admitted that it had been only "lightly touched upon" in the Congress memorandum.<sup>17</sup>

The Ceylon Labour Union was the only important organization which made out a strong case for universal suffrage before the Donoughmore Commission. A. E. Goonesinha had been advised on this issue by Dr. Drummond Shiels, and in his evidence referred to the lack of social legislation to cover minimum wages, hours of work, workmen's compensation, health insurance, pensions, protec-

15. *Ibid.*, p. 714.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 829.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 835.

tion for women workers, and provision for the education and housing of workers. He blamed all these gaps in legislation on the Legislative Council, which had been elected on a restricted franchise, and claimed that adult suffrage would be "a sort of panacea" for the problems facing the workers, who would have a say in the choice of Councillors, thereby ensuring that more social legislation would be passed.<sup>18</sup> In a written memorandum to the commissioners, the Ceylon Labour Union stated that an examination of the class composition of the legislature would reveal the reason why social legislation had been neglected: "The great majority of the legislators are men of wealth, many of them proprietors of large estates . . . or connected with commercial or industrial organizations. The conditions governing the election of members of the Legislative Council are such that nothing else can be expected."<sup>19</sup> The Labour Union pressed for universal adult suffrage without any discrimination on racial and religious grounds; it held that the "unlettered population [was] fully capable of exercising the voting privilege with discrimination" and claimed that often persons who were not able to read or write "showed greater ability than those with a smattering of education."<sup>20</sup> A. E. Goonesinha was so emphatic on the need for adult suffrage that he said he would be against the granting of more responsible government to Ceylon unless at the same time the franchise was broadened.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most important aspects of the Donoughmore Report (1928) on the reform of the Constitution was the recommendation that the vote be given to Ceylonese males over 21 years of age and to females over the age of 30. The commissioners, in justifying this sweeping move, referred to the "backward character" of social and industrial legislation in Ceylon where there was neither relief for destitution nor workmen's compensation, and no control over hours of work and wages. They added that a wider franchise would "expedite the passing of such social and industrial legislation as is now in force in every progressive country." In a sharp rebuke to the Ceylonese who had resisted the extension of the franchise, the

18. The Special Commission on the Constitution of Ceylon 1927, evidence of A. E. Goonesinha, in "Oral Evidence, Vol. III."

19. *Ibid.*, "Written Representations, Vol. IV."

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, "Oral Evidence, Vol. III," p. 30.

Donoughmore commissioners stated that the attitude of the "Sinhalese and Hindu leaders" in Ceylon was not surprising in view of "centuries of patriarchal and feudal government":

The various social strata have for so long been definitely marked off, the transition from the lower to the higher has been practically impossible, and no one has questioned the supreme right of one or a few to dominate the lives of the multitude. . . . A good case could be made out for regarding the extension of the franchise as more urgent than any increase in responsible government. When a considerable increase in responsible government is being recommended therefore, the question of the franchise becomes of first importance.<sup>22</sup>

The franchise recommendations of the Donoughmore Report caused serious divisions of opinion in Ceylon, and when this part of the report was debated in the Legislative Council in October and November, 1928, four separate motions on the question were introduced. The leaders of the Ceylon National Congress, seeing that the Donoughmore Commissioners intended granting adult suffrage, had accepted the change. In the Legislative Council, a Congress member, Francis Molamure, proposed that women over 21 should also be granted the vote, and that in the case of non-Ceylonese, a literacy qualification should be added to the five-year residency qualification, a provision intended to reduce the number of voters among Indian immigrant workers. A second motion by the Burgher member, G. A. H. Wille, opposed universal suffrage, stating that "in the absence of any system rendering politics at all intelligible to the masses" the franchise should only be extended by lowering the existing income qualification and giving the vote to women on similar terms to men. The third motion, by W. Duraiswamy, seconded by P. Ramanathan, claimed that it was "not necessary" to extend the franchise to women, except to those with a school-leaving certificate, and the fourth, by the liberal Englishman, H. R. Freeman, simply proposed that the age of franchise should be 21 for all.<sup>23</sup>

The lengthy debate on the franchise was characterised by the emergence of several distinct currents of opinion. The diehards raised alarms about the decadence and immorality that would result

22. Ceylon Government Printer, *Report of the Special Commission on the Constitution* (1928), p. 83.

23. *Debates of the Legislative Council of Ceylon, Hansard*, 1 Nov. 1928.

from giving the vote to women, and the evil consequences of extending the franchise to the poor. One of the older generation of political leaders spoke of the undesirability of extending the suffrage "to persons who cannot govern themselves and who are given to committing wicked crimes . . . and to common labourers who have no education of any kind."<sup>24</sup> Another Councillor, E. R. Tambimuttu, who had supported the Labour Union at its inception, was equally vehement in his opposition to universal suffrage, saying "an illiterate mass is the greatest danger to any social progress in the country, especially if it is left in the hands of unscrupulous persons . . . ignorant men are bad enough, but ignorant women are worse."<sup>25</sup> The chief spokesman of the conservative viewpoint, however, was G. A. H. Wille, who had also been concerned with workers' welfare and was an office-bearer of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. Wille recommended that instead of universal suffrage, the income qualification should be reduced to Rs.30. a month and remarked, "there may be some people perhaps unfortunate, perhaps incorrigible ne'er do wells who earn nothing, but we cannot provide for these men." Wille taunted E. W. Perera and Congress for their change of view on the franchise and observed that many people had become liberal politicians after reading the Donoughmore report. He further alleged that this shift in opinion was because "the Socialist Doctor" (Dr. Drummond Shiels) refused to give the Ceylonese "the pill of responsible government unless the patient took a strong dose of manhood suffrage." Wille also argued that Dr. Shiels did not "command such a big position either in the British Parliament or in the British Labour Party," and warned that arguments in the report for the grant of manhood suffrage "savoured very much of Socialistic legislation." The view of the conservatives, as expressed by Wille, was that the commissioners "with an almost reckless spirit of experiment" were prepared to suggest that the Ceylonese try things "which had not been tried elsewhere, not even in their own country."<sup>26</sup>

It was left to the few radical members of the legislature to condemn and ridicule such fears. C. H. Z. Fernando said in reply to

24. Speech of P. Ramanathan, *ibid.*, p. 1793.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 1671.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 1846, 1633-37.



Wille that "the Burgher Member wailed that the grant of the vote would be followed by a cry for social equality. If there should happen to be such a cry it will be all the better for the country."<sup>27</sup> Another supporter of labor, Victor Corea, said that the existence of a large number of illiterate persons was "their misfortune and not their fault," adding that if after 100 years of British rule there was so much illiteracy, it was "proof irrefragable that the bureaucrats [had] been absolutely callous to the needs of the people."<sup>28</sup> However, the strongest plea for universal suffrage was made by H. R. Freeman, an Englishman formerly in the Ceylon Civil Service, whose humanitarian work among the impoverished peasantry of North-Central Ceylon enabled him to be the elected representative of the region in the legislature until his death. Freeman, in an impassioned speech, criticized the intolerant attitude of Ceylonese politicians towards "the many workers whose only property is their bodies and limbs and who are not at all concerned with politics but with economics—food, clothing, housing, health." He had bitter words for Wille and others who spoke disparagingly of the poor and of the dangers of granting the franchise to the workers:

A member speaking in Latin said he hated the common crowd, another makes arrogant generalisations "this man without property, this unemployed man . . . incorrigible ne'er do wells". No property, no vote says this highbrow politician. . . . "The proposed franchise is going to have a serious effect on the standard of men in the next Council". Are there in his mind two standards of intellect?—a Dumbara Valley standard and a Bullers Road Standard? And his own super standard? Are there? Are there?<sup>29</sup>

Outside the legislature, A. E. Goonesinha conducted a fierce campaign in favor of universal suffrage and denounced the Ceylon National Congress for its lack of enthusiasm and vacillation on this issue. One result of these divergences on the suffrage question was the break in the uneasy alliance that had existed between the Ceylon Labour Union and the Ceylon National Congress, and the disaffiliation of the labor organization from the Congress. Those members of the Labour Union, like George E. de Silva, who continued

27. *Ibid.*, p. 1717.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 1781.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 1886.

their association with the Congress, were expelled, and the way seemed open for labor in Ceylon to assume an independent political role.

### Influence of the British Labour Party

The formation in 1928 of the Ceylon Labour Party and the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress were ambitious attempts by the labor leaders to assert the independence and the strength of labor in the political and trade-union fields and to agitate for the extension of democratic rights. The background to this development was the cleavage between the moderates and the radicals on labor problems and the franchise issue, which has been discussed. Another major factor which affected the decision of Ceylon labor leaders to launch out on their own was the influence exerted by the British labor movement.

The British Labour Party from its inception had been regarded by nationalist and labor movements in dependent territories as the only element in British political life which was sympathetic to their demands. For example, in 1918, when B. G. Tilak on behalf of the Indian nationalist movement contributed to Labour Party funds, and remarked that the party would be "useful to us," Arthur Henderson assured Tilak that the party would "offer you every possible assistance."<sup>30</sup> The appeal of the Labour Party lay in its belief in the equality of races and its championship of the rights of the workers and the underprivileged. A. E. Goonesinha, who from his youth had been influenced by radical thought, was attracted by the policies of the British Labour Party. Although he was against revolution, he was nevertheless a militant fighter for the rights of the workers and for the political freedom of Ceylon. In the Labour Party he was to find a useful ally, and during the 1920's many prominent members of this party became his advisors and supporters. The first of these was the Labour Member of Parliament Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, who visited Ceylon in 1921 and made an impression on young radicals like Goonesinha and George E. de Silva. At a meeting for Wedgwood, Sir Ponnambalam Aruna-

30. Stanley Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale*, p. 285.

chalam voiced the views of the radicals when he praised the Labour Party for having "cast its influence on the side of freedom, justice and humanity throughout the world" and for keeping in check "the exploiters and oppressors of peoples"; Wedgwood was asked to convey "the grateful thanks of the workmen of Ceylon" to the Labour Party for the interest taken in their welfare.<sup>31</sup>

Another influence was that of Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister in the short-lived Labour Government of 1924, who visited Ceylon in 1926. By this time the Ceylon Labour Union had superseded the Ceylon Workers' Federation as the dominant trade union and Goonesinha played a prominent part as host to MacDonald. The address which the Labour Union presented to MacDonald indicated the hopes that organization placed in the British Labour Party: "The work of the Labour Party in England has been a source of inspiration to workers of other lands as it has been to us and we welcome you with affection as England's Labour leader. . . . We earnestly pray that when power does come again to you, the social reconstruction and betterment of the down-trodden in the Empire will be uppermost in your mind."

Ramsay MacDonald, in his reply, declared that he believed in democracy and self-government and described the elation in other parts of the world when the labor government was elected to power in 1924: "There was a thrill of delight, of self-respect . . . from the rising sun to the setting sun. The Colonies responded, the Dominions responded . . . a glorious experiment was being tried, which if successful would mean the closing of the old books and the opening of the new."<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Goonesinha was on close terms of friendship with Labour M.P. Dr. Drummond Shiels, who advised him on tactics to be adopted in giving evidence before the Donoughmore Commission. Goonesinha made further contacts with the British labor movement in 1927 when he went to India to attend the sessions of the Indian National Congress. There he met A. A. Purcell and J. Halsworth, the delegates of the British Trades Union Congress who had been sent to India to study labor conditions. Purcell was one of the leaders of the left-wing group in the General Council

31. Arunachalam, *Speeches and Writings*, p. 227.

32. *Handbook of the CNC*, p. 732.

of the British Trades Union Congress, which was in favor of militant trade unionism. He was keen on extending the contacts between the British trade-union movement and colonial labor movements and he also worked to achieve friendly relations with Soviet trade unions. On Goonesinha's invitation, Purcell visited Ceylon for two weeks; in their report on India the British trade unionists referred to the Ceylon Labour Union and said it was "deserving of every support that can be given by the British movement."<sup>33</sup> One result of this contact was that delegates of the Ceylon Labour Union were invited to attend the Commonwealth Labour Conference organized by the British Labour Party. A. E. Goonesinha and George E. de Silva went to England for the conference, the passage of Goonesinha being paid from subscriptions collected from workers. A well-known Ceylonese employer and political figure, H. L. de Mel, asked the government to refuse Goonesinha a passport on the ground that he had misappropriated union funds; a man of such calibre, he said, should not be permitted to make statements on labor which would be highly derogatory to Ceylon:

Goonesinha makes the workers believe that he is summoned to England by the King and that he will return with concessions to labour. . . . The immediate and close attention of the I.G.P. should be secured at once and the opportunity seized to end this Bolshevik rule over the proletariat. . . . There are a number of private industrial employers who are silently suffering this sort of tyranny, but do not wish to act publicly against Goonesinha for fear of serious paralysis of their business.

However, the Colonial Secretary was unimpressed by the "silent sufferings" of the employers, and in a sharply worded minute he rejected these accusations as "ex-parte gossip, retailed by an employer whose vision is distorted by personal interests," and added, "I submit that in the absence of reliable evidence in any shape or form the government would be unwise to intervene."<sup>34</sup>

The Commonwealth Labour Conference, which began in London in July, 1928, was attended by delegates from Australia, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, India, Trinidad, Palestine, and Ceylon. Ramsay MacDonald presided at the opening sessions and Arthur Henderson, George Lansbury, and other prominent labor leaders took

33. A. A. Purcell and J. Halsworth, *Report on Labour Conditions in India*, p. 16.

34. CNA, File C.F.492/28.

part in the proceedings. The conference was marked by the walk-out of the Indian delegation, whose leader tried to present a resolution condemning the Simon Commission on the reform of the Indian constitution, which had been boycotted by the Indian National Congress. The British delegation said that the conference was merely a deliberative body and therefore not meant to record resolutions, and this view was adopted by the conference by 5 votes to 3, with India, Trinidad and Ceylon voting against. The Indians expressed their lack of confidence in the good faith of the British Labour Party and accused it of trying to suppress the resolution because two of its members had been on the Simon Commission.<sup>35</sup>

In this dispute it is significant that Goonesinha, while voting with the Indian delegation, did not join them in their walkout, and was not influenced by the criticisms made of the Labour Party leaders by both the Indian delegates and by the left-wing and Communist press in England. For example, the *New Leader*, a journal edited by Fenner Brockway, commented that Labour participation in the Simon Commission had created "the almost universal conviction in India that the party [was] as Imperialist as the Conservative and Liberal parties."<sup>36</sup> A Communist Member of Parliament, S. Saklatvala, alleged that the objective of the Commonwealth Labour Conference was "to continue the time-honoured Tory policy of British Imperialism in the garb and cloak of Socialist benevolence"; he claimed that the British Empire was a reactionary militarist empire and said that the conference had shown that the "breach between the official labor movement and the colonial peoples must be considered as complete." The British Communist paper, *The Worker*, also denounced the conference; "Neither Baldwin nor MacDonald can modify the effects of Imperialism and no matter what the camouflage, the plague will remain, until the workers rise to power and all peoples are made free."<sup>37</sup>

The Labour Party also succeeded in preventing A. E. Goonesinha from making Communist contacts during his stay in London. The same week during which the Labour Party was holding the Commonwealth Labour Conference, the Communist-sponsored Conference of the League Against Imperialism was held in London.

35. *Ceylon Daily News*, 6 July 1928; *Daily Herald*, 6 July 1928.

36. *New Leader*, 13 July 1928.

37. *Sunday Worker*, 15 July 1928; *The Worker*, 6 July 1928.

The Indians were represented at this conference by S. Iyengar, a former chairman of the Indian National Congress; Nehru was elected to the Executive Committee and the Indian Trades Union Congress affiliated to the League. In contrast, Goonesinha, on the advice of the Labour Party, rejected the invitation of the League Against Imperialism, "as the organisers were Communist." Goonesinha was also dissuaded by Labour Members of Parliament from meeting the Communist M.P. for Battersea, S. Saklatvala, who was an Indian.<sup>38</sup>

Goonesinha's stand on the question of constitutional reform in Ceylon also earned him the support of the British Labour party. The recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission were supported by the British Labour Party, and implemented after the party assumed office again in 1929. The recommendations made many drastic changes in the constitution of the country, the most significant being the franchise reform, making Ceylon the first British Crown Colony to be granted universal adult suffrage. The State Council was to consist of 50 members elected on the basis of territorial representation, and 8 members nominated by the Governor to represent minority interests. The Council was divided into seven Executive Committees (Home Affairs, Health, Labour, Education, etc.) which were responsible for supervision and control of government departments. Each executive committee elected its chairman, who became a minister. The Board of Ministers was composed of the seven chairmen of the executive committees and three officers of state—the Chief Secretary, the Financial Secretary, and the Legal Secretary. These officials, who were appointed by the Colonial Office and the Governor, controlled matters such as defense, external affairs, law, and finance. The Governor also retained wide powers and though the Constitution granted a considerable measure of internal self-government, it fell far short of Dominion status.

After the publication of the Donoughmore Report, the Ceylon National Congress expressed its regret at the absence of the cabinet system of government, and showed little enthusiasm for either the executive committee system or the franchise reforms. The attitude of the British Labour Party towards the Ceylonese politicians was

38. Personal communication from A. E. Goonesinha, 22 May 1962.

to a large degree determined by Dr. Drummond Shiels. The Congress was made out to be an indigenous plantation and merchant aristocracy seeking an oligarchic form of "cabinet dictatorship" and Goonesinha was depicted as the representative of the radical forces in the country. Commenting on the evidence led before the Donoughmore Commission, the Labour M.P. Ellen Wilkinson remarked that "Shiels' cross questioning cut through the nationalist hot air of rich native merchants as well as the selfishness of English planters, and got down to bed-rock questions of the conditions of labour of the millions of natives." A left-wing Labour Member of Parliament, Fenner Brockway, said that Shiels' influence had secured the adoption of universal suffrage which was being denounced in Ceylon as revolutionary.<sup>39</sup> When the Ceylon National Congress protested to the Labour Party against the Donoughmore reforms, Ramsay MacDonald, who was influenced by Shiels' views, accused the Congress leaders of being "capitalists and large land-owners . . . opposed to the franchise," and praised the Ceylon labor movement for its independent stand.<sup>40</sup>

The result of the strong influence of the British Labour Party on Goonesinha was seen in both the political and trade-union movements in 1928. A few weeks after his return from England, Goonesinha, acting on the advice of British Labour Party leaders and making use of the experience he had gained by his study of the working of the British Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress, formed the Ceylon Labour Party and the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress.

### *The Ceylon Labour Party*

The need for a separate political party based on the interests of the masses "who form the backbone of the country" had been often emphasized by A. E. Goonesinha. Since the constitution recommended for Ceylon by the Donoughmore Commissioners was to be based on universal suffrage, the formation of a local Labour Party was thought to be opportune, as the newly enfranchised masses would be able to send representatives to the legislature. According

39. *New Leader*, 27 July 1928 and 13 July 1928.

40. Ramsay MacDonald, "Monkeying with the Revolution," *Ceylon Daily News*, 18 Feb. 1929.

to Goonesinha, the members of the Ceylon National Congress and the Legislative Council belonged to the "haughty, patronising and tyrannising Upper Ten" in society, who had done nothing for the "voiceless masses." The deprivation, "helplessness and wretchedness" of the workers was described by Goonesinha: "[they are] ill clad, ill paid, ill fed . . . too insignificant to attract anybody's notice . . . the small fry to be trampled upon, to do all the dirty work and to demand no rights, no privileges." He asserted that the rich showed more sympathy to birds, bulls, and dogs than to the working class, and stated that there was therefore a need for a Labour Party to press for minimum wages, sickness benefits, workmen's compensation, free compulsory secondary education, and rent restriction.<sup>41</sup>

At the inaugural meeting of the Ceylon Labour Party, on October 15, 1928, Goonesinha was unanimously elected to be leader and Chairman of the Party, and Marshall Perera, a lawyer who had been in the Labour Union, was elected Secretary. The large executive committee of 37 members included four members of the Legislative Council, and several lawyers, doctors, and teachers. A novel feature of the Executive Committee was the presence of ten women members, thereby making the Labour Party the first political organization in Ceylon to give a prominent place to women. Some of the women committee members had been earlier associated with the Ceylon National Congress, some belonged to the Theosophical movement, but the majority were activists of the Women's Franchise Union, which had been formed in order to advocate women's suffrage before the Donoughmore Commission.

The objectives of the Labour Party were to promote candidates to contest general and local elections, to secure for the producers by hand or brain "the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible," and to promote "the political, social and economic emancipation of the people." The National Executive of seven members was responsible for the general work of the party and for choosing Labour candidates for elections; membership was open to all those in sympathy with the objects of the party, on payment of 50 cents a month, but it was laid down that those possessing titles given by the British govern-

41. *Times of Ceylon*, and *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 Oct. 1928.



ment, such as knighthoods, would not be eligible for membership.<sup>42</sup>

The reactions to the formation of the new party were varied. The European Association in Ceylon treated the Labour Party as a joke and made fun of Goonesinha's statement that members of the party would not attend receptions given by the Governor at Queen's House.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the *Ceylon Independent* welcomed the party as being a means of alleviating the misery and poverty of the workers, and criticized the employers for their neglect of the workers in the past:

If any person complains that labour is becoming unduly ambitious the true reply is that, in this world sooner or later Nemesis overtakes persons who shirk duties which lie blazing at their feet, demanding attention . . . the welfare of the workers was the last thing in which many employers have been interested . . . their only concern was the maximum work for minimum wages.<sup>44</sup>

The *Ceylon Daily News*, representing the viewpoint of the leaders of the Ceylon National Congress, believed the new Labour Party had been formed with an eye on the forthcoming elections to be held under universal franchise. While giving credit to Goonesinha, "whose lone hand was extended in defence of his humbler friends all this time," the paper alleged that those who were showing sudden enthusiasm for the welfare of labor by throwing a few garlands around Goonesinha's neck were only interested in mounting "from the back of the working man to seats in the State Council."<sup>45</sup>

### *The All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress*

In October, 1928, the same month when the Labour Party was formed, A. E. Goonesinha and other officials of the Ceylon Labour

42. CLD, "Constitution of the Labour Party," File T1, Part I. The Executive Committee included C. H. Z. Fernando, A. Mahadeva, C. W. W. Kannangara, Victor Corea, G. C. S. Corea, Merrill Pereira, George Caldera, Valentine Perera, George E. de Silva, Dr. Muttiah, and Satiyawagiswara Iyer. The women committee members included Mrs. Agnes de Silva, and Dr. (Mrs.) Satiyawagiswara Iyer (formerly Miss Nalamma Murugesu), both active members of the Ceylon National Congress; Mrs. A. Preston, an English theosophist, and Mrs. A. E. Goonesinha, Mrs. Richard de Silva, Mrs. Cyril Jayawardena, Mrs. A. E. de Silva and Misses Eva and Jennie Ferdinando of the Womens Franchise Union.

43. *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 Oct. 1928, quoted in a speech by C. H. Z. Fernando.

44. Editorial, *Ceylon Independent*, 19 Oct. 1928.

45. *Ceylon Daily News*, 17 Oct. 1928.

Union and the Ceylon Labour Party inaugurated the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress.<sup>46</sup> Goonesinha had been urged to form a Trades Union Congress by A. A. Purcell, and the idea had been further discussed with British Labour leaders when Goonesinha was in London. In forming a Trades Union Congress, Goonesinha hoped to group together all the existing unions which were affiliated to the Ceylon Labour Union, and to encourage other sections of workers, including white-collar workers, to form unions affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, which would become a single, powerful representative of the island's nonagricultural labor.

At the first sessions, Goonesinha spoke of the need for the workers to unite, as their salvation lay in being able to "present a solid phalanx to fight their great battles." Goonesinha launched an attack on his old enemies, the "designing politicians and pestiferous adventurers" of the Ceylon National Congress. The lack of social legislation was deplored, the condition of the workers was called "degraded and degrading," and the task of the Trades Union Congress was set out as being "to free the workers from their misery." Much stress was also laid on the solidarity of the working classes of all countries, and Goonesinha claimed that the labor movement knew no differences of "caste, colour or creed." On this occasion fraternal greetings were extended to the British Trades Union Congress and to labor organizations in India, Canada, Australia, Newfoundland, Ireland, Palestine, Trinidad, New Zealand, and South Africa. Goonesinha's non-Communist views were evident from the fact that the Ceylon Trades Union Congress also sent greetings to the trade union (Socialist) International of Brussels, but ignored the Soviet trade unions and the Moscow-dominated International. In contrast, the All-India Trades Union Congress was at this time affiliated to several Communist organizations.

The resolutions passed at the Trades Union Congress and the speeches made by Goonesinha and other officials at the sessions reflected a greater interest in political issues than in purely trade-union matters. Several of the resolutions were on questions such as universal suffrage and the committee system of government as

46. These included Victor Corea, Mr. and Mrs. George E. de Silva, Cyril Jayawardena, C. W. W. Kannangara, Dr. Muttiah, Valentine Perera, and M. L. M. Reyal.

recommended by the Donoughmore Commission. Said one Labour Party member in support of the committee system, "If Committees were abolished the Ministers would be autocrats . . . there would be a system of Soviet government. God save this country from local Lenins and Trotskys." On the question of the Ceylon University, Goonesinha said he was not against the establishment of a university, but that the education of the masses should first be taken in hand. Referring to the proposed Ceylon students' hostel in London, Goonesinha said that the rich were "fleecing the poor for the luxury of sending their children to London to make them briefless barristers," and added, "why don't the rich raise their own money for a hostel?" There was also a resolution that a commission consisting of an equal number of employers and trade-union representatives should make recommendations regarding the right of combination, workmen's compensation, minimum wages, hours of work, arbitration courts, old age pensions, maternity benefits, and rent restriction.<sup>47</sup>

In the years following their formation, the Ceylon Labour Party and the Ceylon Trades Union Congress continued to show great confidence in the British Labour Party. In 1929, the journal of the Ceylon Labour Party stated: "Our only hope of salvation lies in the policy of the British Labour Party,"<sup>48</sup> and at the sessions of the Trades Union Congress in 1929, C. H. Z. Fernando said that they preferred to be wrong with Ramsay MacDonald than be right with the diehards of Ceylon.<sup>49</sup> The same year, the Ceylon labor movement showed its gratitude to the British Labour Party by organizing a ceremony at the Labour Union at which a portrait of Ramsay MacDonald was unveiled.<sup>50</sup> The Labour victory in England at the elections of 1929 was greeted with enthusiasm by the Ceylon Labour Party as it promised "a new era in the advancement and progress of democracy not only in England but also in all parts of the British Commonwealth." Ceylon, it was held, stood to gain immensely by the advent of the Labour Government, because the Conservative Party, on the question of political reforms in Ceylon, would have yielded to "the forces of reaction, enemies of progress, the money

47. See *Ceylon Daily News*, 27, 29 Oct. 1928, for details.

48. *The Comrade*, 26 May 1929.

49. *Times of Ceylon*, 27 Oct. 1928.

50. *The Comrade*, 11 Aug. 1929.

bags and sham nationalists" in order to keep the "downtrodden in eternal bondage."<sup>51</sup>

By 1929, the Ceylon labor movement, under Goonesinha's leadership, had come a long way since its early beginnings, when those who supported the union were regarded as irresponsible agitators. From being a small radical organization with high political ideals but little support either from the middle class or the workers, the movement, within six years, had become a politically significant force, with the potential, in the event of universal suffrage, of becoming a power in the legislature.

The formation of the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress can be viewed as an attempt by a section of the Ceylonese middle class to present a radical political alternative to the moderate Congress policies, and to widen the scope of political and economic demands to include the working class. The leadership came from persons who had been associated with the demands for political independence, the struggle for trade-union rights, the fight against discrimination on grounds of race and caste, and the incipient movement for women's emancipation. These were the dissenters and rebels of urban middle-class society who tried to broaden the political and economic agitation which the moderates had restricted to serve the interests of the Ceylonese capitalists.

51. *Ibid.*, 9 June 1929.

## Chapter 11

# Militant Trade Unionism, 1923-1929

*The workers [in 1929] rose to an extraordinary pitch of revolutionary energy, enthusiasm and sacrifice . . . and displayed rare initiative and ability to cope with a critical situation.*<sup>1</sup>

Philip Gunewardena, 1931

The urban trade-union movement reached the peak of its influence during the years when the labor leader A. E. Goonesinha made a bid for political prominence. The labor movement had grown strong enough to develop its own separate identity, distinct from the largest political organization in the country, and radical politics remained the dominant influence on labor. The series of strikes between 1927 and 1929, most notably among the harbor and tramway workers, and taxi drivers, accompanied by boycotts, mass demonstrations, violence, and rioting, were the most militant witnessed in the country to that date. The factors which facilitated the successful strike movement and the upsurge of labor unrest that swept Colombo were the political developments of the years after 1923, the growth in economic prosperity in the mid-twenties (which made the employers willing to grant concessions), and the increasing militancy of urban wage labor.

### The Economic Background

After 1923, Ceylon benefitted from favorable world prices and this was reflected in an increase in the quantity and value of the

1. Philip Gunewardena, "Whither Ceylon?" *The Searchlight*, 9 Nov. 1931.

main exports and in a large favorable balance of trade. There was also an increase in urban and rural employment, and a rise in government expenditure. Tea, coconut, and graphite (plumbago) commanded high prices on the world market and there was a remarkable boom in the rubber industry; in addition there was no shortage of food. The peak year was 1926, when the value of exports reached the record total of over Rs.500 million and the balance of trade was the highest ever recorded. Although exports declined after 1926, exports and imports continued at a high level, as can be seen in Table 1, until the onset of the economic depression in 1929.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Exports*</i>	<i>Imports*</i>
1926	593	395
1927	448	407
1928	393	412
1929	407	492

\* Value in Rs. millions

During these years of relative economic prosperity the Colombo working class expanded, took on the independent attitudes of urban wage labor, and became assertive on economic and political issues. In the late twenties there was continuous dissatisfaction among the working class over wages, conditions of employment, and the rising cost of living. A commission appointed in 1928 to inquire into wages revealed that among the urban proletariat, the daily-paid skilled and unskilled workers in government departments had somewhat better conditions of work and pay than those in the private sector, receiving some privileges such as gratuities, long-service pensions, and compensation in cases of accident. The condition of workers in the large private firms varied considerably. According to the commission, 50 percent of the workers in a number of well-known firms received less than Rs.1. a day and worked for an average of 24.75 days a month. Some firms paid gratuities for long service and half wages in cases of accident, but pensions were hardly ever granted.

Although there was little unemployment among urban workers during these years, there was a great deal of poverty. A slight in-

2. H. A. de S. Gunasekera. *From Dependent Currency to Central Banking*, p. 174.

crease in wages had been granted during the First World War, and in 1920 and 1925 further increases were given to meet the rising cost of living. The urban workers, whether skilled or unskilled, were nonetheless plagued by indebtedness; the widespread practices of borrowing money at ruinous rates of interest, and of obtaining necessities on credit, were often the only means of survival. The 1928 commission described the chronic indebtedness of workers and said that money which should have been spent on food and clothing was "filtered away in interest on items procured on credit and paid for in instalments and on other debts." The commission estimated that the average minimum subsistence wage was Rs.1.08 a day and after considering evidence on the cost of living and the budgets of the lowest paid workers, it concluded that in every case examined, "the total expenditure exceeded the stated amount of earnings."<sup>3</sup> The existence of economic grievances among workers during a period of trade prosperity and low unemployment made the climate favorable for increased pressure on employers for wage increases and other concessions.

The first serious initiative in this direction was undertaken in July, 1925, when a memorial drafted by A. E. Goonesinha on behalf of the workers in government departments was presented to the Legislative Council by C. H. Z. Fernando. The memorial referred to the many petitions enumerating the workers' grievances which had been ignored. It claimed that the Government Factory workers were prepared to resort to drastic measures but had been prevented from doing so by the promise of the Ceylon Labour Union to "act vigorously," and reference was also made to the great discontent among the railway workers. The memorial said that the 1925 budget did not contain "a single item calculated to benefit the workmen," and demanded an all-round increase of salaries for government daily-paid workers. Other demands were for sick leave pay, 14 days' casual leave, pensions after ten years' service, cheaper season tickets, and periodic railway passes.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this agitation, the government's Labour Advisory Committee appointed a committee to consider the complaints of the workers. The committee consisted of eleven members headed by

3. "Report of the Commission appointed to inquire into the wages of Manual Workers," *Sessional Paper 8 of 1928*.

4. CNA, Memorial of 29 July 1925, File B/19/26.

H. W. Codrington, the Controller of Revenue, and included the heads of the various departments concerned (Railways, Government Factory, Public Works, and Harbour), the Mayor of Colombo, two Ceylonese members of the Legislative Council (D. B. Jayatilaka and G. A. H. Wille), and two English private employers. On the question of insufficient pay, which was "the first and outstanding complaint made by the workmen," the committee accepted the statement of the Director of Statistics that the rise in the cost of living since 1914 had been 70 percent. On the basis that the government had made an all round increase of wages in 1920, the committee recommended a 20 percent increase on present rates. The demand by the workers for increments based on length of service was refused as the cost was held to be prohibitive. The committee also recommended that overtime, which was paid for at the ordinary rate, should be raised to a time-and-a-quarter rate for all persons working under factory conditions, and that workers should have five public holidays with pay; casual leave with pay was held to be incompatible with the status of daily-paid labor. The demand for pensions was rejected on the ground that pensions were very rare in the case of daily-paid labor anywhere, but recommendations were made concerning gratuities, sick leave with pay, dismissals, and fines.

The main recommendations of the committee—the 20 percent increase in wages and the five statutory annual holidays—were accepted by the government, but the question of overtime was deferred "pending the collection of further information on the subject." The reactions of the private business firms were also favorable. Colonel Hayward, who had been one of the members of the committee, informed the government that the leading engineering firms accepted the recommendations of the report, and he added that if the 20 percent wage increase was not granted there would inevitably be serious strikes. The two Ceylonese members of the committee, Wille and Jayatilaka, who added riders to the report, were moderate political figures and leading members of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. Wille pleaded for one or two days of casual leave a year for workers to cover cases of illness, death, and marriage, thereby "humanising their lot," and Jayatilaka, commenting on complaints of harsh treatment, said that much trouble could be avoided if workers were treated sympathetically and if non-



Ceylonese officers in workshops were able to talk to the workers without interpreters. Both these riders reflected a concern for making concessions of a minor nature on humanitarian grounds rather than tackling the important grievances.<sup>5</sup>

The impact made by the general strike of 1923 and Goonesinha's warning to the Labour Advisory Committee that the workers would resort to drastic action if relief was not given accounted for the willingness of government to grant the wage increase. Government officials, who were aware of the serious industrial disputes in India, began to be concerned about labor unrest in Ceylon. They realized that the new trade-union leader A. E. Goonesinha was not a "workers' leader" of the old type with watchwords like "moderation" and "law and order" on his lips, but a political figure with a radical outlook and contact with the Indian national movement, a daring individual who had achieved a phenomenal personal success with the workers of Colombo by his leadership of the 1923 strikes. Although all the workers' demands were not secured in 1925, the Ceylon Labour Union benefitted from the concessions that were granted by the government, and both membership in the union and Goonesinha's influence grew rapidly. By 1926, strike activity was again resorted to—in September of that year the Labour Union led a successful strike over the dismissals of weavers at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills, the largest textile mill in Ceylon. That year there was also a stoppage of work by the attendants and workers at the General Hospital on the grounds that they had not received the 20 percent increase in pay. A. E. Goonesinha intervened on their behalf with the Chief Secretary and the increase was obtained. The wave of strikes spread to other groups of urban workers and from 1927 until 1929, with the growth of the Labour Union, there were a series of strikes, beginning with that of the port workers of Colombo.

#### Labor Unrest 1927–1929: The Port, Taxi, and Tramway Strikes

In almost all parts of the world port workers have been at the forefront of trade-union agitation, and Ceylon has been no excep-

5. *Ibid.*

tion. From the earliest strike of boatmen in the Colombo harbor in 1901, to the strikes of 1920 and 1923, the workers in the harbor were among the most militant section of the Colombo working class, and after 1923 they were the most active supporters of A. E. Goonesinha. Not unexpectedly, the new wave of industrial unrest which began in 1927 flared up in the Colombo harbor. The main grievances of these workers concerned their wages and the contract system of wage payment. Under this method the lump sum given by the shipping agents to a contractor for supplying labor had to filter through several hands before it reached the workers. Those involved in unloading ships (known as "discharge coolies") received Rs.1.35 a day, and the loading workers received Rs.1.50 a day. The dissatisfaction over wages was ignored by the employers and on February 10, 1927, the loading and discharging workers, estimated at between four and five thousand men, came out on strike demanding Rs.2. for day work, Rs.3. for night work, and an hour off for meals. They were joined a few days later by 2,000 shoremen (who took cargo from the lighters to the warehouses), about 400 landing men (employed in loading carts and lorries), and the cranemen and carters at the wharf. The strike caused very serious dislocation in the harbor and ships had to use their crews for the unloading of cargo. The government unsuccessfully tried to ease the situation by bringing labor from India and by the use of convict labor. But the convicts proved to be inefficient, dropping the cargo (perhaps purposely) into the sea, and the Indians declined to work as they were refused food by the bazaar shopkeepers who were in sympathy with the strikers.

The organization and supervision of the strike was carried on by the Ceylon Labour Union, which collected donations of money and food and supplied meals to the strikers. Several mass meetings were held and processions paraded through the streets of Colombo led and controlled by the "Red Shirts" of the Labour Union. A. E. Goonesinha urged the strikers to fight for their demands and not to give in, even if it meant striking for two or three months; he reassured the workers that they would not starve and advised them to avoid gambling and drinking. The government referred the matter to the Labour Advisory Committee, headed by W. E. Wait, but its efforts to mediate between the employers and the union failed

and the negotiations broke off. The result of this was a sharp intensification of the strike, which spread to other harbor workers, including the 5,000 "coal coolies" employed in coaling ships and discharging coal.

The strike could not be ignored as the continued functioning of the harbor was essential to the economic life of the country. The government therefore intervened with a scheme for arbitration with Justice G. S. Schneider as umpire and C. W. W. Kannangara and C. S. Burns (both members of the Legislative Council) to represent the workers and employers, respectively. On March 1, after the strike of 13,000 workers had lasted almost three weeks, the harbor workers marched back to work to the tune of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" played by brass bands. A meeting was held at which the procedure of returning to work pending arbitration was explained to the workers by Goonesinha. The strikers clearly felt that they had achieved victory and the mood in the working-class districts near the harbor was one of jubilation. Three weeks later arbitration awards granted rates of Rs.1.75 a day and Rs.3.50 a night for loading workers and Rs.1.60 a day and Rs.3.20 a night for discharging workers, which represented an increase over existing wages. The workers were allowed an hour off for their night meal and three-quarters of an hour for the day meal. The umpire, who estimated that a worker would earn an average of Rs.43.75 a month for loading and Rs.40. for discharging cargo, stated, "I regard a monthly wage between Rs.40. and Rs.45. as a fair and reasonable wage upon the evidence which came before the arbitrators and from my own knowledge of the conditions of life."<sup>6</sup> The arbitration award was welcomed by the workers and lively celebrations were held to mark the event, including a spectacular procession organized by the Ceylon Labour Union, consisting of "brightly clad dancers, banners bearing slogans, bebies of specially trained choristers singing heroic stanzas and a sprinkling of Red Shirts, all headed by music and a large red flag." On this occasion large enthusiastic crowds were present from all parts of the city and Labour Union badges were worn by a large number of the crowd.<sup>7</sup>

6. *Ceylon Daily News*, 29 March 1927. For details of the strike, see *Times of Ceylon*, *Ceylon Daily News*, and other daily papers for Feb. 1927.

7. *Ceylon Daily News*, 11 April 1927.

The strike in the harbor—after which the workers had obtained significant concessions—was an event of great importance for the labor movement and was one of A. E. Goonesinha's biggest trade-union victories. The strikers received considerable help from other sections of the workers and from the public, and this enabled them to conduct a militant campaign. Mass meetings were held at which railway, harbor, Government Factory, and printing-press workers demonstrated their support for the strikers and made donations for the strike fund. Many influential shopkeepers offered to supply food to the strikers, and Goonesinha announced that "Podisingho of Galpotha and Banda Appu of Bankshall Street were prepared to feed about 500 people at a time, night and day."<sup>8</sup> The Ceylon Labour Union also commanded the whole-hearted loyalty of the harbor workers. The workers were reputed to be the "toughest" and rowdiest section of the Colombo working class, but strict discipline was maintained.

Support was also forthcoming from foreign seamen—one of the most publicized incidents being the encouragement the strikers received from the Australian crew of the *Jervis Bay*, which had docked in Colombo during the strike. These sailors had been offered nearly £2. over and above their wages for unloading the cargo, but on hearing that there was a strike on in the harbor they refused to work. Some of the crew visited the office of the Labour Union and informed Goonesinha that they were members of an Australian union whose rules prevented them from acting as "blacklegs" in a strike. The Labour Union held a reception for the crew on their return journey at which Goonesinha claimed that it was rarely that such sympathy was shown by the white race to the nonwhites, and he added that the "epoch making" action of the crew of the *Jervis Bay* "augured well for the labour movement the world over." The crew was presented with a photograph taken during the strike, light refreshments were served, and "Solidarity Forever" was sung.<sup>9</sup>

Some newspapers also supported the strike. The *Daily News* was highly critical of the system of contracts and subcontracts, and declared that a solution to labor troubles in the harbor could only come with the elimination of the middlemen. It added that the un-

8. CNA, Colombo Harbour Strikes, File CF.200/1927.

9. *Ceylon Daily News*, 14 Feb., 20 April 1927.

certainty of employment and the poor rates of pay made the condition of the workers "one worthy of consideration"; the use of prison labor by the government was referred to as "contrary to civilised usage," and the government was blamed for prolonging the dispute by its nonintervention at an earlier stage, thereby causing hardship to the strikers and losses to the shipping companies.<sup>10</sup>

The strike consolidated the dominant position of Goonesinha as the leader of the workers. In the early 1920's the government had tried to ignore Goonesinha, but by 1927 he had emerged as the undisputed labor leader of Colombo. The strike also marked the emergence of Goonesinha into active radical politics, and from 1927 until 1931 he was as much an important political figure as a labor leader. During the 1927 harbor strike, anti-British feeling was aroused, as the leadership of the union came into direct conflict with the British shipping agents and harbor officials and the British members of the police force, who still regarded trade unionism as a subversive movement which should neither be recognized nor encouraged. Goonesinha has recalled that when he telephoned the General Manager of the Ceylon Wharfage Company, W. F. Fleming, to ask for an interview, he received the reply "To hell with trade unions." Similarly Goonesinha was baited by the Chairman of the Port Commission, Graeme Tyrell, who asked, "What the devil do you mean by creating all this trouble?"<sup>11</sup> The activities of Goonesinha and his supporters were naturally of great interest to the police. During the strike, the Vice-President of the Labour Union, K. Natesa Aiyar (the Indian member of the Legislative Council), advocated a strike among domestic and hotel servants in order to teach the "white man" a lesson and bring him to his knees. This led to a confidential note by Inspector-General Dowbiggin.

We are accustomed to wild statements from Mr. Goonesinha but it is a very different matter when a Member of the Legislative Council supports making an attack on one community by calling out scavenging coolies, domestic servants and hotel servants. This is of course exactly what Goonesinha tried to do in 1923 and failed. It is typical of Goonesinha's methods.<sup>12</sup>

10. See editorials, *ibid.*, 16, 24 Feb. and *ibid.*, 23 Feb. 1927.

11. Personal interview with A. E. Goonesinha, 1961.

12. CNA, Report of C.I.D., File CF.200/1927.

The strike in the harbor caused serious alarm among both businessmen and government officials. The strength of the Labour Union had been demonstrated and the possibility of labor disputes disrupting the whole business life of the community, as well as stimulating political agitation, were new factors to be dealt with. At the conference called by the Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, to discuss the strike, British businessmen associated with the shipping lines said that they could deal with the strikers if the government afforded them protection and declared martial law, a request which the Governor refused.<sup>13</sup>

An important effect of the gains made by the harbor workers after the strike of 1927 was the encouragement thereby given to direct action by other sections of the working population. One notable advance was the formation in 1928, by A. E. Goonesinha, of the Ceylon Mercantile Union, the first trade union among clerks in the private sector. Following the victory of the harbor workers, a wave of strikes occurred in Colombo in 1928 and 1929. Among the many labor disputes that took place in 1928, the most important one was the strike of hiring-car (taxi) drivers, who belonged to the Ceylon Chauffeurs' Union, an affiliate of the Ceylon Labour Union.<sup>14</sup> The hiring-cars, which were owned by private Companies, did a brisk business when ships with tourists were in port, and the drivers were skilled, literate, and militant. In April and May, 1928, there was a series of disputes between the drivers of the Minerva Hiring Company, who belonged to A. E. Goonesinha's Union, and the owner, C. D. Armstrong, who was reluctant to recognize trade unionism among his employees. Armstrong had dismissed the leading union officials among his drivers saying, "get out of my garage . . . I don't want your damned Union."<sup>15</sup> At a public meeting to sup-

13. *Ibid.*, Report of conference of 23 Feb. 1927.

14. There were also labor disputes in 1928 at several of the large business firms including, Hoare & Co., Hutson & Co., Walker & Sons, Colombo Commercial Co., Freudenberg & Co., and the New Colombo Ice Company. Among the other sections of workers who were led by the Labour Union into making claims against their employers in 1928 were the hotel workers (at the Grand Oriental Hotel, the Galle Face Hotel and the Metropole), the printing workers at the *Examiner* Printing Press and Harrisons & Crosfield's Printing Department, hospital workers in Kandy, the workers at the Government Factory, the "coal coolies" in the Harbour, and the labor force of the Admiralty in Trincomalee.

15. *Ceylon Daily News*, 10 May 1928.

port the drivers, a resolution was passed referring to the strike as an "outcome of the challenge thrown out to Trade Unionism," and a pledge was made to boycott any firm that directly or indirectly supported Armstrong against the workers on strike. This strike marked the first occasion on which the boycott was used in Ceylon during a labor dispute, although Goonesinha had advocated its use in the political field for many years. A boycott was declared against a petrol station owned by Walker & Co., who were held to have supported Armstrong. The station referred the matter to the Police Magistrate, alleging that A. E. Goonesinha had intimidated their customers with threats of violence if they traded there.

The strike caused a stir when stones thrown at one of the tourist cars belonging to Armstrong resulted in the wife of the Mayor of Newcastle, New South Wales, losing an eye. Responsibility was denied by A. E. Goonesinha and the Chauffeurs' Union, who denounced the incident as bringing disgrace, "not only to the labour movement but to the whole Island," and Goonesinha, in a letter to the Labour Advisory Committee, asked that the Committee intervene to settle the strike in view of the incident, which he considered to be a "serious development." Goonesinha was also anxious to have the four-week-old strike settled as he was about to leave for Britain to attend the Labour Party Commonwealth Conference. The Labour Advisory Committee, under the chairmanship of W. E. Wait, consented to mediate if this was acceptable to both parties and if the strike and boycott were called off by the Chauffeurs' Union. This was agreed to and a settlement between the parties was negotiated, by which some of the dismissed workers were taken back.<sup>16</sup>

The climax to the industrial unrest and the peak point of the influence of the Labour Union was reached in 1929 when the workers of the Colombo tramways were involved in militant strike activity. The tramway strike, and the riots that followed, demonstrated the fact that the Colombo working-class population was prepared to resort to violence and militant action on a scale unparalleled in Colombo. The strike, which had started as an industrial dispute over wages, ended in a popular upsurge of violent resistance to authority. The original cause of the strike was for-

16. For details, see *ibid.*, 10, 22, 23, 30 May 1928.

gotten and the Colombo workers came out into the streets to show their support for Goonesinha and to manifest their defiance of the police.

One of the chief means of transport used by the urban workers was the tramways which served the commercial and populous districts of Central Colombo. The tramways were owned by Boustead Brothers, a British Company, who were also Estate Agents dealing with the import and export of a large variety of products. The drivers and conductors of the trams were skilled and literate elements of the working class. Their wage rates were Rs.1.20 a day rising to Rs.2. in the seventh year of service and Rs.2.50 in the fourteenth year. The workers claimed that they got no sick or casual leave and were fined on the slightest pretext, including a fine of a cent a minute if they were late in the morning. The Ceylon Labour Union, which had formed a trade union among these workers, sent a memorandum demanding a 25 percent increase in pay, 2 weeks' casual and 2 weeks' sick leave, free raincoats, boots and hats, overtime pay, and a ban on deductions from wages. The employers agreed to make some concessions on leave and overtime but refused an increase in wages.<sup>17</sup> This refusal, along with the dismissal of a tram conductor, led to a strike on January 23, 1929, which lasted for 13 days and involved only 150 workers, but had an impact which went far beyond the original grievances of the workers.

At the outset the Ceylon Labour Union realized that the scope of the strike would have to be extended if any success was to be achieved. It therefore chose the effective method of hitting at the employers through boycotts. Goonesinha and the Labour Union urged the public to boycott the trams "as a protest against the scandalous manner" in which Boustead Brothers were treating their employees. The result of the boycott was to increase the interest of the general public in the strike. The travelling public had not been greatly inconvenienced by the strike (as distances in Colombo are not great), and there was little hostility towards the strikers. The Labour Union provided free rides in taxi cabs (whose drivers were members of the Union and supporters of Goonesinha), and several sympathizers lent their private cars for the transport of tram passengers.

17. *Ibid.*, 24 Jan. 1929.



The boycott proved to be a great success and large crowds of interested sightseers assembled on the roads. The volunteer tram drivers, including Cedric Boustead, a partner of Bousteads, and other British executives from business firms (inspired no doubt by the 1926 General Strike in Britain when the "upper classes" helped to break the strike by manning transport and other services), were booed and jeered at and passengers travelling by tram were stoned by the crowds. Strikers picketed the tram routes and officials of the Labour Union travelled around in cars appealing in humorous rhymes to bystanders to boycott the trams. The *Ceylon Daily News* described the "crowds of unemployed and street hooligans [who] took up the songs and paraded the streets in holiday mood . . . joined by troops of street urchins." Some English passengers bound for Australia, who were in port for a day, were taken around in cars by the Labour Union, waving red flags and shouting "Don't travel by tram" in Sinhalese, to which the crowds responded with deafening cheers. A group of mercantile clerks went in procession round the streets in support of the tramway men and Law College students with red flags and red sashes round their hats went along the tram routes demonstrating their sympathy with the strikers. The railway workers from the locomotive workshops (which were situated along a tram route) were also said to have shown their support for the strike "in a dangerous fashion" by shouting insults to tram drivers and passengers and hurling stones at the trams.

The situation was further aggravated by a second boycott launched against Boustead Brothers. Responding to the Labour Union's call for a boycott of Boustead's goods for the duration of the tram strike, the workers at the wharf refused to handle any cargo for Bousteads. According to a police report, the Labour Union's objective was to "cripple Bousteads, and bring about a settlement of the strike by preventing the loading and unloading of their produce in the harbour"; the report added that the Ceylon Wharfage Company was threatened with a general strike of all workers if they were forced to handle Boustead's goods.

The boycott of their cargoes caused serious alarm to Bousteads. Goonesinha was summoned to the Chamber of Commerce to sign a document renouncing the boycott, in return for which the Company merely promised to refer the demands of the strikers to the

head office in London. The agreement called upon Goonesinha in his capacity as President of the Labour Union, and on behalf of other unions with which he was connected or would be connected in the future, to declare that where a dispute arose, he would not in any way interfere with or hamper the work of any company for which Bousteads were the agents, and to agree that a breach of this would make him liable for damages. Goonesinha's reaction to this was one of fury; he tore up the document and issued a statement to the press condemning it as scandalous and impertinent: "It is a document that binds me, this union and future unions to Bousteads . . . and any failure to observe these ridiculous conditions makes me liable to pay damages. Does Mr. Boustead think I am a lunatic?" After this episode the strike and boycott were intensified. The *Daily News* stated that because of the "inhuman document" Goonesinha had been asked to sign, "the sympathy of the public veered decisively on the side of the strikers." The turn of events led to the active intervention in the dispute of S. P. Hayley, who was the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Chairman of the Employers' Federation. The Labour Union, too, was anxious for a settlement of the dispute, and after further negotiations it was decided that the strike and boycott were to be called off for a few days pending the final decision.<sup>18</sup>

While the negotiations were going on between the tramway men and the employers, the strike, which had begun as a dispute on wages and the dismissal of a worker, led to a serious riot between the police and the dense crowds that had lined the streets since the beginning of the tram boycott. The police had always been unpopular with the working class and urban poor of Colombo. The British police officers were feared, and the Inspector-General of Police, H. Dowbiggin, was remembered as being connected with some of the excesses committed during the Riots of 1915. The Ceylonese police officers, who came more into contact with the workers in their day-to-day activities, were objects of popular hatred, as they had the power to arrest and intimidate the poor, and often exacted bribes. The unpopularity of the police was commented upon by Governor Stanley in a despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

18. For details of the strike, see *ibid.*, 1-7 Feb. 1929.

In Ceylon, respect for the police is not as general as it is in England. Suspicions and prejudices against the police are enhanced by the peculiar propensity of many local newspapers to make an almost daily feature of the publication of articles or allegations tending to bring all government authority into hatred or contempt.<sup>19</sup>

During the tramway strike, Goonesinha and other members of the Labour Union accused the police of acting against the workers, and constant denunciations and derogatory references to policemen kept alive the existing hostility. At mass meetings, the Labour Union officials referred to the police as devils, assassins, and wild elephants who were trying to harm the poor man.<sup>20</sup> In a comment on police attitudes, Goonesinha wrote:

As armed constables accompanied every tram car, the masses very naturally looked upon the police as taking a very active interest against the strikers. . . . I found that the police showed in what direction their sympathies lay, when they hustled, harassed and even roughly handled drivers who had placed their cars at the disposal of the public. Feeling was roused against the police force and it was accentuated when prosecutions were initiated day after day.<sup>21</sup>

The trouble between the police and the strikers began during the boycott when the tramway company requested protection and police constables were assigned to the trams. The crowd hurled continuous abuse at the volunteer tram drivers and began throwing stones, bottles and pieces of iron at the trams. This led to further police intervention; policemen were placed on duty along the tram routes and they arrested many persons on charges such as disorderly behavior, assault of policemen, loitering, mischief, obscene language, and intimidation. The drivers of taxis and private cars who were giving lifts to tram passengers were charged with many traffic offenses, which led to the Trades Union Congress protesting against "the attitude of discrimination adopted by the police in prosecuting and harassing hiring car drivers." At a mass meeting the police were accused of "encouraging the tramway company and interfering unnecessarily with the Labour Union men."<sup>22</sup>

19. CNA, Despatches to Colonial Office, Governors Despatch No.130 of 12 February 1929.

20. *Ibid.*, C.I.D. Report on the Tramway Strike, p. 28, File CF.609/29.

21. *Ibid.*, letter to Colonial Secretary from A. E. Goonesinha, 13 Feb. 1929.

22. *Ibid.*, C.I.D. report, File CF.609/29.

The tension and hostility between the crowds and the police reached its climax on February 5, 1929. The railway workers from the locomotive workshops—who were most active in jeering and throwing stones—were enraged when the police were given permission to enter the workshops, make arrests, and remain on duty inside the premises. There had been disorder throughout the day and “rowdies and urchins” were reported to have been persistent in stoning the police. The crowd waited for the railway workers and when the workshop whistle blew, “the waiting mob cheered . . . the workmen appeared and deafening cheers, hooting and caterwauling filled the air.”<sup>23</sup> (This incident was reminiscent of the rioting in Colombo in 1915, which also began with agitation by the railway locomotive workers.) The same morning, Goonesinha and some of the Union officials, while on their way to the Chamber of Commerce to negotiate a settlement of the strike, were involved in an incident. Goonesinha, who intervened in a skirmish between the police and members of the crowd, reprimanded the police officials and was himself involved in a scuffle with the police. The incident led to serious repercussions as a rumor quickly spread that Goonesinha had been seriously assaulted by the police. Workers from the harbor, the coal sheds, the Government Factory, and the railway workshops stopped work on hearing this and marched into the city. They were joined by workers from many private firms, and by noon the city was flooded with a mass of excited workers, the numbers being estimated by Goonesinha at 20,000. Crowds of workers gathered outside the offices of the Ceylon Labour Union, and Goonesinha in addressing them, denounced the police for assaulting him. Cries of “Kill all the police” were reported from the crowd.<sup>24</sup>

By evening, an immense crowd of workers and onlookers had collected outside the Maradana police station. The press referred to “scenes of the wildest disorder” when stones and bottles were thrown at the police station, nearby buildings and gas installations were set on fire, electric wires were cut, a fire engine was burnt, and the street lights were smashed. The police fired on the crowd, killing 5 and injuring 250, and after 20 minutes of firing, the disturbance

23. *Ceylon Daily News*, 6 Feb. 1929.

24. CNA, Report of the Deputy I.G.P., 10 Feb. 1929, File CF.609/29.

was quelled. The next morning dense crowds again collected at the scene of the previous day's riots. They hurled abuse at the police officers, and the feeling against the police ran so high that the Ceylonese constables were withdrawn from the streets, an act which was condemned by the *Daily News* as "a complete abrogation of authority, an abject surrender . . . a greater crime than that of Maradana's hooligans."<sup>25</sup> Further attacks on the police station began and only subsided when Goonesinha arrived on the scene accompanied by the Colonial Secretary and persuaded the crowd to return to their homes.

The unprecedented violence of the tramway strike, which was the culmination of a series of strikes, resulted in two important policy changes. The employers, who in the past had refrained from recognizing trade unions led by Goonesinha, decided to come to terms with the unions. The Government, which up to that date had adopted a laissez-faire policy towards labor activity (relying on the police to keep law and order during strikes), drafted repressive laws designed to control trade unions.

## The Results of Labor Unrest

### *The Employers' Federation and the Collective Agreement*

The attitude of the capitalists and the government to trade unionism changed with the circumstances. By 1928, after the harbor and hiring car strikes, the more enlightened private employers and government officials were prepared to come to terms with the labor movement by conciliatory measures which implied the recognition of trade unions and their leaders. In this year an Employers' Federation was formed and the first collective agreement was signed a year later. But attitudes hardened in 1929 after the tramway strike because the situation seemed dangerous, with the result that, under pressure from employers and key officials in the administration, the government tried to pass harsh legislation to curb labor activity.

In the late twenties, the class conscious and militant urban working class was also in the process of becoming an important force in

25. See *Ceylon Daily News*, 6, 7 Feb. 1929, for details.

politics. After the acceptance of the Donoughmore Commission's proposals on universal suffrage and the formation of the Ceylon Labour Party, there seemed to be a real possibility that labor would achieve considerable political influence in the legislature. In view of this new development, the large employers of Colombo decided that in order to control the growing strength and militancy of the labor movement, they had to combine and adapt themselves to the new situation. Under the guidance of S. P. Hayley, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and the Managing Director of the large export firm of Hayley and Kenney, an Employers' Federation was formed on October 18, 1928. This federation grouped together the main British business firms in Ceylon, excluding the plantations. The objects of the association included the encouragement and promotion of better relations between employer and employee, mutual support and cooperation between employers dealing with workers' demands and strikes, and the fixing of "points of custom and forms of contract between employers and employees." Other objects of the Federation were the encouragement of fair wages and arbitration in labor disputes.<sup>26</sup>

The background to the formation of the Federation was a change of attitude among both employers and government officials to the problem of labor unrest and the recognition of trade unionism. A shift in the attitude of some government officials to the labor movement had been noticeable in 1928, when the Colonial Secretary, M. Fletcher, wrote on the question of trade unions, "I regard the unrest among labour as being in no way abnormal. There is an inevitable and quite proper demand for a higher standard of comfort and the men are beginning to see that without combination and co-operation their material advancement is impossible."<sup>27</sup> The approach to A. E. Goonesinha as an individual also underwent a change—instead of denigration, he began to receive flattery. Whereas in 1925 a civil servant had advised the government that "Goonesinha's name should not be mentioned unnecessarily" and that as far as possible he should be ignored, only three years later the Colonial Secretary could say, "I am personally by no means persuaded that Mr. Goonesinha is as black as it is the fashion to paint

26. *Times of Ceylon*, 18 Oct. 1928.

27. CNA, Minute of 17 June 1928, File CF.492/1928.

him, and judiciously handled . . . I believe that his actions might be of real use to the community."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in 1928 the leading employers revised their opinion of the labor movement. S. P. Hayley warned the employers that though some of them still thought "they could dictate to labour," the aim of the Federation was not to fight unions because "labour nowadays [cannot] be fought." Hayley urged the Employers' Federation to show interest in the prevention and the settlement of labor disputes. The employers were requested not to give cause for strikes, but where they were imminent or had actually occurred, to have discussions with the recognized labor leaders. Up to that date, A. E. Goonesinha had been regarded by employers as an agitator and demagogue whose hold over the working class of Colombo was a menace to industrial peace. But at the first meeting of the Employers' Federation, S. P. Hayley publicly declared that Goonesinha was "not such a terrible bogey," and that if recognized, he could be induced "to put his labour union on a proper basis."<sup>29</sup>

After the serious clashes connected with the tramway strike and riots of February, 1929, the Employers' Federation made a move to curb militant trade unionism by negotiating a collective agreement between employers and labor. The architect of this agreement was Hayley, the Chairman of the Employers' Federation, who persuaded A. E. Goonesinha and individual employers of the advantages to both sides from such an agreement. There was some resistance at first from Goonesinha, who did not at that time trust any employer. Goonesinha has recalled how he misunderstood Hayley: "When he invited me to come to the Chamber of Commerce I refused to do so and asked him to come to the labour headquarters if he wanted to discuss anything with me. I had occasion to be very angry with employers for the manner in which they treated us, but I found Hayley sincere and earnest."<sup>30</sup> It must be noted that Goonesinha had been in England in 1928, during the historic Mond-Turner negotiations between the Chairman of the Imperial Chemical Industries, Sir Alfred Mond, and Ben Turner, the Chairman of the British Trades Union Congress, when an attempt was made

28. CNA, Minute of 14 Oct. 1925, File B/19/26; and CNA, File CF.492/1928.

29. *Times of Ceylon*, 18 Oct. 1928.

30. Personal Communication from A. E. Goonesinha, 22 May 1962.

to achieve industrial peace through collaboration between employers' and workers' organizations. The formation of the Ceylon Employers' Federation in 1928 had also been welcomed by Goonesinha on the ground that it would help to "establish friendly relations between employer and employee, to clear all misunderstandings . . . [and] to talk over and adjust matters."<sup>31</sup>

In June, 1929, Ceylon's first collective agreement was signed by the Employers' Federation and the Ceylon Trades Union Congress. The Employers' Federation represented eight affiliated associations of employers in the engineering, motor, mills, fertilizer, hotel, harbor, importing, and printing trades, while the All-Ceylon Trades Union Congress had seven member unions—the Ceylon Labour Union and the unions of chauffeurs, printers, hotel workers, mariners, tramwaymen, and mercantile clerks. In return for recognition, the Trades Union Congress agreed not to call a strike without first attempting to arrive at a settlement with the employer or in the event of negotiations failing, not to strike without giving the Employers' Federation seven clear days' written notice of intention to strike.

The collective agreement marked an important development in industrial relations in Ceylon and indicated a change of attitude by both sides. The agreement was a formal statement of procedures between two central organizations representing labor and employers. In Britain during this period such procedures were only observed by convention. Hence the meeting together and legitimizing of the relationship between the central bodies was a novel move in a country where trade unionism was in a rudimentary state of development. According to Goonesinha, some of his friends in the British trade-union movement congratulated him on this achievement because "at that time they had nothing like this."<sup>32</sup> The agreement was also of great importance because it meant that for the first time official recognition was given by capitalists to the existing trade unions and to the right of workers to organize. In return, the unions gave a pledge to negotiate under an orderly system which was laid down in writing; this amounted to a disavowal of lightning

31. Report on the sessions of the Trades Union Congress, *Times of Ceylon*, 27 Oct. 1928.

32. Personal communication from A. E. Goonesinha, 22 May 1962. See CLD, File T.11, for the agreement.



strikes and other militant forms of trade-union action. Goonesinha called the agreement a “happy augury” in the relations between employers and workers, and praised Hayley as an “ambassador of peace who had ushered in a new era, when for the first time in the history of this island, Labour Unions were recognized.”<sup>33</sup>

### *The Attempt to Introduce Trade Union Legislation*

After the tramway strike of 1929, which had resulted in lightning strikes, picketing, boycotts, and riots, the government attitude changed and there was a serious attempt to curb trade unions and regulate trade disputes by drastic legislation on the one hand, and to introduce minimum-wage legislation and a conciliation ordinance on the other. The violent tramway strike occurred in February, 1929, and within a month the Ceylon government had drafted legislation to cover trade unions, trade disputes, conciliation of disputes, and minimum wages.

The most significant feature of this draft legislation was the adoption of the main restrictive provisions of the British Trade Union and Trades Disputes Act of 1927. This Act had been passed by a Conservative government after it had crushed the general strike of 1926, for as G. D. H. Cole remarked, “The Conservative Party, having tasted reaction wanted more. It felt that the trade unions were down, and it could not bear to miss the chance of stamping on their faces.”<sup>34</sup> By the 1927 Act, many of the concessions that had been won by British unions over the course of years were swept away: several categories of strikes, including general and sympathetic strikes, and also mass picketing were declared to be illegal, and the political fund of a trade union was subject to a “contracting in” clause to replace the provision whereby a member had to specifically agree to payments to this fund.

Conservative officials in Ceylon welcomed this Act and used it as a precedent to introduce similar legislation to counteract the growing labor movement. Four draft bills were drawn up. They included a Trades Disputes Ordinance, which prohibited strikes in essential services, lightning strikes, sympathetic strikes, intimidat-

33. *The Comrade*, 7 July 1929, 10 Nov. 1929.

34. G. D. H. Cole. *A Short History of the British Working-class Movement*, p. 423.

tion, and the wearing of uniforms, and a Trades Union Ordinance, which compelled trade-union registration, thereby making an unregistered trade union an unlawful association. Under this ordinance, expenditure on political objectives was controlled by a "contracting in" clause for trade-union members. These two draft ordinances, which incorporated many of the provisions of the British Act of 1927, were rejected by the Secretary of State for the Colonies. (The other noncontroversial ordinances were the Trades Disputes Conciliation Ordinance establishing procedures for settling labor disputes, which was implemented in 1931, and a Minimum Wages Ordinance, which was shelved because of the depression.) The rejection of the ordinances governing trade unions raises two questions: What were the specific causes that contributed to the drafting of such repressive legislation? What was the reason for the surprising rejection of these proposals by the Secretary of State for the Colonies?

The normal practice when drafting legislation in the colonies was to adapt existing laws in either the metropolitan country or in other colonies to local conditions. Apart from the fact that the restrictive British trade-union legislation of 1927 met with the approval of the British officials in Ceylon, the adoption of its main provisions can perhaps be explained by specific local conditions, namely the pressures on the Ceylon government to control labor and trade-union activity. Various groups of employers, sections of the press, the police, and some government officials had urged the government to introduce drastic trade-union legislation. The climate for the acceptance of such legislation was created by the violent nature of labor disputes that occurred both in Ceylon and in India about this time.

Each major strike in Ceylon after 1927 had been followed by agitation by the British-owned press and the less liberal employers for the adoption of the British Trade Union Act of 1927. After the harbor strike had paralysed shipping in the port in 1927, the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce requested the Colonial Secretary to introduce legislation based on the British Act of 1927, not only because the Ceylon Labour Union had "a very effective hold over the workers," but also because without efficient safeguards, "the irresponsible or mischievous use of that power [offered] the most serious men-

ace to the working of the port and the general welfare of the Island.”<sup>35</sup> In 1928, the agitation for labor legislation was renewed after the violence that occurred during the taxi strike. The *Times of Ceylon*, which led the campaign for stringent control of trade unions and the prohibition of lightning strikes, accused the government of being “disgracefully supine in controlling the strike situation.” The *Times* urged that violence during strikes should be punished by flogging and that outsiders who were professional agitators should not be allowed to be union office-bearers.<sup>36</sup> After the taxi strike, several other associations requested the government to introduce trade-union laws based on the British legislation. These included the Automobile Club of Ceylon, which emphasized the need to preserve “law and order,” and the Engineering Employers’ Federation, which held that legislation similar to the British Act was both “necessary and urgent” to control labor organizations, “if the government thinks that such bodies should be recognized.”<sup>37</sup> The Employers’ Federation soon after its formation in 1928 also declared that one of its main aims was to persuade the government to pass labor laws.

Another incentive for the government to pass labor legislation was the fear that the serious industrial unrest in India, and the increasing strength of the Communists in the Indian trade-union movement, would affect the Ceylon situation.<sup>38</sup> In 1928, the *Times of Ceylon* warned that the labor situation throughout the East was becoming difficult to handle because of the activities of “politically minded professional agitators” and it particularly mentioned “Indian politicians of Swarajist tendencies” who had set themselves up

35. CNA, File J/854/28.

36. Editorials, *Times of Ceylon*, 21, 25 May 1928.

37. CNA, File J/854/28.

38. The year 1928 was one of acute industrial unrest in India when there were 203 disputes involving over half a million workers and resulting in the loss of over 31 million man-days. The Communists had been increasingly active in the Indian Trade Union movement after 1923. Because of the rise in the number of industrial disputes, in 1926 a Trade Unions Act was passed which provided for the registration of Trade Unions. From 1925–1929, the influence of Indian Communists on the Trade Union movement grew. Many foreign Communists attended the sessions of the Indian Trade Union Congress, and the affiliation of the Indian T.U.C. to the League against Imperialism, and the Communist Pan-Pacific Secretariat, and its refusal to send delegates to the I.L.O., showed that Indian Trade Unionism was “breaking off from Amsterdam to approach Moscow.” S. D. Punekar, *Trade Unionism in India*, pp. 87, 92, 391.

as labor leaders in order to strengthen their own position as politicians. The Indian government was accused of being dilatory in tackling the situation, and Ceylon was said to be following a similar policy. The paper advocated the immediate introduction of stringent labor legislation as "delay in grappling with the situation [had] resulted in the worst form of American Tammany Hall methods in Trade Union circles."<sup>39</sup>

The need for trade-union legislation was also strongly advocated by government officials. During the harbor strike of 1927, a civil servant commented on the vital need for "the drastic suppression of picketing, victimization and violence,"<sup>40</sup> and in 1928, after a former secretary of the Labour Union had published a pamphlet accusing Goonesinha of misappropriating union funds, the Inspector-General of Police advised the government to introduce legislation to control the finances of unions. He also warned the Colonial Secretary that the rioting during the tramway strike was an example of how quickly in the East "a mob gets inflamed over some incident entirely different to the original dispute between strikers and employers," and mentioned the urgent need for arbitration and for legislation to prohibit lightning strikes.<sup>41</sup> Although the government had ignored earlier appeals for labor legislation, it decided to take action after the violence and rioting of the tramway strike. Three days after the riots, the Colonial Secretary informed the Legislative Council that the government, which had been studying the British legislation, was preparing laws to control trade unions.

However there was also opposition to the draft legislation. A. E. Goonesinha announced that it had been "prompted by the hue and cry raised by the master class and by the vicious campaign inaugurated by designing and treacherous employers of labour," and he alleged that the Ceylon government, in proposing such legislation, was siding with the capitalists.<sup>42</sup> Sections of the press also protested, including the *Ceylon Independent*, which declared that it would be unfortunate if "the panic legislation adopted in the U. K. during the general strike was introduced to the Statute Book of Ceylon."<sup>43</sup>

39. Editorial, *Times of Ceylon*, 25 May 1928.

40. CNA, Minute of 19 Nov. 1928, File B/148/27.

41. *Ibid.*, Statement of 26 May 1928, File CF.800/300.

42. *The Comrade*, 16 June 1929.

43. Editorial, *Ceylon Independent*, 21 Feb. 1929.

*The Opposition of the Secretary of State to the Draft Legislation*

While the usual official practice was for the Colonial Office in London to review all colonial legislation, it rarely happened that a law submitted with the support of the Governor and the civil service in a colony was rejected outright by the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The attitude of the Colonial Office to the Ceylon trade-union legislation of 1929 is therefore of special importance. With the formation of the Labour Government in 1929 there had been a change in the attitude of the Colonial Office towards labor problems in the colonies. The new Secretary of State for the Colonies was Lord Passfield, better known as Sidney Webb, founder-member of the Fabian Society and coauthor of the classic *History of Trade Unionism*. The Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies was Dr. T. Drummond Shiels, who had served on the Donoughmore Commission for the reform of the Ceylon constitution. Shiels had a special interest in colonial labor problems and was the moving force behind Passfield.<sup>44</sup> One of the main aims of the Labour Government was to secure the repeal of the Trade Union and Trade Disputes Act of 1927, which was regarded as a vindictive piece of legislation. It was therefore natural that any legislation in the colonies based on the 1927 Act would meet with the disapproval of the Labour Party and the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The Governor of Ceylon, Sir Herbert Stanley, was aware of the difficulties that would arise, and in a despatch to the Secretary of State, he stressed the need for such legislation in Ceylon "to protect the uneducated labourer from exploitation, whether by the employer or by fraudulent persons by means of pseudo-trade unions and also to protect the community from disorganization and other serious consequences which may so easily follow upon the occurrence of preventable labour disputes."<sup>45</sup> Although the Governor forwarded the draft legislation to London in April, 1929, stating that the matter was one of urgency and that the bills should be implemented at an early date, no immediate reply was received. Ten

44. B. C. Roberts. *Labour in the Tropical Dependencies of the Commonwealth*, p. 179.

45. CNA, Despatch by Governor Stanley to the Secretary of State for the Colonies No.385 of 30 April 1929, File CF.800/30.

months later the Governor showed his irritation at the delay and remarked "There may be some political difficulty in view of the attitude of H. M.'s present government to some of the labour legislation passed by their predecessor. I am afraid we have to possess our souls in patience."<sup>46</sup> The veto from London finally came in September, 1930, nearly a year and a half after the submission of the draft legislation, when Lord Passfield in a confidential despatch, while approving the Minimum Wage Bill and the Trades Dispute Conciliation Ordinance, objected to those provisions of the Trades Union Ordinance and the Trades Disputes Ordinance which were based on the British Act of 1927. On the question of the British Act, Passfield wrote:

Substantially all the provisions of the Act are or may become in the near future subjects of acute controversy in this country, and although I recognize that very different regulations of labour organization might be applicable to the U. K. on the one hand and Ceylon on the other hand, I have not felt able to agree to the incorporation of its provisions in the legislation of Ceylon.<sup>47</sup>

The despatch made special mention of the provisions to which objection was taken; these were the "contracting in" clauses with regard to the political fund, and the sections concerning sympathetic strikes, illegal strikes and prohibition of incitement to illegal strikes, liability in tort during illegal strikes, and intimidation. This despatch was a severe blow to the Ceylon administration, as the drastic provisions of the draft ordinances, which were intended to restrict trade-union activity, were exactly the provisions which the Labour Government was not prepared to see enforced in colonial territories.

Less than three weeks after the Ceylon despatch, a circular despatch was sent by Passfield to the Governors of all colonies in which the attitude of the Colonial Office to the whole question of trade unionism and trade-union legislation in British Colonies was laid down. Passfield stated that he regarded the formation of trade unions in colonial territories as "a natural and legitimate consequence of social and industrial progress"; it was therefore the duty

46. *Ibid.*, Minute of 19 Feb. 1930 by Governor Stanley, File B/6/30.

47. *Ibid.*, Confidential Despatch of 1 Sept. 1930.

of colonial governments to "smooth the passage of such organizations . . . into constitutional channels" in order to prevent trade unions falling "under the domination of disaffected persons by whom their activities may be diverted to improper and mischievous ends." The suggestion was also made that legislation on the lines of the British Trade Union Act of 1871, and laws providing for compulsory registration, should be introduced if they did not exist in any colonial territory; in colonies where the labor movement was more advanced, the Governors were asked to review the situation and decide if the existing legislation was adequate. While emphasizing that British legislation might not always be appropriate in colonies "in view of the divergencies of labour conditions," Passfield insisted that he could not agree to any provisions of the British Trade Union Act of 1927 being adopted.<sup>48</sup> In the face of this opposition from the Colonial Office, the Ceylon government was obliged to redraft the ordinances, but the Ceylon Colonial Secretary gave the order that no further action should be taken until the fate of the bill in the House of Commons to amend the Trade Union Act of 1927 was known. Although the Ceylon bills were redrafted in accordance with the instructions of the Secretary of State, the Ceylon government decided not to introduce the legislation, in the expectation that the Labour Government would not remain in office for very long. As one government official hopefully commented, "the decisions of the Secretary of State may be reversed if there is any change of government in Great Britain."<sup>49</sup>

There were other reasons why the government postponed the introduction of both the Trade Union Ordinance and the Trades Disputes Ordinance even in their modified and revised form. The economic depression after 1929 and the resulting widespread unemployment had led to a sharp decline in trade-union activity and industrial unrest. The control of trade unions therefore ceased to be a matter of urgency. In addition, the collective agreement between the Employers' Federation and the Labour Union, signed in June, 1929, had lessened the tension between the unions and employers and there were few strikes after this date. Another factor

48. *Ibid.*, Circular Confidential Despatch 17 Sept. 1930.

49. CLD, letter of Controller of Immigrant Labour, File T.8.

which influenced the government was the new Constitution of 1931, which provided for a State Council elected by universal suffrage. The officials had to act very cautiously as it was felt that any controversial legislation would be challenged by the elected majority in the State Council.

The government also dropped the proposed Minimum Wage Ordinance, which was regarded as an impractical measure during a period of severe economic depression when employers were reducing wages and retrenching labor. The only trade-union legislation the government decided to proceed with was the noncontroversial Trades Disputes (Conciliation) Ordinance of 1931, the first piece of legislation in Ceylon providing for government intervention in labor disputes. The aim of this bill was the prevention and settlement of trade disputes by means of commissions appointed by the Governor, and conciliation boards appointed by the Controller of Labour.<sup>50</sup>

To sum up, during the years 1923-1929 the labor movement underwent several important changes. The conditions were ripe for an upsurge of militant trade unionism. Economically, there was relative prosperity, and the labor movement was beginning to exert political influence. The militant strikes of these years were in part an outcome of the favorable economic and political conditions. The other significant change was the official recognition afforded to the Labour Union and its leaders by the employers. The large capitalists decided to tackle the situation by a policy of appeasement. They organized themselves into an Employers' Federation, negotiated a collective agreement with the Labour Union, and urged their members to appear as enlightened employers. The policy was one of recognition and conciliation in return for "responsible" behavior on the part of the unions. The government, on the other hand, abandoned its laissez-faire policy towards trade unions and tried to take a firm stand on industrial unrest through stringent legislation. But the economic events of the depression, which engulfed the labor movement, changed the whole picture. Employers sharpened their

50. The commissions were to report on matters relating to trade, including agriculture and industry. The conciliation boards were to deal with any existing or apprehended trade dispute, whether the parties to the dispute consented or not.



weapons and abandoned the policy of conciliation; the government and the employers deliberately ignored both the collective agreement and the Trade Disputes Conciliation Ordinance, and the militant labor movement of the 1920's underwent almost total collapse.

## The Economic Depression and the Decline of the Urban Labor Movement, 1929-1933

*Never since British rule has the country been faced with such a terrible plight.*<sup>1</sup>

A. E. Goonesinha, 1929

The impact of a country's economic conditions on the fortunes of a labor movement can be seen from a study of the severe economic depression in Ceylon between 1929 and 1933. Among the several points that emerge from a consideration of labor during a period of economic crisis is the overwhelming importance of economic factors, for even where a favorable political climate for trade-union agitation prevails, in the face of a sharp economic setback the labor movement inevitably suffers a decline. Methods of labor agitation such as strikes, which prove effective in times of prosperity, are often hard to sustain in conditions of depression. Class antagonisms also sharpen during a period of crisis and the capitalist class becomes solely concerned with retaining its position—at the expense of the working class. It also happens that during a period of economic depression the working class and its leaders sometimes resort to racial or religious diversionary activities.

The Ceylon labor movement, which had reached the peak of its trade-union and political success in 1928–1929, declined sharply in influence with the onset of the economic crisis. The Ceylon Labour Party and the unions made attempts to combat the depression and led protests against the government's economic program, but the

1. *The Comrade*, 1 Sept. 1929.

agitation was not successful, and the strikes led by A. E. Goonesinha during these years ended in defeat. The depression aggravated the conflict between the moderates, who were concerned with capitalist interests, and the radicals, who championed the working class. The capitalists attempted to safeguard their own economic privileges by cutting wages, retrenching labor, and imposing taxes which affected the poor. The labor movement, which was on the verge of collapse, tried unsuccessfully to bolster its declining influence by resorting to a campaign against Indian workers in Ceylon. But by 1933, the "Goonesinha era" had ended.

Ceylon's export-import economy was so heavily dependent on the world market that even by the middle of 1929 the effects of the economic depression in the United States and Europe were felt in Ceylon. The Island's main exports were a limited variety of primary products and the main imports were foodstuffs and manufactured goods. As a result of the depression—when the fall in the price of primary products was greater than the fall in the price of industrial goods—Ceylon was exposed to the worst hazards of the trade cycle, as seen in Table 2.<sup>2</sup>

Table 2.

Year	Exports*	Imports*	Balance of Trade*
1926	503	395	+108
1929	407	429	— 22
1932	170	196	— 26

\* value in Rs. millions

Between 1930 and 1933 the world prices of tea, copra, and graphite fell sharply, and there was a disastrous crash in the rubber industry. The estimate of the prices of Ceylon exports during these years, taking 1925 as a base, is shown in Table 3.<sup>3</sup> The fall in

Table 3.

Year	Tea	Rubber	Copra	Graphite
1925	100	100	100	100
1930	78	15	65	105
1931	59	8	43	94
1932	43	6	52	66
1933	47	6	42	49

2. H. A. de S. Gunasekera, *From Dependent Currency to Central Banking*, p. 174.

3. S. B. Das Gupta, "Four Years of the Depression in Ceylon," *Ceylon Economic Journal*, Dec. 1933.

the world prices of imported essential foodstuffs such as rice and sugar provided some relief, but the price of imported manufactures remained relatively high. Moreover, since the fall in money income was greater than the fall in domestic prices, there was a decline in real income. The most serious social problem the government had to face was the economic distress caused by unemployment. There was drastic retrenchment in government departments, private firms, and factories, and many tea, rubber, and coconut estates either closed or sharply cut down the number of workers employed. With the resulting curtailment of spending, the peasant economy also began to feel the effect of the depression, and the price of local paddy fell from Rs.5.90 a bushel in 1926 to Rs.3.50 in 1933.<sup>4</sup> Unemployment was severe in the towns both among skilled and unskilled workers, and among white-collar workers in government and mercantile offices. Many households dismissed their servants, who swelled the ranks of the urban unemployed. The government tried to combat the effects of the crisis by orthodox pre-Keynesian means, but Ceylon, while sharing the "dislocation in the countries which were her major markets, was almost completely free of the experimentation in economic affairs which was a characteristic feature of the policies of economically advanced countries."<sup>5</sup> For example, between 1929 and 1933 there was a drastic policy of retrenchment in the government and private sectors, and expenditure on public works was also cut sharply from Rs.24 million in 1928-1929 to Rs.5 million in 1933-1934.<sup>6</sup> Other methods used to counteract the depression were increased import duties, the introduction of an income tax, tea and rubber restrictions schemes, the reduction of the minimum wages on plantations, and desultory efforts at coping with the unemployment problem through government relief works.

For several years after the formation of the Ceylon Labour Union the country had enjoyed a period of unprecedented trade prosperity. At the same time the cost of living had risen sharply and the efforts of the Union were directed towards securing increases in wages and better conditions of work. Chronic unemployment was

4. A. D. V. de S. Indraratna, *The Ceylon Economy from the Great Depression to the Great Boom*, p. 4.

5. H. A. de S. Gunasekera, *From Dependent Currency*, p. 158.

6. *Sessional Paper 12 of 1937*, p. 5.

not a major concern of the Labour Union, as the boom conditions in tea, rubber, and other products had led to increased employment opportunities. Until 1928, apart from casual unemployment among unskilled workers in Colombo, there had been no serious unemployment problem. But in mid-1929, the trade unions had to tackle for the first time the prospect of mass unemployment. Faced with this unparalleled economic crisis, the labor movement resorted to several courses of action. First, the labor leaders organized protests against the government's economic policy both in and out of the legislature. Second, the competition for jobs during a period of severe unemployment led to an aggravation of communal tension and the adoption by the Labour Union of a program based on communal animosity. Third, the Labour Union, during the depression years, made several unsuccessful attempts to bolster its strength by launching strikes.

### The Campaign of Protest

Soon after the first effects of the depression began to be felt in 1929, the Labour Union and the Ceylon Labour Party started a campaign of official deputations and mass meetings to draw the government's attention to the economic hardship of the workers. In August, 1929, a Labour Party deputation to the Governor, led by A. E. Goonesinha, stressed the opposition of the working class to the policy of the Legislative Councillors who he said, were mainly landowners and capitalists, representative of only four percent of the population. The deputation urged the abolition of the taxes on food and suggested that the economic crisis should be tackled by taxes on betting, entertainment, and luxuries, and also by raising a loan, rather than by measures which would further increase unemployment and hardship among the poor.<sup>7</sup> The same month, a meeting organized by the Labour Union in order to protest against deteriorating economic conditions attracted over 10,000 persons.<sup>8</sup> At another Labour Party mass meeting held in October of that year to consider the unemployment question, Goonesinha announced

7. CNA, File B/95/29.

8. *The Comrade*, 1 Sept. 1929.

that the labor deputation to the Governor had produced no tangible results. Resolutions were passed asking the government to tackle the unemployment problem and urging the Secretary of State for the Colonies to take necessary measures to prevent unemployment in government service. Goonesinha also advised the workers that unless the government took steps to reinstate those who had been dismissed, the working class should "retaliate and be fully prepared for the fray."<sup>9</sup> But there was little hope of retaliation or preparing for battle, because by 1931 the financial crisis had deepened and unemployment had grown to serious proportions, especially among the urban workers of Colombo. Many of the unemployed gathered at Goonesinha's house demanding relief, and he had to appeal to merchants for bags of rice which were distributed to the needy. Crowds of unemployed also collected outside the office of the Labour Union where, according to a State Councillor, "there were a thousand people . . . with signs of starvation writ across their faces, struggling, scrambling and fighting for morsels of food."<sup>10</sup>

Supporters of the Ceylon Labour Party also used the legislature to agitate against the government on this issue. Between 1929 and 1931 they conducted a vigorous opposition in the Legislative Council to the government's economic policy, and this was continued by Labour Party members in the newly-elected State Council after 1931. In 1929, a select committee consisting of the unofficial members of the Legislative Council considered methods of coping with the problem of balancing the budget and recommended cuts in public expenditure and further retrenchment of workers. C. H. Z. Fernando of the Labour Party dissented, and condemned these proposals on the grounds that they would give rise to "a wave of unemployment unprecedented in the history of this country which would further react disastrously on the general prosperity of the country if it [did] not spell actual ruin and misery to thousands of the poorer classes."<sup>11</sup> The proposals of the select committee were also severely attacked by Goonesinha, who accused the Councillors of "handling the axe with the ferocity of murderers." He alleged that while thousands were thrown out of employment, public works stopped, and food supplies to hospitals curtailed, the councillors

9. *Ceylon Daily News*, 7 Oct. 1929.

10. *Debates in the State Council of Ceylon, Hansard*, 9 Sept. 1931, p. 197.

11. *The Comrade*, 15 Sept. 1929.

had voted money for a university and for the compilation of a Sinhalese dictionary, thereby showing their "negligence, jobbery and utter callousness."<sup>12</sup>

A further round of protests occurred when the Ceylon Government in 1929 decided to raise additional revenue by increasing the duty on all imports by 9 percent. Many of the unofficial members of the Legislative Council objected to this proposal as it meant that not only imported luxuries but the necessities of life of the poor would be affected by the increased duties. The Labour Party strongly protested that by increasing taxes on rice, chillies, and other foodstuffs, the government was discriminating against the poor. *The Comrade*, the journal of the Labour Party, wrote: "Petrol, coal, coke, tea chests etc. are allowed into the country free of all duty . . . What is necessary to support the lives of the poor is taxed, while others are let off scot-free because the government studies the interests of only one class."<sup>13</sup> The decision of the Legislative Councilors in 1929 to cut their own salaries by Rs.100. was ridiculed by the Labour Party, which said that they should have given up their whole salaries "instead of a miserable Rs.100." When the Council voted to increase the salary of the Inspector-General of Police, *The Comrade* condemned it as "inconceivable madness" and a "crime," coming at a time "when thousands of poor are faced with starvation."<sup>14</sup>

There was further controversy in 1930, when the government proposed to introduce an income tax into Ceylon for the first time; although there was a storm of protest from the wealthy, the move was supported by the Labour Party as being "the most equitable form of taxation."<sup>15</sup> After a heated discussion on the matter, the Legislative Council passed an amendment that the income tax proposals should be deferred until the new legislative body was elected in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution. The side-tracking of the income-tax issue was vehemently condemned by the Labour Party.

The opinions expressed by some British officials in Ceylon on the depression also caused resentment among labor leaders. At the budget debate of 1930, the acting Colonial Secretary, F. G. Tyrell, had

12. *Ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1929.

13. *Ibid.*, 21 July 1929.

14. *Ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1929.

15. *Times of Ceylon*, 14 Nov. 1930.

referred to the "hard times before us," and said that the crisis would teach people "habits of industry and thrift . . . and [might] well prove to be a blessing in disguise." Victor Corea, who had for many years been associated with the labor movement, replied that highly-paid government officials, secure in their posts and sure of their income, knew nothing of the "grinding poverty of the masses of the country," who were being "strangled out of existence by the twin serpents of burdensome taxation and depression."<sup>16</sup>

At the general elections to the State Council held under universal suffrage in 1931, the Labour Party contested seven seats and won two. A. E. Goonesinha was elected by the Colombo Central constituency, the working-class stronghold in the city, and S. W. Dasanaiké won in Colombo South. The new State Council was faced with the problems of increasing unemployment, a deepening financial crisis and the prevalence of distress in all parts of the island. The campaign of the two Labour Party members consisted of sharp criticism of government policy combined with an effort to secure some measure of relief for the unemployed. For example, in September, 1931, Goonesinha proposed that the government should give immediate relief to the thousands of unemployed who were "in acute distress and on the verge of starvation." As a short-term measure he demanded that the government provide Rs.25,000 for the urgent relief of distress as there were 5,000 to 10,000 people who were actually starving and who would "break out into riot" if steps were not taken to ease the situation. Goonesinha claimed that although the government's committee appointed in 1930 to review the unemployment question had rejected the dole system, in the present crisis doles would be better than nothing. "Those gentlemen who sit here say that the dole system is not good, will they talk of principle and not give a measure of rice to feed these people and their families?"<sup>17</sup> The supporters of the motion included S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who was at that date the President of the Ceylon Workers' Federation. He agreed that the system of doles was unproductive, but said the depression was due to the evils inherent in the capitalist system. The outcome of the debate attracted the attention of many of the unemployed, who stood outside

16. *Debates in the Legislative Council of Ceylon, Hansard*, 30 July 1930, pp. 1011, 1141.

17. *Ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1931.



the State Council awaiting the result. Although the Minister of Labour, Peri Sunderam, urged that the question of unemployment should be approached "with caution and circumspection," Goonesinha's motion was carried in the State Council by 29 votes to 14.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the government's measures to deal with the financial crisis (income tax, increased import duties, cuts in expenditure, and retrenchment), attempts were also made to cope with the unemployment problem. In 1931 the Colombo Municipal Council made provision for doles to be granted to clerks and skilled workers who were unemployed, but this scheme was abandoned after a few months.<sup>19</sup> Relief works were begun by the municipality in the suburbs of Colombo where a few thousand workers were given employment which was described as unskilled earthwork involving levelling and filling at the rate of 50 cents a day for men and 30 cents for women for an eight-hour day.<sup>20</sup> An official report on poor relief admitted that these schemes could not touch the underlying causes of unemployment and were only able to alleviate distress to some extent, while proving to be a very expensive method of distributing relief. For example, it was estimated that work on the Kolonnawa bund cost Rs.5,000 more when done under the relief scheme than under normal conditions.<sup>21</sup> At the budget debate in 1932, the two Labour members were critical of the relief works. A. E. Goonesinha referred to the government's efforts to cope with unemployment as "mere patchwork" and regretted that a "real scheme for tackling the question of unemployment [had] not been placed before the House." S. W. Dassanaiké on the same occasion remarked, "It is all well and good for us to provide for the levelling of the ground and a little bit of earthwork here and there; these afford some little assuagement of the acute distress . . . but there are queues of men who cannot be given work."<sup>22</sup>

Faced with the proportions of the economic crisis and the ineffective measures taken by the government to resolve the problem, the prospects for the labor movement seemed very bleak. Protests by the unions and the Labour Party were of little avail and in view of

18. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

19. "Unemployment in Ceylon," *Sessional Paper 7 of 1937*, p. 13.

20. "Report on Poor Relief in Ceylon," *Sessional Paper 20 of 1934*.

21. "Unemployment in Ceylon," *Sessional Paper 7 1937*, p. 16.

22. *Debates in the State Council of Ceylon, Hansard*, 4 Oct. 1932, pp. 2545, 2461.

the existing unemployment, strikes were ruinous. The labor movement did, however, attempt to rally Ceylonese urban labor by resorting to a campaign against Indian workers in Colombo.

### The Change in Communal Policy of the Labor Movement

It is not unusual in times of economic stress for the majority group in a society to turn against the minorities and blame them for existing hardships. In Ceylon, one of the direct consequences of the economic depression was an increase in communal tension among the working class. This was encouraged by the Labour Union's policy against urban Indian immigrant workers. The migration of workers from South India for work on the plantations had begun in the 19th century and by 1931 there were nearly 700,000 Indian workers and their dependents in Ceylon. In Colombo there were 33,000 Indian workers in 1931, mainly doing unskilled jobs in the Municipality, harbor, railways, public works, and factories. These Indian urban workers were Tamils (from Madras State) and Malayalis (from Travancore-Cochin), who generally were willing to do unskilled work at lower rates of pay than indigenous labor.

Animosity against the Indian immigrant workers had existed in Ceylon even before the First World War, when the antiforeign propaganda of Anagarika Dharmapala was directed against Tamil, Malayali, and Muslim immigrants from India. In the years around 1912 there had been instances of hostility by Sinhalese railway workers towards Indians, who were regarded as potential "black-legs" during strikes. But in the early 1920's the Ceylon Labour Union drew its main support from the daily-paid workers of the railways, harbor, and Government Factory, where there were high proportions of Indians. During these years of relative economic prosperity there was little racial tension, and both Indian and Sinhalese urban workers were drawn together into joint trade-union activity. A. E. Goonesinha—although he had been strongly influenced by Dharmapala and the Sinhalese Buddhist tradition—readily accepted the loyal support of the Tamil and Malayali workers of Colombo. In 1928, when the Ceylon Trade Union Congress was

formed, Goonesinha proclaimed his belief in the solidarity of all workers and said that the labor movement made no distinctions on grounds of caste, race, or creed.<sup>23</sup> The recommendation of the Donoughmore Commission that Indians resident in Ceylon should be given the vote was supported by Goonesinha and the Labour Party, although the Ceylon National Congress opposed the move. It is, however, significant that in 1928 K. Natesa Aiyar, the Vice-President of the Labour Union, who was an Indian, accused Goonesinha of saying that Indians should be driven out of Ceylon; Goonesinha denied this and Natesa Aiyar was expelled from the Labour Union.

As a result of the unemployment during the depression, there was an acute increase of communal tension in Colombo and a hardening of A. E. Goonesinha's attitude towards immigrant labor. In April, 1929, during the strike of printers at the Lake House Press led by Goonesinha, the management were able to break the strike by bringing in workers from South India. This was the first time that Goonesinha had suffered such a defeat, and the use of Indian labor to crush the strike led to a wave of anti-Indian feeling among the Sinhalese. In 1929, many employers who were undergoing financial difficulties replaced their workers with lower-paid Indian labor. After the Queen's Hotel in Kandy had dismissed the entire kitchen staff and replaced them with Indians, the *Morning Leader* described the incident as a serious menace to skilled and unskilled Ceylonese workers and said that there was "much resentment among the working classes and the general public."<sup>24</sup> In 1930 there were reports that households in Colombo were employing Malayali servants in place of Sinhalese, "giving rise to disorder and unruliness," as the Sinhalese were using "guerilla tactics" against the Malayali servants, who were waylaid and assaulted.<sup>25</sup> At the railway workshops the persistent friction between Sinhalese and Malayali labor led to a case of murder, and some gangs of unemployed men began organized attacks on Indian workers in all parts of Colombo.<sup>26</sup>

As economic conditions deteriorated, A. E. Goonesinha's campaign against Indian workers increased in intensity. The marked

23. *Ceylon Daily News*, 27 Oct. 1928.

24. *Morning Leader*, 8 April 1931.

25. *Ceylon Independent*, 30 July 1931.

26. CLD, File G.150, Part I.

change in the attitude of Goonesinha towards Indian workers was apparent in 1930. His Sinhalese paper, *Viraya*, launched a campaign of anti-Indian propaganda, and in December, 1930, it attributed the decline of the Sinhalese to the "white man, Coast Moors, Borahs and Malayalis," who were accused of crushing the Sinhalese out of existence.<sup>27</sup> After he entered the State Council in 1931, Goonesinha led the campaign against the unrestricted migration of Indian workers into Ceylon. He complained in September, 1931, about the Indian immigrants who came to Ceylon, "daily or weekly by hundreds without restriction."<sup>28</sup> In October of the same year, Goonesinha proposed that preference should be given in government departments to Ceylonese workers, including daily-paid labor, and he claimed that 20 percent of the workers at the relief works at Kirillapona were Indians who could easily be repatriated.<sup>29</sup> In the budget debate of 1931, Goonesinha stated that out of 3,000 daily-paid workers on the railways, 1700 were Malayalis. "Hundreds of Malayalis are coming here and depriving Ceylonese labourers of work by undercutting them." He accused the government and private employers of being interested only in cheap labor and alleged that while Ceylonese worked for Rs.1.50 or Rs.1.75 a day, the Malayalis were willing to work for 50 cents.<sup>30</sup>

The anti-Indian campaign was carried on with great vigor during 1932 and 1933. At the May Day celebrations in 1933, the police noted "the truculent attitude of Goonesinha's May Day procession against the Malayalis,"<sup>31</sup> and the Trades Union Congress that year urged employers to give preference to Ceylonese workers as there were "thousands thrown out of employment . . . and destitution among the Ceylonese."<sup>32</sup> In July, 1933, Goonesinha claimed that although there were over 15,000 unemployed persons in Colombo, there were 32,000 Indians employed in government departments.<sup>33</sup>

But these efforts by A. E. Goonesinha to revive the fortunes of the labor movement by means of an anti-Indian policy failed. Although for a short period the energies of urban labor were diverted

27. *Ibid.*, quoting *Viraya* of 12 Dec. 1930.

28. *Debates in the State Council of Ceylon, Hansard*, 8 Sept. 1931, p. 140.

29. *Ibid.*, 13 Oct. 1931, p. 627.

30. *Ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1931, p. 506.

31. CLD, File G.150 Part I.

32. *Ceylon Daily News*, 14 March 1933.

33. *Ibid.*, 7 July 1933.

by communal antagonisms, the severe economic effects of the depression led to the almost complete disintegration of the labor movement.

### Strike Activity

During these years of economic crisis, the Labour Union made a desperate attempt to bolster its strength and retain the allegiance of the workers through strike action. Several efforts were made by Goonesinha to conduct a successful strike, but every strike that took place was crushed. The reason for this was that with the onset of the depression, the attitude of the employers towards trade unions hardened and the conciliatory policy of the late 1920's was abandoned in favor of strong tactics to combat and defeat the unions. Further, the government, which had passed a Trades Disputes Conciliation Ordinance in 1931, showed reluctance in implementing this ordinance when faced with a decline in the bargaining power of the trade unions. Consideration of the major strikes during the depression reveals the extent to which the position of the trade unions had changed from the successful era of the 1920's.

#### *The Lake House Strike*

The first major setback suffered by Goonesinha and the Labour Union came in April, 1929, when a strike of printers occurred at the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, known as the Lake House Group, which was the largest newspaper concern in the country. The Managing Director of this group, which included two English dailies, the *Ceylon Daily News* and *Ceylon Observer*, and Sinhalese and Tamil papers, *Dinamina*, *Silumina*, and *Thinakaran*, was D. R. Wijewardene, who had modernized and expanded his business during the 1920's. Wijewardene was a moderate nationalist who had been the Secretary of the Social Service League and an office-bearer of the Ceylon National Congress. As an employer, he was known as a hard taskmaster, insisting on efficiency, punctuality, and correct work, which he achieved by a ruthless system of fines. Wijewardene regarded Goonesinha as a political extremist and also a dangerous labor agitator. To Wijewardene, trade unionism was a menace that

had to be fought, and he was not prepared to recognize either the right of workers to form trade unions or the right of trade-union leaders to negotiate on behalf of the workers. The series of successful strikes led by Goonesinha's Labour Union in government departments and commercial firms and the rapid development of trade unionism in the 1920's had been viewed with alarm by Wijewardene. When the first strike took place at Lake House, Wijewardene acted swiftly, using the opportunity to attempt to put an end to Goonesinha's run of successes and thereby to crush the Labour Union.

The dispute at Lake House arose in 1929 when the printers formed a union with Goonesinha as its President and petitioned the management for an increase of wages; this resulted in the instant dismissal of the workers who presented the petition. When in March, 1929, a machine foreman of the *Ceylon Observer* with nine years' service was dismissed, the union called a strike of all the Lake House printers. A list of strikers' demands was drawn up which included a 50 percent wage increase and the discontinuance of fines.<sup>34</sup> The case of the strikers was taken up by Goonesinha, who condemned the system of fining workers at Lake House as scandalous and said, "nowhere in the world have I heard of such disgraceful treatment meted out to poor workmen." He alleged that a delivery boy earning Rs.7.50 a month had been fined Rs.7.25, that workers were fined when machinery was damaged in the course of their work, that fines of Rs.5. to Rs.10. were imposed for mistakes by proofreaders, and that workers who were absent were fined Rs.2.50 and forfeited their day's wages. Further allegations were made that no extra pay was given for overtime, and that no sick leave or casual leave was granted to workers. Goonesinha described the strike at Lake House as the product of "years of oppression, tyrannical treatment and slave driving." But Wijewardene refused either to meet or to negotiate with Goonesinha and proceeded to use all available means to break the strike. Those workers who had not struck work were given police protection and some were taken on a picnic to one of Wijewardene's country estates.<sup>35</sup> The decisive blow was inflicted against the strikers when linotype operators were brought from

34. *Morning Leader*, 23 March 1929.

35. For details, see *The Comrade*, 30 June 1929; *Morning Leader*, 29 March 1929.

Madras to fill the places of the workers on strike. Goonesinha denounced this as "an insult to Ceylon" which would lead to the enslavement of the Ceylon workers, and called upon the trade unions and the public to boycott the Lake House newspapers.<sup>36</sup> According to Goonesinha, the strike was being continued to vindicate "the rights of trade unionism, the rights of men to combine, and of unions to make representations on their behalf," and he condemned the Lake House attitude of not tolerating "outside interference" as a "most remarkable and scandalous position."<sup>37</sup>

The strike collapsed, however, and the printers had to return to work unconditionally. The blow was a bitter one for Goonesinha, more so because the Lake House newspapers gloated over their success against him. In turn, Goonesinha did not spare the Lake House proprietor; he contrasted Wijewardene's refusal to recognize trade unions and his use of Indian labor in breaking the strike with the realistic approach of S. P. Hayley and the Employers' Federation. He further alleged that at a meeting of the Printing Employers' Federation, a resolution introduced by Wijewardene that the Federation should not recognize trade unions was defeated, and that as a result, Wijewardene had left the Federation. Goonesinha claimed that British firms were more enlightened in their attitude toward trade unions, and denounced "plutocrats born in this Island who would pursue their barbaric ways and exploit labour by defying the unions." On the question of employing "blacklegs" from India, he said that British firms never "hit basely below the belt" in this manner, whereas D. R. Wijewardene, "the great patriot, who spoke of the Indian menace, who would not give the Indian the vote," had imported Indian labor and "boldly announced that he was in a position to break the strike and send his countrymen into the streets by giving Indians their jobs."

The defeat of Goonesinha in the Lake House strike was the revenge of the moderates over the radicals. As a result, Goonesinha's long-standing animosity towards the moderate nationalists of the Ceylon National Congress was roused again, and D. R. Wijewardene became the main target of attack by the Labour Union and the Labour Party. In an article on "Lake House Tyranny," the Labour

36. *Morning Leader*, 12 April 1929.

37. *Ibid.*, 9 April 1929.

Party journal warned Wijewardene that though he considered himself the "Kaiser of the capitalists" and proclaimed that he was going to wage a ruthless war on trade unions, he should not forget that "today the Kaiser was chopping wood in Holland, a disillusioned and sadder but wiser man."<sup>38</sup> The animosity was kept alive on both sides. After the Lake House strike, this group of newspapers carried on a fight against trade unionism and a personal vendetta against A. E. Goonesinha. For example, for some years the prefix "Mr." was dropped by the Lake House papers whenever they had occasion to refer to the labor leader.

In addition, the Lake House group supported other employers in their battle against trade unionism. One such occasion occurred in November, 1929, when there was a strike over dismissals at the Nuwara Eliya Grand Motor Depot led by James T. Rutnam, a radical nationalist teacher who at the time supported Goonesinha and was active in politics. During this strike, Lake House hostility to trade unions and strikes was again strongly expressed. The management of the Motor Depot was wished success "in fighting this menace," and the experience of Lake House in dealing with strikes was stressed in an editorial which stated, "Some time ago lightning strikes were becoming almost a daily feature . . . the public of Ceylon have not forgotten the summary manner in which this plague was checked." The *Daily News* called Rutnam an "obstreperous school teacher," and added, "all that these so-called labour leaders seem to care for is the notoriety they earn by their theatrical exploits."<sup>39</sup> During a strike at the *Times of Ceylon* in 1931, the *Daily News* described the Labour Union as a "stalking horse for rogues and brigands," and added that except for the strike at Lake House where "the strikers and the men behind them learnt to rue the result of their recklessness," other firms had not been so successful in dealing with the "strike serpent."<sup>40</sup>

### *The Times of Ceylon Strike*

The second major defeat suffered by A. E. Goonesinha and the Ceylon Labour Union occurred in 1931—a few weeks after the pass-

38. For details, see *The Comrade*, 30 June, 7 July, 10 Nov. 1929.

39. *Ceylon Daily News*, 7 Nov. 1929.

40. *Ibid.*, 25 April 1931.



ing of the Trades Disputes Ordinance of 1931—when workers at the British-owned *Times of Ceylon* came out on strike. The year 1931 was a period of increasing economic depression, when the *Times* had lengthened the hours of work, stopped giving double pay for overtime, and had cut the casual and sick leave privileges which had been formerly accorded to the workers. These grievances of the *Times* employees were further aggravated by the dismissal of two workers; the newspapers alleged that the dismissals were for “fraud and insolence,” but the Labour Union claimed that they were the result of protests by these workers against the curtailment of privileges.

The *Times* strike developed into a test of strength between the Labour Union on the one hand, and the employers and the government on the other, but the odds were heavily against the Labour Union as the slump and the increase of unemployment had by that time become critical. The union threatened the Employers’ Federation with sympathetic strikes in other firms, and it organized mass demonstrations, processions, and continuous picketing outside the offices of the *Times*. The employers and the government, for their part, adopted stringent measures and the *Times* management refused negotiation or efforts at conciliation. The government claimed that the Trades Disputes Ordinance did not apply to the case, and the police increased their powers of arrest against pickets.

The dispute hinged on the interpretation of the collective agreement signed in 1929 between the Employers’ Federation and the Trades Union Congress, which stated that before calling a strike, the union had first to attempt to negotiate and if this failed, to give a week’s notice of intention to strike. The Employers’ Federation, which claimed that the union had failed by a few hours to conform to the week’s notice, was able to persuade the government that the dispute should therefore not be referred to a conciliation board. The Manager of the *Times* informed a government official that Goonesinha was making use of the Trades Disputes Ordinance to rehabilitate himself among the workers by forcing government intervention, and added that even though his case was weak and the strikers would gain nothing, Goonesinha could then put the blame on the government. Goonesinha, on the other hand, not only accused the *Times* of “taking advantage of the depression to clamp

down on the rights which had been obtained by the workers," but also alleged that the Employers' Federation was trying to avoid conciliation by insisting on a week's notice to the very hour like "Shylock's pound of flesh." The government, in this case, sided with the employers, and Governor Stanley in a confidential telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies reported:

The grounds of the strike are trivial and the terms of the agreement regarding strikes between the Labour Union and the Employers' Federation were not properly observed. . . . Goonesinha was anxious to strengthen his position by engineering a strike on any excuse as soon as possible after the passing of the Conciliation Ordinance and forcing Government intervention under the Ordinance. I have refused to take action under the Ordinance. The Employers' Federation has behaved reasonably and I am quite convinced the agitation is largely artificial.<sup>41</sup>

The Controller of Labour, N. J. Luddington, after an interview with Goonesinha, said he would not intervene in the dispute unless the existing means of conciliation had failed. Claiming that if he did so the employers would be hostile to the new ordinance, he added, "Conciliation [is] a plant of tender growth which should not be prejudiced against from the start." A government communique also stated, "If anyone asks for government intervention under the Industrial Disputes Ordinance it [is] his duty to avoid hasty action . . . government cannot assist those who by ill-considered action put themselves in the wrong."<sup>42</sup>

The *Times* informed the government that they were not prepared either to arbitrate or reopen the matter, and taking advantage of the unemployment among skilled workers, the management was easily able to fill the places of the strikers. To counteract this, the Labour Union had to do something drastic, and the Indian "weapons" of passive resistance (*satyagraha*), hunger strike, and boycott were employed. Goonesinha went on a hunger strike to persuade the "blacklegs" who had replaced the strikers to stop "behaving like traitors." At a public meeting a worker referred to Goonesinha as "our Mahatma" and another said that the strikers should adopt the methods of Gandhi. A telegram sent "on behalf of Ceylon workers" to the Governor claimed that Goonesinha's condition was critical and asked for the immediate appointment of a conciliation board

41. For details, see CNA, File 1007/31.

42. CLD, Minute of 24 March 1931, File T.7; and CNA, File 1007/31.

to settle the strike. After five days, Goonesinha broke his fast when a delegation of workers gave him an assurance that the "blacklegs" would cease work.<sup>43</sup>

The tactic of trade boycott, which had been used in earlier strikes, was also tried during the *Times* strike. Two days after the strike began, Goonesinha warned the Employers' Federation that he intended to declare a boycott in the harbor which was likely to adversely affect members of the Federation. A token one-day stoppage took place and a week's notice was given of the harbor workers' intention to strike. The workers of the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills also struck work for a day, but resumed work on instructions from Goonesinha. There were said to be "bazaar rumours" that the railway workshops and hotel workers would strike, and that there would be a general strike, but these were discounted by a government official who stated that the depression was "a very bad time to attempt anything like a general strike or sympathetic harbor strike," and accused Goonesinha of "merely using the threat in order to test his own power."<sup>44</sup>

As sympathy strikes proved to be impracticable during a period of depression, the Labour Union had to resort to other methods of militant activity. Several mass demonstrations were organized by the Labour Union and its volunteer corps of Red Shirts. The Gandhi Sangham (which had been formed to uphold the principles of Gandhism) supported the strikers and conducted a procession through the streets of Colombo carrying political slogans and portraits of Goonesinha, Gandhi, Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Sarojini Naidoo. At a mass meeting which followed, the crowds were asked to assist in the movement for a general strike and to help in picketing. The Labour Union and the Gandhi Sangham also organized picketing outside the *Times* and it was reported that "remarkable scenes were witnessed" when groups of volunteers squatted on the road and were arrested by the police; as fast as one group of pickets was arrested another took its place, and many clashes occurred between the police and the crowds. The Police Magistrate, on an application made by the police, passed an emergency ex-parte order prohibiting the public from picketing in any

43. CNA, File 1007/31.

44. *Ibid.*, Telegram of 16 April 1931.

manner in or near the office of the *Times*. A total of 89 pickets (of whom 52 were harbor workers) were arrested under the order, and Goonesinha, in a telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, protested against the cancellation of "the well-known rights of peaceful picketing," alleging that the police action amounted to interference with individual liberty. The government had not been consulted about the Police Magistrate's order and when Goonesinha cabled the Secretary of State, the Colonial Secretary noted that police action had been "somewhat precipitate," and suggested that the police be asked to go slow in their action against pickets.<sup>45</sup>

A. E. Goonesinha was correct when he stated that the whole machinery of government was being used against the strikers. Particular hostility and resentment was felt against the police, who were accused of siding with the employers. The Police Superintendent's action of entering the workshops of the *Times* and posting a notice assuring protection to persons willing to work was condemned by the Trades Union Congress as being "an attempt at intimidation." Goonesinha also accused the police of entering the premises of the Labour Union and assaulting people in their efforts to disperse crowds of pickets. The union issued a leaflet denouncing government officials for taking sides in the dispute, and condemning the Mayor for sending unemployed men to the *Times* to fill the posts of the strikers. Goonesinha also declared that government officials, who had been prevented in 1929 by a "civilised [Labour] government in England" from passing trade-union legislation "with poisonous terms" based on the English Act of 1927, were disgruntled over this rebuff and were determined "disloyally to undermine Downing Street." The government was prompted to reply to what it termed "false and mischievous accusations" and it insisted that "Government officials, including the Police, do not take sides in these disputes . . . it is their duty to maintain order and to protect all citizens from interference."<sup>46</sup> Sections of the press, also joined in condemning the Labour Union and Goonesinha, and references were made in the *Daily News* to the misuse of "the symbols and methods consecrated to a noble cause in India," in order to inflame "the worst passions of the mob in Colombo."<sup>47</sup>

45. *Ibid.*, Minute of 17 April 1931.

46. *Ibid.*, Leaflet by A. E. Goonesinha and Communique of Colonial Secretary.

47. *Ceylon Daily News*, 25 April 1931.

The Labour Union was unable to sustain the strike against the overwhelming opposition of the government, the employers and the press. The unemployment caused by the depression prevented the strike spreading to other sections of the workers and made popular support for the strike all the more difficult. The *Times* strike was called off, and the Labour Union experienced a major setback from which it never recovered.

### *The Galle Face Hotel Strike*

The third rout of the Labour Union was the collapse of the strike of waiters in Colombo's largest hotel in 1933. The Galle Face Hotel, which was British-owned and catered mainly for British residents and tourists, had suffered serious loss of business during the depression when there had been a marked decline in tourism.

In May, 1933, the Galle Face Hotel waiters, who received wages of Rs.19. per month, plus board, lodging and clothes, and extra money from tips, complained to Goonesinha that the Italian head-waiter had dismissed six waiters and taken on new ones, including Malayalis, and had pocketed a tip of Rs.100. which Lord Rothermere had left to be distributed to the waiters. In September, 1933, as a result of further dismissals, a strike took place at the Hotel.

The Trades Union Congress, in a letter to the management, accused the hotel of "leaving no stone unturned to persecute the men by attempting to deny them their rights." The action of the management was described as "scandalous victimisation" and Goonesinha stated that the Hotel had broken the Agreement between the Trades Union Congress and the Employers' Federation in precipitating a crisis by dismissing workers. In turn, the management said that the strike was a violation of the Collective Agreement, as it was called without the stipulated seven days' notice being given.<sup>48</sup>

The union was faced with a losing battle from the start of the strike. The swiftness with which the management was able to recruit labor was the first blow. The hotel issued a statement that they had filled all vacancies and added that it was a "great pity that some old servants of many years' service have been thrown on the streets without the prospect of any gratuity . . . Mr. Goonesinha has

48. For details, see *Ibid.*, 22 Sept. 1933.

only himself to blame for this deplorable state of affairs." Shortly after the waiters struck work, the conservancy workers at the hotel also came out in sympathy with the waiters, and were rapidly replaced from among the unemployed casual labor which was readily available.

Several unsuccessful attempts were made by the Labour Union to organize sympathetic strikes among other workers. At a mass meeting of waiters, harbor and other workers, a decision was made to give all possible assistance to the strikers. At this meeting the police clashed with the strikers and the union protested against the "high-handed action of the police in infringing the rights of the hotel employees" by forcibly ejecting them from the esplanade where the meeting was taking place. The Trades Union Congress adopted a resolution empowering Goonesinha, to "declare any strike in any place which in his opinion would help the cause of the men who are out on strike." At a meeting of the Ceylon Chauffeurs' Union, presided over by Goonesinha, the taxi drivers decided not to convey passengers to the Queen's Hotel, Kandy, as this hotel had supplied waiters to the Galle Face Hotel during the strike.

The strike failed—the management would not reopen negotiations with the union, and refused to take back the waiters who had struck work. As a result of the strike, 163 hotel employees lost their jobs, and these workers were blacklisted by all the big hotels which belonged to the Ceylon Hotels Association. In a petition to the State Council, the workers stated that they were boycotted by other hotels, and as a result more than 600 of their dependents were starving. When the Inspector-General of Police appealed to the Ceylon Hotels Association to lift the boycott against these workers, the Secretary replied that this was not possible, as the Association belonged to the Employers Federation and was bound by its rule that "no member shall knowingly employ any person who is suspended on strike or locked out from the service of any member of any association which is a member of the Federation."<sup>49</sup>

A survey of the period 1929 to 1933 reveals the way in which an acute deterioration of the economic situation caused an almost total eclipse of the labor movement, even at a time when political unrest

49. CNA, Galle Face Hotel Strike, File I/584/33.

was on the increase. In fact, the aggravation of the economic crisis, while heightening political tension, blunted the means by which labor could assert itself. In a context where unemployment was widely prevalent and alternative sources of cheap labor were readily available, trade unionism took on a "defensive" role, and the attempts made to sustain the movement ended in failure.

## Chapter 13

# The Labor Movement in the Plantation Sector

*The cooly's lot is not an enviable one. Being poor, ignorant and helpless, he is unable to protect himself against the cupidity and tyranny of unscrupulous recruiters and bad employers.*<sup>1</sup>

Ponnambalam Arunachalam, 1916

*No apology is required for having started a Labour Federation in the planting districts. . . . After a century of suffering the labourer has come to realize that self-help alone can save him. . . . He has found from sad experience that none can help him in the way in which he wishes to be helped.*<sup>2</sup>

K. Natesa Aiyar, 1931

Capitalist forms of production had first made inroads into Ceylon in the plantations, but the relationship between worker and employer on plantations retained nonetheless certain feudal features. This was the basic reason for the lack of political or trade-union organizations among plantation workers until 1931. The process of unionization on the plantations developed in isolation from the very active urban movement. The leaders of urban labor were aware of the grievances of the vast mass of unorganized workers on the tea and rubber plantations, but they made no attempt to introduce trade unionism on the plantations or to link the urban and plantation workers in joint action. Although the estate labor force had become more rooted in Ceylon by the late 1920's, urban politicians and labor leaders regarded the Indian workers as transient aliens

1. P. Arunachalam, *Speeches and Writings*, p. 208.

2. CNA, Open Letter of K. Natesa Aiyar, President of the Estate Labour Federation, to the Employers, File 1184/32.



with no permanent interest in Ceylon. Moreover, when strikes and serious labor trouble occurred in Colombo, the planters, who were alert to the possibility of labor agitation spreading to the plantations, took great care to isolate their workers from the urban labor movement. For example, during the 1923 general strike in Colombo, the planters prevented their workers coming to the city for fear that they might become "infected with the strikers' attitude of mind."<sup>3</sup>

In the 1920's, when there was an unprecedented rise in urban labor unrest, there were neither trade unions nor even friendly societies among plantation workers. An organization of plantation clerks and minor supervisory staff called the Kelani Valley Indian Association had been formed in 1923, and had demanded that weekly wage payments be made direct to the workers, but the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour claimed that the association's interest in labor had "yet to be proved" and that it existed only to promote its President's candidature to a nominated Indian seat in the Legislative Council.<sup>4</sup>

The life of the plantation worker continued to be as "nasty, poor brutish and short" as before. Even when urban labor had made economic, political, and social advances, the plantation workers lagged far behind. Economically these workers were the most exploited group, and in 1930 the Agent of the Government of India observed that indebtedness was the "most distressing feature" of the plantation worker's life: "Thousands of Indian labourers are perpetually in debt . . . their debts go on increasing in inverse proportion to (their) ability to pay them. Labourers' indebtedness which may have had small beginnings, becomes acute, chronic and well-nigh incurable."<sup>5</sup> During these years, however, the plantation worker began to emerge from his semiserf status, and the ties that kept the worker in bondage to the kangany were loosened, making the development of trade unionism feasible in principle. By legislation, some of the evils of the kangany system were controlled, although many evasions of the law took place. Nevertheless, one must note that the "tundu" system, whereby a kangany could transfer his "work gang" from one plantation to another, was abolished in 1921,

3. Statement of Graeme Sinclair, *Planters' Association Year Book*, 1923, p. 11.

4. CLD, Department of Indian Immigrant Labour, File W.22.

5. *Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in Ceylon*, 1930, p. 10.

and kanganyas were also prevented from recovering debts in the courts. Under the Minimum Wage Ordinance of 1927, wages had to be paid direct to the worker, and rates were raised. Although the economic depression caused a reduction in rates, the question of wages became an important issue, for it was a means by which the worker could emancipate himself economically from the kangany. One factor that had characterized the plantation work force was its links with India and its migratory nature. But by the 1920's these workers had become a permanent resident work force whose ties with India were weakening. Once the plantation became a fixed work place—rather than a temporary place to earn money and return to India—the workers' outlook changed. As contacts with the Indian village grew less and the dependence on the kangany declined, the plantation workers began to acquire the characteristics of wage labor.

One of the most significant political events for the plantation workers was their enfranchisement in 1931. Prior to this date, when the franchise in Ceylon was based on income, property, and literacy qualifications, the plantation workers did not possess any political rights. There were, however, two members in the Legislative Council who were nominated by the Governor to represent Indian interests. The Donoughmore Commission had recommended that the franchise should be granted to adults who had been resident in Ceylon for five years, but this was opposed by the majority of Ceylonese politicians on the grounds that immigrant Indians had no permanent interest in Ceylon and that this would result in the swamping of the Sinhalese vote in the up-country districts by a floating population of Indians. In view of these protests, the standard test of eligibility to vote was changed from a residential qualification to one of "domicile"; persons who were not domiciled in Ceylon had to either satisfy a literacy and property qualification, or obtain a "certificate of permanent settlement." After the franchise qualifications were altered, around 100,000 Indians acquired the right to vote.

In 1931, for the first time in Ceylon, the workers on plantations assumed a role of importance in political matters. In plantation districts the candidates held mass meetings, issued pamphlets and

election literature, and whipped up political excitement among the workers. This group of workers, hitherto ignored by politicians, found themselves at the center of political activity, eagerly canvassed by election candidates. The elections resulted in two Indians, Peri Sunderam (Hatton) and S. P. Vytilingam (Talawakelle), and one planter, A. Fellowes Gordon (Bandarawela), winning seats, out of a total of forty-six constituencies in the island. The elections marked the beginning of the political representation of plantation workers in the State Council, and the choice of Peri Sunderam, one of the Indian members, as Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce, was referred to by the Indian Agent in his report for 1931 as "a matter for singular satisfaction."

There were also other changes which made the workers receptive to unionization. For example, though the education system on plantations remained far below the standard in the rest of the country, some progress had been made after the Education Ordinance of 1920, whereby school-going on plantations was made compulsory and planters were obliged to provide workers' children with an elementary vernacular education. Whereas in 1904 there were only 2,000 children at school on plantations, by 1920 the figure was 11,000 and by 1930 it had risen to 26,000.<sup>6</sup> There was also an advance in literacy. The census of 1931 lacks this data, but the 1921 census figures show that there was 18 percent literacy among plantation workers (27.6 percent males and 7.1 percent females) compared to 12.37 percent in 1911. The spread of education had some bearing on the development of trade-union consciousness. Hostility to the kangany grew as the educated worker became better equipped to challenge his authority. The change in this respect was marked. In 1908 the evidence recorded by the Labour Commission indicated that the worker often had little knowledge of the amount of his indebtedness to the kangany.<sup>7</sup> The improvement in education enabled workers to keep accounts of their indebtedness and the wages due to them, and they became aware of any malpractices on the part of the kangany or the employer. The increase in education

6. E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census*, p. 410 for 1904 figures; *Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in Ceylon, 1931*, for the 1920 and 1930 figures.

7. *Labour Commission Report, 1908*, para. 9, 10.

among the plantation workers also had political repercussions. Literate workers kept in touch with local and Indian politics through Tamil newspapers published in Ceylon and through Tamil political literature from India. The plantation workers began to show interest in the activities of the Indian nationalist movement and enthusiasm for the Congress leaders, Gandhi and Nehru, who visited Ceylon in 1927 and 1931 respectively.

In spite of certain advances in education and political awareness, trade unionism on plantations was slow in taking root. In the early years of the urban labor movement, religion was a useful facade for political and labor activity, but in the plantation sector there was no parallel development. The ritual of the Hindu religion, the propitiation of deities and votive offerings in exchange for favors granted, no doubt helped the worker to come to terms with adverse working conditions and what at all times was a singularly hostile environment. Ponnambalam Arunachalam, in a talk on Indian emigration, mentioned the consoling influence of Hinduism on Indian indentured workers in Fiji who lived in "degrading and miserable conditions . . . amid squalor, physical and moral."<sup>8</sup> But though the pioneers of plantation labor agitation were Hindus, there is no evidence of any semipolitical religious movement on the plantations, and the early attempts to agitate on behalf of plantation workers were political and not religious in origin. This may be explained by the fact that by the late twenties, when middle-class Tamils began to show concern about plantation labor, a religious facade was not necessary to disguise trade-union and political activity.

The leadership of the plantation labor movement came from middle-class Tamils who were radical in outlook. Several moderate members of the Tamil community had joined the movement for political reforms but had shown little interest in plantation labor problems. The first to express concern was Ponnambalam Aruna-

8. On this question, Arunachalam quoted the Rev. C. F. Andrews, who had made a study of Indian labor in Fiji. "The religious sense among the people . . . has been the sap in the tree of Hindu civilisation . . . I have found here in Fiji among indentured coolies, Hindu men and women, whose hearts are filled with poetry and nature and love of God . . . One of them told me that everything that God had made was beautiful in Fiji and man alone was vile. We knew which man he meant . . . Through all the evil and misery of their fate they have kept the soul of goodness." *Speeches and Writings*, p. 209.

chalam, who between 1913 and 1922 had led a campaign against the Labour Ordinance and had protested against wages and conditions on plantations.<sup>9</sup> The next attempt to introduce trade unionism on to plantations began as a radical political venture led by K. Natesa Aiyar, whose interest in trade unions was a by-product of his political activities. His career progressed from “seditious” journalism inspired by the Indian nationalist movement to collaboration with the urban trade-union leader A. E. Goonesinha, and culminated in independent trade-union activity on the plantations. Natesa Aiyar, a South Indian Brahmin who had been a government servant in Tanjore, had a flair for journalism and joined a Tamil paper. According to police sources, Natesa Aiyar visited Ceylon around 1915 to make contacts and collect subscriptions for his paper. In 1920, he returned to Ceylon and became the editor of a Tamil newspaper, the *Thesa Nesan*, whose proprietors, M. A. Arulanandan and Dr. E. V. Ratnam, were executive committee members of the Ceylon National Congress, the latter also becoming a committee member of the Ceylon Labour Union. The same group of Tamil politicians, who were regarded by the police as political agitators, started an English paper, the *Citizen*, edited by Lawrie Muttukrishna with Natesa Aiyar as its publisher.<sup>10</sup> On the important issues of the day there was an identity of opinion between the radicals in Ceylon, whether they were Sinhalese or Tamil. The *Citizen* supported militant organizations like the Young Lanka League, published strong editorials condemning “wickedness in high places,” and denounced the Salaries Commission Report as a “most immoral document.” This paper was mainly inspired by the Indian national movement; it contrasted India’s militant political struggle with the moderate policy of the Ceylon nationalists. In 1921, an article on “The Spirit of India” claimed that politically Ceylon was far behind India, and it urged the Ceylonese to give up their “wor-

9. A distinction was made between migrants from India referred to as Indian Tamils and those Tamils who were a part of the permanent population—known as Ceylon Tamils—who were mainly unconcerned about the hardships of estate workers.

10. CNA, Police Reports of 26 Aug. 1922, File 14196/25. The “political agitators” in Ceylon who were mentioned in these police reports as Natesa Aiyar’s associates were Lawrie Muttukrishna, Dr. E. V. Ratnam, M. A. Arulanandan and Proctor Murugesu.

ship of ancestry and past respectability" and also their prevalent "mania for empty honour and empty show."<sup>11</sup>

It was inevitable that the journalistic career of Natesa Aiyar would attract the interest of the ever-vigilant Ceylon police, especially in view of his connections with India and his open hostility to British rule. During the visit of the Prince of Wales to India and Ceylon in 1921-1922, the police kept a watch on the radicals in Ceylon who had denounced the visit, and a critical article on the Prince of Wales by Natesa Aiyar in the *Thesa Nesan* was filed in his police dossier. In 1925, the police urged the government to prosecute Natesa Aiyar for a seditious editorial entitled "British Take Notice," which warned Britain that trouble in India, Egypt and Ireland proved that the "present condition of the Empire was shaky" and that future trouble was inevitable. In a confidential report to the Colonial Secretary, the police described this article as "highly seditious matter of a kind which is very rare in the Island." But the Colonial Secretary advised the police that a prosecution for sedition would not succeed, and recommended instead that "the activities of this gentleman be watched."<sup>12</sup>

The first link between Natesa Aiyar and labor activity was his association with an Indian nationalist and Communist, D. M. Manilal, who was from Baroda. It may be noted at this point that Ceylonese radicals had welcomed the Russian revolution in 1917, and had access to Communist literature which filtered through in spite of police censorship. In the early 1920's, Communist groups in India often used Ceylon as a convenient base for smuggling prohibited political literature from Europe to India, or as an escape route for Indian Communists travelling between India and other countries.<sup>13</sup> But there is no information about any link which may have existed between these Communists and Ceylonese. It was Manilal who provided the first open contact of this nature, though he did not emphasize his Communist views while in Ceylon. Manilal, who had been called to the Bar in London in 1907, was an associate of

11. See the *Citizen*, 23 Oct., 13 Nov. 1921.

12. CNA, Police Reports, File 14196/25.

13. Indian National Archives, New Delhi, Home Political File No.24-1 of 1924. For example, in 1922, a Bengali Communist, Nalini Gupta, who was in M. N. Roy's group, was arrested in Colombo, but subsequently managed to leave for Europe after receiving money from Muzzafar Ahmad in Calcutta sent to Colombo through Jotin Mitra.

Gandhi. He practiced in Mauritius from 1907 to 1910, defending Indian workers in court cases against planters and organizing meetings all over the island to highlight the problems of the immigrant workers. In 1910 he went to India as the Mauritian delegate to the sessions of the Indian National Congress, where he described the deplorable condition of immigrants and urged the abolition of Indian immigration to Mauritius.<sup>14</sup> Manilal next worked in South Africa with Gandhi, and on the latter's advice went to Fiji. There he led agitation and strikes among Indian immigrant workers, resulting in his deportation on a prohibition order in 1920. On a visit to New Zealand, Manilal again attracted police attention by delivering a public lecture on working-class solidarity, and urging his audience to read a book called *Red Europe* written by an Australian Member of Parliament. It is no wonder, then, that on Manilal's arrival in Ceylon in October, 1921, the police kept track of his movements. He was considered a "suspicious" person because of his past record among Indian workers and his connections with the Indian nationalist movement, but he was also a more imminent source of danger because the Prince of Wales was due in Ceylon, and the authorities did not want Indian "agitators" to excite the Ceylonese against the Prince's visit.

During his brief stay in Ceylon, Manilal was associated with the group of Tamil nationalists and radicals who ran the *Thesa Nesan* and the *Citizen*. The latter paper gave considerable publicity to Manilal's visit and praised him for having made history by championing the cause of Indian workers in sugar plantations in Fiji and for trying to secure "the material and moral freedom of Indians enslaved in Fiji."<sup>15</sup> When the Ceylon Government issued a deportation order against Manilal, this became a celebrated civil rights case. There were many protests, including a public meeting where moderates of the Ceylon National Congress, and radicals like C. H. Z. Fernando and A. E. Goonesinha of the Young Lanka League, spoke out vehemently for Manilal. In the Municipal Council, Fernando unsuccessfully tried to pass a resolution denouncing the deportation order as "a serious and arbitrary infringement of the

14. D. Napal, *Manilal M. Doctor, Pioneer of Indo-Mauritian Emancipation*. Manilal was also known as Doctor Manilal and Manilal Shah.

15. *Citizen*, 16 Oct. 1921, 1 Jan. 1922.

rights and liberties of the British subject . . . likely to create the impression abroad that the city of Colombo is under a despotic rule."<sup>16</sup> Some sections of the press also joined in the protest: the *Daily News* said that Manilal's countrymen would feel that there was "something in the labour conditions of Indians in Ceylon that the government feared Manilal would expose,"<sup>17</sup> and the *Morning Leader* claimed that the Ceylon government regarded Manilal as a "missionary of non-co-operation" who would "tell our patriots of Gandhi and his great doings."<sup>18</sup> There can be no doubt that Manilal not only spotlighted the problems of plantation labor, but also inspired some of the Indians in Ceylon—most notably K. Natesa Aiyar—to speak out on behalf of Indian workers. The fact that Manilal, on his return to India, was closely associated with the Indian Communist Party and the trade-union movement, and in 1924 helped in the defense of S. A. Dange and other Communists in the Kanpur Conspiracy Case, increased official suspicion of both Manilal and Natesa Aiyar. The Indian police, who were watching Manilal during the conspiracy case, reported:

Manilal is a well known labour agitator who was successively externed from Fiji, New Zealand and Ceylon and refused permission to practice in the High Courts of Madras and Bombay. . . . He is clever enough to keep in the background but there is ample evidence that he is deeply implicated in the propaganda carried on more openly by others. Manilal helped Singaravelu Chettiar in forming the 'legal' Communist Party . . . the Labour and Kishan Party of Hindustan.<sup>19</sup>

By 1925, the Ceylon police alleged that Natesa Aiyar had not only maintained his connection with Manilal but was also in contact with "certain labour leaders in Australia, America, the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements" and with political agitators in India.<sup>20</sup>

From 1925 onwards, Natesa Aiyar took an interest in the conditions of plantation labor. Though prevented by the trespass laws from visiting plantations, he managed to do so by accompanying an

16. *Ceylon Daily News*, 7 Jan. 1922.

17. *Ibid.*, 9 Jan. 1922.

18. *Ceylon Morning Leader*, 8 Jan. 1922.

19. Indian Government Archives, New Delhi, Home Political-Secret File No.261 of 1924.

20. CNA, Police Reports, File 14196/25.



Indian cloth merchant from Colombo who used to make the rounds of the plantations. Soon after Natesa Aiyar wrote *Planter Raj*, an "inflammatory" pamphlet which attacked planters and gave a grim description of working conditions on plantations. From this point onwards, Natesa Aiyar's political career was closely linked with labor questions. As the Indian member of the Legislative Council from 1926 until 1931, he constantly agitated on behalf of the plantation workers, especially on the minimum wages question.

Natesa Aiyar's concern with labor also led him to attempt a political and trade-union partnership with the urban labour leader, A. E. Goonesinha, which lasted from 1926 to 1928. In 1926, they jointly edited a radical paper, the *Forward*, which advocated complete political freedom and denounced "camouflaged political reforms" as being "calculated to gratify title hunters." Like most radical Ceylon journals, it gave prominence to foreign political events, attacking Mussolini's "sorry and sordid task of trampling underfoot the rights of man," and also strongly condemning colonialism as "glorified brigandage . . . the usurpation of the rights and liberties of one nation by another." On economic and social issues, the *Forward* agitated for social legislation and the elevation of "the oppressed classes of the community."<sup>21</sup> Natesa Aiyar's first experience of active trade-union work was through his association with Goonesinha. During the harbor strike of 1927, led by the Ceylon Labour Union, Natesa Aiyar persuaded workers who had been brought from India to refuse to work; he raised questions in the Legislative Council about the strike and, together with Goonesinha, collected funds for the strikers from the merchants of Colombo. Another link between Natesa Aiyar and urban labor was his membership in Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union, becoming its Vice-President for a short period.

But what might have developed into a very important alliance between the organized militant urban labor movement and the unorganized mass of workers in the vital plantation sector of the economy did not materialize. In 1928, Goonesinha had denounced the exploitation of labor and had sympathized with the cause of economic and political rights for Indian workers in Ceylon, but he

21. *Forward*, 22 Aug., 5, 19 Sept. 1926.

had never shown any willingness to extend his trade-union activities to include plantation workers. For one thing, the Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamil members of the middle class did not regard the plantation workers as an integral part of the working population; the prevalent view among urban union leaders was that though the condition of the "coolies" on plantations might amount to semi-slavery and needed redress, the urban workers had their own battles to fight to keep themselves above "coolie" status. Whereas in the first two decades of the 20th century, a Ceylonese nationalist, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, could speak out for plantation labor and also receive the support of his middle-class colleagues of the Social Service League, by the 1920's the Ceylonese politicians began to talk of the potential political and economic dangers if plantation workers obtained the franchise and organized themselves into trade unions. Fears that the Sinhalese might be swamped by minority groups were openly discussed, and the extension of the franchise to include plantation workers, as recommended in the Donoughmore Commissioners' report, was bitterly opposed by the Ceylon National Congress. Significantly, Goonesinha did not oppose this extension of the franchise to include Indian workers, but he made no effort to encourage trade unionism on plantations.

The initial disagreement between Goonesinha and Natesa Aiyar occurred in 1928, just before the depression; Natesa Aiyar was convinced that A. E. Goonesinha, the hero of the Sinhalese workers and the disciple of Anagarika Dharmapala, was basically a chauvinist and therefore against the Indian plantation workers. When Natesa Aiyar alleged that Goonesinha was anti-Indian, Goonesinha denied it and promptly expelled him from the Labour Union. Whatever chances there were of an alliance between A. E. Goonesinha and Natesa Aiyar vanished completely with the onset of the economic depression in 1929. During the depression years between 1929 and 1934, there was not only a collapse of both the urban and plantation labor movements, but also strong anti-Indian feeling among urban workers, caused by the increase in unemployment among Ceylonese and the threat of cheap Indian labor displacing indigenous labor. The Ceylon Labour Union's change to an anti-Indian policy intensified the breach between the labor leaders of the two communities.

## The All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation

It became clear by 1931, a time when the depression had aggravated the anti-Indian feeling among the Ceylonese urban working class, that a plantation labor movement would have to develop separately, and that the leadership for such a movement would have to arise from the Indian middle class in Ceylon. In 1931, Natesa Aiyar made the first attempt to organize a trade union among plantation workers when he founded the All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation, with its head office in the tea planting district of Hatton. The impact of this first penetration of trade unionism into the heart of the "planter raj" caused a sensation among the plantation workers. Natesa Aiyar's appeal was charismatic for he was a Brahmin who had come to champion those who, in caste terms, had been regarded and treated as "pariahs." He was the challenger of the most powerful employers in Ceylon, and was fearless in his attacks on them. As a Tamil orator he had a hypnotic appeal on the plantation workers, who flocked to his meetings and hailed him as a messiah.

Some of the objectives of the Federation were similar to those of a provident society, and included the propagation of ideas of brotherhood, self-help, and thrift, and the discouragement of drinking, gambling, and indebtedness. To combat indebtedness, the new union urged the formation of credit societies and cooperative stores. Other aims included the improvement of education among the workers and the raising of their economic and political status.<sup>22</sup> Disputes between workers and employers and the question of the repatriation of the old and disabled were taken up by the Federation, but the organization was handicapped from the start. The economic depression had set in and because of the reduction of the minimum wage and the threat of mass unemployment, the situation was highly unfavorable for any trade-union activity. In addition, under the trespass laws access to plantations by trade unionists was illegal. The activities of the Federation were therefore restricted to two methods of agitation. The first was redress for individual

22. CNA, Objectives of the All-Ceylon Indian Estate Labour Federation, File CF.1184/32.

grievances by means of petitions, and the second was propaganda for the Federation through publications and mass meetings.

Petitions had always been the most frequently used means for workers in Ceylon to express their grievances, and the petition writer was a common feature of every town and village. After the Federation adopted this method there was a sudden rise in the number of petitions from plantation workers to the superintendents of plantations, and to the Agent of the Indian government in Ceylon (who was appointed by the Indian government to look into the interests of Indians in Ceylon). The number of petitions to the latter, which had amounted to 956 in 1929, rose to 1,859 in 1931, and 2,468 in 1933, an unprecedented increase which the Indian Agent attributed to the activity of the new trade union.<sup>23</sup>

Since entry on to the plantations by union officials was illegal, the chief means of contact between the union and the workers was through meetings in nearby towns. In May, 1931, a meeting of 5,000 workers was held in Hatton and resolutions were passed protesting against reduction of wages, breaches of the Minimum Wages Ordinance, and the "truck system" operating on plantations (whereby workers bought their provisions from the plantation- or kangany-owned shop).<sup>24</sup> In June, 1931, the Kandy branch of the new union held a mass meeting at which Natesa Aiyar advised the plantation workers to make representations of their grievances through the union. He urged them to avoid indebtedness and drink, to assert their rights regarding working hours, and to resist the "truck system."<sup>25</sup> Using his talents as a journalist, Natesa Aiyar also issued many pamphlets in Tamil, including "Rights and Responsibilities of Indian Immigrants," advising workers on the best methods of dealing with their employers on questions such as giving notice. In 1931 he also started a journal in English called the *Indian Estate Labourer*, with V. P. Nathan as its editor.

This first spurt of trade unionism in the plantation sector was countered by a determined effort by planters to crush the movement and to discredit its leaders. The planters were the most powerful group of capitalists in Ceylon and the plantation workers, who formed the largest concentration of the proletariat, were the most

23. *Report of the Agent of the Government of India, 1933*, p. 9.

24. CLD, Report of meeting of 3 May 1931, File W.3 Part V, Minimum Wages.

25. *Ibid.*, Estate Labour Federation, File G.176.

exploited and unorganized section of the working class. Realizing the potential threat to their economic position, the planters speedily suppressed any trade-union agitation. To begin with, the Planters' Association advised estate superintendents not to reply to any letters received from the union and requested the Controller of Labour "to be good enough" to refer petitions from plantation workers to the superintendent concerned. When the planters also asked the Indian Agent, K. P. S. Menon, to ignore all petitions from the union, he refused, saying that it would be "difficult entirely to ignore petitions signed or thumb marked by labourers, no matter which source they come from."<sup>26</sup> There were even cases where certain Magistrates, on receiving petitions from plantation workers, referred these to the estate superintendents in question—a practice which was condemned by Natesa Aiyar as being a travesty of justice.<sup>27</sup> In addition, in August, 1931, after the inaugural meeting of the branch of the Estate Labour Federation had been held in Kandy, the Municipal Council refused to allow the use of municipal grounds for future meetings of the union, one of the Councillors arguing that as the union encouraged workers to "deeds of insubordination and mischief," the Council should not "be a party to this kind of nonsense."<sup>28</sup> In other plantation areas the same opposition was shown, and local councils and owners of vacant land in several plantation towns refused permission for these grounds to be used for union meetings.

The planters also resorted to a policy of personal denigration of Natesa Aiyar, and for this purpose they not only recruited the help of kangannies and subordinate staff, but also exploited the existing bitterness between the "depressed" castes and the Brahmins. As Natesa Aiyar regarded the kangannies as the real enemies of the plantation workers, even comparing them to the slave traders of Africa, it was not difficult for the planters to use kangany organizations in their campaign. In September, 1931, the Planters' Association discussed proposals "to curb Natesa Aiyar's activities"<sup>29</sup> and

26. *Ibid.*, letter of 2 June 1933 from Secretary, Planters' Association to the Controller of Labour, and letter of K. P. S. Menon to Planters' Association 5 June 1933.

27. CNA, Indian Labourers and Police Magistrates, File 1282/30.

28. CLD, Estate Labour Federation, File 176, quoting *Times of Ceylon*, 17 Aug. 1931.

29. *Ibid.*, "Minutes of General Committee of Planters' Association 9 September 1931." "Mr. Garrick said his head clerk was the Chairman of the Indian Association

later in the year, a planter published an anti-Natesa Aiyar circular for distribution on the plantations. This document played upon the caste feelings of the workers and kangannies by attacking Natesa Aiyar's Brahmin origins.<sup>30</sup> It was also alleged that plantation trade-union leaders were making a living out of the ignorant workers, and in March, 1932, the Chairman of the Planters' Association referred to "activities of self-constituted leaders who seek to exploit the labourers as a means of livelihood."<sup>31</sup> At a meeting held to start a cooperative society to counteract trade unionism, the Chairman said that "pernicious doctrines at present being preached by undesirable self-seekers and disappointed men should be avoided like the plague."<sup>32</sup> The planters also financed a weekly Tamil paper, *The Oolian*, described by the *Times of Ceylon* as "an organ for fostering better understanding between planter and labourers,"<sup>33</sup> but which was, in fact, mainly concerned with propaganda against Natesa Aiyar. It alleged that the union was harmful to the plantation worker, and attributed labor troubles on plantations to "the evil machinations of the so-called Estate Labour Federation." The union was also said to have done nothing for the workers except to take collections from them "under various pretexts," and to write petitions "setting out the various grievances alleged by the ignorant labourers." In November, 1931, *The Oolian* stated that people like Natesa Aiyar should be sent to prison and expressed the hope that it would not be long before some planter decided to have him "securely shut up for sometime." In December of the same year, this paper referred to the worker as "an ignorant individual who would give his last penny to hear some maniac get on to a platform and run others down," and said that hanging was too good a fate for men like Natesa Aiyar, "lest they pollute the very rope from whose end they might sway."<sup>34</sup> The planters' viewpoint was also expressed by

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[which was] working against Natesa Aiyar. He hoped Superintendents would provide facilities for members of the Indian Association to hold meetings."

30. Ibid., "Minutes of Planters' Association 13 November 1931."

31. Speech of A. G. Baynham, Chairman of the Planters' Association of Ceylon, at the 78th Annual General Meeting, 11 March 1932, *Year Book of the Planters' Association, 1931*, p. 63.

32. CLD, "Report of Meeting of Imboolpittia Co-operative Society," 29 Nov. 1931, File G.176.

33. Ibid., quoting *Times of Ceylon*, 18 Sept. 1931.

34. Ibid., quoting *The Oolian*, 11 Sept., 30 Nov., 7 Dec. 1931.

the Estate Staffs' Association, which represented the minor staff on plantations. At a meeting of this association in August, 1931, a resolution was passed calling on its members not to have any dealings with Natesa Aiyar, and reference was made to the need for "loyalty to their superiors—the planters—who really provided their bread and butter." The President of this association alleged that as a result of the activities of the Labour Federation, "a once contented labour force was now seething with discontent," and he added that he knew of no respectable person who was a member of the Union.<sup>35</sup>

Although it was true that the plantation workers were "seething with discontent," this first outburst of trade-union activity petered out by the end of 1933. The main cause of the decline was the economic depression, which had very adverse effects on the tea and rubber industries. Moreover, the methods used by the planters to stamp out incipient trade unionism, and internal dissension within the union, weakened the movement. In September, 1932, V. P. Nathan, the President of the Kandy branch, quarrelled with Natesa Aiyar, and informed the Minister of Labour that he was opposed to Natesa Aiyar's Labour Federation and was therefore ending his connection with the union.

### The Depression and the Minimum Wage Controversy

Although the Indian plantation workers were unorganized and were economically and politically the most underprivileged sector of the working class, they became the center of heated controversy concerning the minimum wage issue. This question caused clashes of opinion not only between the Indian and Ceylon governments, but also between the planting interests and the government, and several political figures, including Jawaharlal Nehru, joined the debate. The Minimum Wages Ordinance had been passed in 1927, thereby increasing plantation wage levels, which had remained stagnant since the 19th century. But even this wage increase was based on a "minimum needs" subsistence budget. This advance was made with the greatest planter opposition and official caution, and was largely the result of insistent prodding from the Indian government. The ordinance was not implemented until 1929, and the

35. *Ibid.*, quoting from *Morning Leader*, 28 Aug. 1931.

gains so arduously secured were wiped out with alacrity between 1931 and 1933 on account of the depression.

When the Indian government first raised the important question of the necessity of a minimum wage for Indian plantation labor in Ceylon, the Ceylon government opposed this move because of the hostility it would arouse among planting circles, and also because it would have led to a demand for a minimum wage for Ceylonese workers. In 1926, after the Indian government had pressed for an investigation into the cost of living of plantation workers, the Agent of the Indian government drew up a family expenditure budget. He came to the conclusion that 40 percent of the Indian workers were unable to earn a living wage, and wrote, "ill health, inefficiency and low wages form a vicious circle."<sup>36</sup> It was the Indian government's firm insistence on minimum wage legislation, accompanied by a threat to curtail the emigration of Indian labor to Ceylon, that led to the reluctant acceptance of the principle of the minimum wage by the Ceylon government in spite of the hostility shown to the proposal by the planters. In 1925, the Chairman of the Planters' Association referred to the fact that the government of India had "absolute power to prevent emigration of labourers," and the Governor of Ceylon warned the planters that they were "up against a very difficult question and must fall in with the views of India." There was a considerable amount of indignation among the planters; references were made to the dictatorial powers of the government of India and its interference with the liberty of British subjects. One planter suggested that as the Planters' Association was so vehemently against the minimum wage, "our opinion should be expressed regardless of consequences." The Indian government was also severely criticized for insisting on a minimum wage in Ceylon where none existed in India. A deputation of the Planters' Association met the Governor and urged that if the minimum wage legislation was introduced, the measure should not penalize planters only but should include all employers in Ceylon.<sup>37</sup>

In 1926, the government drafted a Minimum Wage Ordinance which was sent to the Planters' Association for comment. The matter was discussed at a stormy meeting in December, 1926. A resolu-

36. *Report of the Agent of the Government of India, 1926*, p. 10.

37. *Year Book of the Planters' Association, 1925*.



tion by a diehard group of planters that the Planters' Association was diametrically opposed to the new Labour Ordinance as it was against the best interests of the employer and employed was debated but withdrawn. One of the proposers of the resolution claimed that a minimum wage was not merely "a socialist ideal and a levelling-up process," but was also an insult to managers and workers, and added, "Gentlemen, the house is on fire, we have got to put it out." Another planter said that with the adoption of the minimum wage there would be "no incentive for good work and it would bring ultimate ruin on the cooly." A more moderate line was taken by members of the Legislative Council, Major Oldfield and T. L. Villiers, who claimed that intransigence on this issue would do great harm to planters, and would also be a political mistake.<sup>38</sup>

The proposed minimum wage legislation also drew comment from Ceylonese politicians, who felt that if the government was prepared to enforce minimum wages for plantation labor, there was an even stronger case for such benefits to be conferred on indigenous workers. Several senior government officials agreed that the minimum wages bill would be lost in the Legislative Council unless some provision was made for Ceylonese workers.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, after the government agreed that a commission to enquire into wages and conditions in industries other than plantations would be appointed, the Minimum Wages legislation was passed.

The Ordinance provided for the setting up of plantation Wages Boards in revenue districts composed of a chairman, a public officer, two members representing the employers, and two representing the workers. The members were to hold office for three years and were to fix minimum rates of wages of plantations within the jurisdiction of the board. The Ordinance also made provision for the payment of monthly wages before the tenth day of the following month. The whole amount of wages (apart from legal deductions for rice, etc.) had to be paid directly to the worker himself. The employer also had to comply with regulations regarding discharges and immigration certificates of workers. It was further stipulated that no child under the age of ten should be allowed to work on plantations.

38. *Year Book of the Planters' Association, 1926.*

39. CNA, File B/93/26.

The raising of the minimum wages of plantation workers, which came into force in January, 1929, improved the conditions of employment and methods of wage payment. But these benefits were shortlived, for by 1930 the tea and rubber industries were beginning to suffer from the economic depression, and only the best quality high grown tea was able to stave off the effects of the depression until 1933. One consequence of the disastrous fall in tea prices was an immediate demand by planters for a reduction in the minimum wages which had been fixed in 1929 at 54, 52, and 50 cents a day for male workers in the up-country, mid-country, and low-country respectively. The depression had also caused a drop in the price of rice, the principal item in the workers' budget, which was provided by the plantation and its cost deducted from wages. The planters therefore proposed that wages should be adjusted to reflect the fall in the price of rice, and after negotiations with the Government of India, the first reduction in the minimum wage took place in May, 1931. There was a reduction of five, four, and three cents respectively in the wages of men, women, and children, provided that rice was reduced from Rs.6.40 to Rs.4.50 a bushel. This in effect maintained the real wage virtually unchanged. With the deterioration in the economic situation after 1931, there was a demand for a further reduction in the minimum wage. At this stage the issue became a matter of heated controversy between the planters and the Controller of Labour on the one side, and the Minister of Labour, the Executive Committee for Labour, and Natesa Aiyar's newly formed Estate Labour Federation on the other.

After the 1931 elections under the Donoughmore Constitution, the new Minister of Labour was Peri Sunderam, an Indian from a plantation background who had been an office-bearer of the Ceylon Workers' Federation in 1920. The question of the second reduction of the minimum wage came before the Executive Committee for Labour which included not only Peri Sunderam, but also S. P. Vytilingam, who had been elected from a plantation area. Another Indian member of the committee was I. X. Pereira, who said that the proposed reduction of the minimum wage would deprive the plantation labor of even the barest needs. "If we value human lives, these 700,000 dumb labourers deserve better consideration than

the comparatively few employers."<sup>40</sup> Also on the Executive Committee for Labour was the leader of the urban workers, A. E. Goonesinha, who opposed the move to reduce the minimum wage. It was therefore not surprising that this Committee rejected the proposal to cut the minimum wage further, with only one member (M. J. Cary, the nominated European member) dissenting. The agitation against this second reduction of minimum wages was reinforced by statements from K. P. S. Menon, the Indian Agent in Ceylon, who said that the reduction of wages was not merely a problem of arithmetic but essentially a human problem: "the minimum wage was meant to enable a labourer not merely to keep his own body and soul together, but to provide for his family including workers and non-workers."<sup>41</sup> During the minimum wage controversy, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was on a visit to Ceylon, expressed strong views on the question. Nehru claimed that as the earnings of Indian workers in Ceylon were far below living wage standards, to talk of lowering wages was "monstrous," and he attacked the planters for their pre-occupation with dividends at the expense of wages:

In the past years when dividends of 80, 90 or 100% were declared, what part of them went to labour? . . . and when the slump comes the first to suffer must be the labourer. Even in these days of economic depression, to declare a dividend of 35% and in the same breath to talk of lowering the minimum wage, seems to me to indicate a mentality that is dangerous to society. It is this mentality which always tries to pay the least possible wage and seeks to wring out the biggest dividends from the labour of these wage slaves. Labour must have a living wage . . . if this cannot be paid by any industrial undertaking the sooner it shuts up the better.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of the resistance to the second reduction of the minimum wage, the measure was adopted. The background to this action was the deepening economic crisis, which had led to open evasions of the provisions of the Minimum Wage Ordinance and even to the closing down of several plantations. The Indian Agent reported that on rubber plantations tappers were employed for six hours and only paid three-fourths of the minimum wage. While admitting that

40. CLD, letter of I. X. Pereira to the Minister of Labour, 30 July 1931, File W.3.

41. *Report of the Agent of the Government of India, 1932*, p. 12.

42. *Ceylon Daily News*, 13 July 1931.

the depression had resulted in "an almost intolerable strain on the working of the Minimum Wage Ordinance," the Indian Agent alleged that planters attempted to take the law into their own hands by paying the workers arbitrary rates of pay "on the ground that the labourers themselves were not unwilling to receive them."<sup>43</sup> There were many irregularities which attracted attention, among them the practice on some plantations of giving no pay or half pay for a day's work on the pretext that the tea leaf picked was inadequate. In 1932, one plantation had 515 cases of half pay being given to the workers. In 1932, by the Perth estate test case, the payment of less than the minimum wage for a working day, even though work may not have lasted the stipulated eight hours, was declared to be illegal. By the Minimum Wage Ordinance, the full wages had to be paid direct to workers, but in spite of this, the practice of paying wages to the kangany, or allowing him to collect his debts at the pay table, continued. There were also cases of workers turned off the fields during the course of their work on the excuse their work was unsatisfactory.<sup>44</sup>

Because of the critical economic position, the Executive Committee on Labour was reluctantly compelled to accept the revised proposals of the Board of Indian Immigrant Labour, which included a reduction of the minimum wage and a provision for the question to be reconsidered after six months. The second reduction of the minimum wage came into effect in February, 1932; it left the up-country wages unchanged but reduced the daily wages of men in low-country and mid-country estates by 4 cents, with corresponding reductions for women and children. The third reduction in the minimum wage took place in May, 1933, after a catastrophic collapse in 1932 of all grades of tea, including the high-grown tea. Table 4 gives an indication of the wage reductions made after the minimum wage had been introduced.

A vigorous campaign of opposition to the reduction of the minimum wage was led by Natesa Aiyar and the All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation. In a letter to the Controller of Indian Immigrant Labour, Natesa Aiyar said that his union, "on behalf of 750,000 labourers, opposed the reduction of the minimum wage as the em-

43. *Report of the Agent of the Government of India, 1932*, p. 13.

44. *Ibid.*

Table 4.

		<i>Up-country</i>	<i>Mid-country</i>	<i>Low-country</i>
New minimum wage for men	1929	54	52	50
After reductions:	1931 May	49	47	45
	1932 Feb.	49	43	41
	1933 May	41	37	35

ployers were already resorting to devious methods of wage reduction." He reminded the Controller that though the Government of India had suggested the need for a minimum wage in 1922, the legislation had only been passed in 1927 and added, "considering the reluctance and the time taken by the authorities in this country in increasing the wages, and the zeal and hurry shown in the reduction of wages during the past few months, one has to think twice before consenting to any reduction of wages." Natesa Aiyar also warned the Controller against thinking that the "seemingly calm atmosphere" on plantations indicated a contented labor force and, in his usual picturesque language, said that the move to reduce wages was comparable to lighting a cigar with a candle while sitting on a heap of gunpowder.<sup>45</sup>

Although the acute nature of the depression and the consequent widespread unemployment prevented the reduction of minimum wages from creating an explosive situation as predicted by Natesa Aiyar, an effort was made by the Estate Labour Federation to arouse public interest in the question and to organize protests by the plantation workers themselves. In August, 1931, the union sent a memorandum to the Governor asking him to resist any attempts to reduce the minimum wage. It referred to the unorganized, uneducated plantation workers having to contend with "the all powerful capitalist in this country."<sup>46</sup> Mass protest meetings were held in plantation areas and when further reductions in the minimum wage were made after 1931, the union condemned these as "unjust, uncalled-for and immoral."<sup>47</sup> The reduction of the minimum wage

45. CLD, Memorandum on the Reduction of Wages submitted by the Estate Labour Federation, 2 July 1931, File W.3.

46. CNA, letter from All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation to the Governor, 28 Aug. 1931, File CF.1184/32.

47. CLD, Report of resolution at meeting of Estate Labour Federation, 18 April 1933, File G.176.

had been agreed to by the Government of Ceylon on condition that the plantation workers were allowed the choice of repatriation to India instead of working at reduced rates. Taking advantage of this provision, Natesa Aiyar, as a last resort, tried to cause panic in planting areas by organizing mass repatriation of Indian plantation workers, but this tactic was unsuccessful as the economic depression had caused a surplus of labor.

By 1933, trade unionism on the estates had almost collapsed. From the start, the labor movement begun by Natesa Aiyar had to face almost ferocious planter opposition, because unlike their urban counterparts, the plantation employers were not prepared to tolerate or recognize trade unionism. The labor force on plantations were also a "depressed" community in many senses. The "coolies," as they were commonly called, were uprooted aliens of "low" caste, unskilled, poor and illiterate, isolated from the mainstream of life around them, from the urban labor movement, and from the political agitation in the rest of the country. In these circumstances, the incipient trade-union movement on plantations was unable to withstand the overwhelming disaster of the economic depression, a crisis which caused a disintegration of even the strong urban trade-union movement. It was not until 1939, under more favorable economic and political conditions, that plantation labor was finally able to assert itself.

## Conclusion





## Conclusion

We have divided the period of history under consideration into two sections—the first from 1880 up to the riots of 1915, and the second from that event to the depression of the early 1930's. In the consideration of the first section, we have tried to show what factors were responsible for the beginnings of labor agitation in the 1890's, and, as well, the scale and scope of this agitation. As to the former, the answer lies mainly in the accelerated economic development and the accompanying growth of wage-labor relationships which occurred in the urban sector of the economy during that period. Labor agitation, so it would seem, was a concomitant of a certain level of economic development, together with the prevalence of factory-type organization.

As to the scale and scope of the movement, during the early period the workers in the key sector of the economy—the plantations—did not organize into unions. Escaping from the serfdom of South India, they became new serfs in Ceylon, bound to the planter and the kangany by indebtedness and other ties, and deliberately kept isolated from the outside world of political parties and trade unions. Only much later, after the weakening of the feudal aspects of the estate laborer's relationship with kangany and planter, and the breakthrough of middle-class leaders into the "planter raj," was the plantation sector organized. Nor, for that matter, were the white-collar urban workers able to organize during this early period; they were willing to combine in provident societies, of course, but their aspirations to integrate with the middle class undercut the more militant resort to direct action and trade unionism. The scope of the labor movement, then, was confined to the middle part of the working class spectrum during this early period. The group which A. E. Buultjens correctly claimed in 1893 was "ripe for unionisation" was composed of urban skilled craftsmen and mechanics who had been brought together by the factory system. These in-

cluded the printers who struck work in 1893, and the railway workers among whom there was considerable unrest between 1912 and 1915. There were other militant sections of the working class, such as laundrymen, carters, and butchers, who were not employed in factories but were united by occupational loyalty which enabled them to resort to strikes whenever municipal or government restrictions were placed on the exercise of their professions.

But the rise of wage labor and a certain type of economic organization alone was not a sufficient condition for the development of a labor movement. How the workers could manage to assert themselves against the severe social and institutional barriers to working-class agitation that were features of 19th-century colonial Ceylon remained a problem. To broadly sum up, it may be said that because the workers by themselves were at a disadvantage and were unable to influence economic and social policy, the labor movement came to be channeled through movements of protest concerned with religion and politics. Furthermore, the movement had to depend on middle-class leaders already engaged in rousing public opinion on religious and political issues—leaders who were also, no doubt, eager for support from a larger section of the community. Religion, politics, and the labor movement were thus closely interrelated, religious influences predominating in the years before 1915 and politics predominating in the latter phase.

Although this study distinguishes between a religious and political phase of the nationalist movement, the two overlap considerably. Up to 1915, when religious polemics were tolerated by the British but nationalist politics were regarded as seditious, religion was the most convenient means used to express political sentiments. Attacks on missionaries and on Christians were often thinly-veiled indictments of the colonial government. Even the idealization of Japan, which was very evident among both the radicals and the working class, was inspired by the ability of a Buddhist Asian country to politically and militarily challenge a Christian European power. Many of the specifically religious protests of the early period were also semipolitical in content. The Buddhist-Catholic riots of 1883, in which the militant leader of the Buddhist revival, Migettuwatte Gunananda, was involved, and the agitation and riots in Anuradhapura in 1903 led by Walisinha Harischandra, had polit-

ical overtones; in the latter case the campaign was directed against churches, butchers' shops, and liquor taverns, which were identified as the symbols of British rule in Ceylon. Even the Buddhist-Muslim riots of 1915, which have been regarded as a religious conflict, were closely linked with political and economic grievances, and with labor agitation. The temperance movement had a distinctly political content as it was not merely a protest against the evils of intoxication, but also a general attack on government policy and especially the lucrative government monopoly of liquor licensing. Criticism of the consumption of alcohol was also an attack on the social behavior of the Christianized elite, among whom drinking had become fashionable. Since the idealized view of traditional Buddhist society was one where alcohol was abhorred, the temperance leaders were in effect lashing out at social changes introduced by foreign rule and reasserting a supposedly superior traditional way of life. "Politics under the cloak of religion" was the discerning verdict of the Inspector-General of Police, who clearly saw the significance of the temperance agitation.

In considering the class structure at that time and the issue of leadership, a division has been drawn between various groups that formed the middle class. The indigenous, as distinct from the ruling British class, has been divided into the traditional and modern sections, the latter subdivided into conservatives, moderates, and radicals. The distinction between the traditional and modern groups is fairly obvious. The Sinhalese-Buddhist or Hindu-Tamil hierarchy of those with high status in the traditional society can easily be distinguished from the English-educated, urbanized members of the modern Christianized elite. It was, however, more difficult to separate the divisions in the modern group—the conservatives, moderates, and radicals—who had a similar economic base. They came from the same educational and cultural background and had high social and economic status. The conservatives, who were subservient to the British, opposed any form of trade-union or political agitation. These were the large landowners who were content to live in feudal style.

But the group which has been referred to as moderates were those persons who had developed capitalist attitudes which are typical of a nascent bourgeoisie which reinvests rather than consumes the

economic surplus. Having achieved a degree of economic prosperity, this group aimed at political power, but was faced with the task of breaching the racially exclusive British "club" which ruled the country and manned the higher rungs of the civil service. The history of the Ceylon national movement illustrates the process by which the Ceylon middle class gained political power. In this campaign for the democratic rights of political representation, freedom of expression, and racial equality, which was at all stages carried on by constitutional means, the moderates had the support of the radicals.

But the radical section of the middle class had a viewpoint which differed from the moderates on politics and labor matters. Whereas moderate policy was limited to certain reforms which would give more political power to the middle class, the radicals took the campaign further and demanded complete self-government, full trade-union rights, and universal suffrage. Although the two trends were distinguishable even in the years before 1915, the division became much clearer after that date. Both the moderates and radicals who involved themselves in matters connected with labor before 1915 were also activists in protest movements concerning religion, temperance, and incipient nationalist demands. A. E. Buultjens and Dr. Lisboa Pinto, the founders of the first trade union in Ceylon, were apostates from Christianity, and Anagarika Dharmapala, Walisinha Harischandra, and A. E. Buultjens, the leading figures of the Buddhist revival, were champions of working-class agitation. All these leaders, including Dr. Lisboa Pinto and John Kotelawala, also belonged to various temperance organizations. Even in 1912, the new group of moderate labor leaders, C. Batuwantudawe, Arthur Dias, and D. C. Senanayake, were nationalists active in the temperance and social service movements.

What was the connection between incipient working-class unrest and the religious and political movements of the years preceeding 1915? One important feature of the religious revival was the development of public opinion among the workers, especially the more literate urban skilled workers, which made them receptive to political ideas and more willing to challenge the authorities. The religious revival inspired a series of newspapers and journals which ventilated both religious and political grievances. What is more,

demonstrations, petitions, and mass meetings were used as a means of expressing public opinion on religio-political issues like the temperance agitation, the Buddhist protests in Anuradhapura, and the Buddhist education campaign. Many of the religious, political, and labor leaders had a flair for popular oratory and journalism; both the Buddhist crusader, Migettuwatte Gunananda, and the Hindu leader, Arumuga Navalar, in their writings and public speeches in Sinhalese and Tamil respectively, pioneered the use of simple forceful language in place of pedantic and archaic forms. Dharmapala went further and introduced invective, working-class idioms, and pithy phrases, which made him the most popular orator and journalist among the Sinhalese workers.

The second part of this study dealt with the years between 1915 and 1933, when the political and labor movements became organized. These years also formed a period of economic fluctuation and political change. Economically there were several periods of crisis and boom. A partial setback and recovery of exports during the First World War was followed by a postwar depression, but in the 1920's there was a quick recovery. The value of exports, which had been Rs.273 million in 1915, rose to Rs.503 million in 1926, the peak year of the boom. But the prosperity did not continue, and from 1929 onwards a serious decline set in, reaching critical proportions by 1933, when the value of exports dropped to Rs.117 million and resulted in an adverse balance of payments. Politically, in 1915 the Legislative Council (based on the 1912 reforms) still had an official majority and even the majority of the unofficials were nominated by the Governor; by 1931, the legislature had fifty members elected by universal suffrage and a Board of Ceylonese Ministers chosen from the elected members. Although the framework was still controlled by the British, the 1931 reforms were a significant advance from the old unrepresentative Legislative Council which had existed for nearly a hundred years to the beginnings of self-government based on universal franchise. The dominant political organization of the period was the Ceylon National Congress, formed in 1919. Three years later the newly articulate urban workers had their own militant organization, the Ceylon Labour Union. Both these bodies had their heyday in the 1920's and declined after the depression.

The links between politics and religion loosened in the years between 1915 and 1933. Religion, of course, remained an ever-present factor in Ceylon politics and regularly surfaced. But after the tumultuous events of 1915, religious agitation receded into the background and secular nationalism took its place. The nationalists no longer found it necessary to use a religious idiom to express political grievances. Temperance agitation became a rather passé means of political campaigning, and anti-Christian outbursts ceased to be a popular means of asserting nationalist views. Whereas in 1915 a schoolboy's article expressing the Buddhist view on the impermanency of all things was interpreted by the Police as an attack on British rule, by the 1920's nationalist students could express their political views without resort to religious texts.

In considering the Goonesinha era of the 1920's, one must attempt to assess the political and economic factors affecting the labor movement. In the years between 1923 and 1929, favorable economic conditions coincided with a period of increasing political awareness, culminating in the spectacular strikes of 1928-1929. The main political concession granted to the working class was universal suffrage. The advance of the labor movement and the concessions obtained were the result of several factors. These were the increasing maturity and self-confidence of the urban working class, which acquired strong middle-class leadership, the economic conditions which made the employers willing to accede to wage demands, and the favorable political climate which made it possible for the workers to resort to militant struggles. After 1929, the economic boom gave way to a period of unprecedented depression. But political agitation did not decline. On the contrary, although the first elections under universal suffrage were held in 1931 during the depression, there was considerable political activity and excitement because the urban working class and rural masses for the first time had a say in the choice of the legislature's elected State Councilors. Despite the political climate, however, the labor movement was hard-pressed to survive an economic catastrophe of the magnitude of that which began in 1929.

The attitude of the government and the major employers to trade unionism was also a factor requiring consideration. Although the British authorities in Ceylon (after some initial reluctance in the

years between 1915 and 1920) adjusted themselves to the prospect of political changes, this same approach was not extended to trade unionism, and government resistance to the recognition of the movement was considerable. This was a recurring feature in the history of the Ceylon labor movement. The bureaucrats always showed some willingness to consider proposals for political changes, however unrealistic they seemed, but at every stage they were more inflexible about trade-union demands. Labor agitation was regarded as seditious long after political agitation had become respectable. The reason for this was that where gradual political changes could be accommodated, and compromise solutions could be negotiated with the moderates, the British authorities in Ceylon feared recognition of trade unions as the thin end of a dangerous wedge. They were apprehensive that trade-union activity and strikes led by radical "agitators" and political "extremists" might get out of control, becoming a challenge to both "law and order" and the economic system itself.

In this connection, one must also remember that the outlook of British officials in Ceylon was generally conservative. The class background of these officials made them generally hostile to trade unionism. The extent of this feeling was seen during the First World War, when the British railway drivers employed in Ceylon were denounced by the Colonial Secretary as "low-grade Europeans" because they were making demands for higher wages and better terms of work. Further, the leading employers, who were mainly British, had similar attitudes to labor, and up to 1928 there was a strong reluctance on the part of both government and employers to negotiate with or recognize A. E. Goonesinha's labor movement. But there were differences of opinion even among the British in Ceylon. Thus, in 1928 the more enlightened employers, led by S. P. Hayley, negotiated a historic collective agreement with Goonesinha. Similarly, some government officials were for reconciliation with labor, but in 1929, after the tramway strike, the government proposed drastic legislation to curb trade unions. Here again, conflict arose among the British themselves, for the Labour government in Britain refused to agree to these measures in spite of the strong feeling in favor of such legislation among British officials in Ceylon.

During the 1920's there was continuous conflict between the radical and the moderate elements among Ceylon's Westernized middle-class. Since the radicals were numerically very few and were not a major force in the Ceylon nationalist movement, very little attention has previously been paid to them. It is only in studying the labor movement that their importance becomes evident. For although they were few and their direct following was small, their influence was far greater than their numerical strength. In the 19th century, both the radicals and the moderates were outside the sphere of political decision making. By the 1920's however, the essential difference between the moderates and the radicals was that the moderates were in the process of becoming a part of the ruling class—a position which they partially achieved by 1931, when a Ceylonese Board of Ministers composed of moderate politicians was chosen from the elected members of the State Council. As the moderates aspired to become a part of the ruling class through a policy of compromise with the British, it was inevitable that the divisions between the radicals and moderates would become intensified.

From 1915 onwards there was disagreement between the radicals and moderates on politics and trade unionism, and by the 1920's the cleavage had become acute. The moderates controlled the largest political organization, the Ceylon National Congress, whereas the radicals dominated the leading labor organization, the Ceylon Labour Union. But the moderates also had their own labor organization, the Ceylon Workers' Federation, and the radicals belonged to small but relatively militant political groups such as the Young Lanka League and the Ceylon Labour Party. There were frequent clashes between the two groups over the political campaign for reforms and the agitation and strikes of the urban workers. Disagreement arose on methods of action; where the moderates advocated restraint, conciliation, and caution on politics and labor problems, persuading the workers of the virtues of "patience, sober habits, honesty and thrift," the radicals were for militant nationalist agitation and for strong aggressive action by the workers. In political matters, the moderates wanted gradual reforms based on a restricted franchise, whereas, the radicals demanded immediate home rule—*swaraj*—with universal suffrage. The crucial political test was on



the issue of universal suffrage, over which the radicals broke with the Ceylon National Congress to form the Ceylon Labour Party. On labor, the divergence was as sharp: the moderates who had failed to give vigorous leadership in the 1920 strikes were replaced by the radicals who led the 1923 general strike and controlled the militant urban labor movement of the 1920's. It was clear that the urban workers, a literate, politicized, articulate group, preferred radical leaders; it was the radicals who could champion the class interest of the workers by challenging the employers and the British officials.

Another difference between the moderates and the radicals lay in their foreign sources of inspiration. Whereas the moderates admired British liberalism and the conservative wing of the Indian nationalist movement, the radicals were influenced by the Indian "extremists" and by the British Labour Party. In fact, it was the connection with this party that influenced the Ceylon radicals not only in their political and trade-union work, but in their whole ideology. At a time when Marxism was gaining support in many parts of Asia, the Ceylon radicals of the 1920's remained essentially social-democrat in outlook. Moreover, the link with the Labour Party in Britain proved useful to the Ceylon labor movement and its leaders. Because of the insistence of the British Labour Party, for example, universal suffrage was recommended for Ceylon in 1927 and adopted in 1931, and in addition, Lord Passfield (Sidney Webb), the Labour Party's Secretary of State for the Colonies, was able to prevent repressive trade-union laws being introduced to Ceylon in 1929.

One of the important developments of the 1920's was the way in which the plantation workers, who had been isolated from the mainstream of political and labor movements in the rest of Ceylon, began to assert themselves during this period. Taking advantage of the favorable political climate, especially after the granting of universal suffrage, some Tamil politicians in Ceylon made a determined effort to penetrate the plantations. By the late 1920's, the plantation workers, though poorer, less literate, and socially more "backward" than the urban proletariat, began to break free of their bondage to the kangany and to formulate demands against the employers. The wage rise that occurred after the Minimum Wage legislation of 1927 was a key factor in liberating the worker from his

semifeudal ties. The plantation workers also had a "redeemer" in K. Natesa Aiyar, a middle-class Hindu of the highest caste who emerged as the champion of the most depressed class of workers in Ceylon. The urban labor movement had expressed itself through religious and radical political movements, but in the case of plantation labor, politics predominated over religion. By the late 1920's, Natesa Aiyar, who had links with Indian nationalists and even with Indian Communists like D. M. Manilal, did not need to resort to religious forms of protest. The Hindu revival in Ceylon had been a 19th-century phenomenon which affected only the nonplantation Tamils. The most exploited section of the working class—the plantation workers—were kept isolated from the rest of the population. There was no middle class among plantation Tamils, and political and religious movements among other groups of Tamils in Ceylon did not spread to the plantations in the early years. But when, in the late 1920's, a breakthrough to the plantations was made by a few middle-class Indian Tamils from Colombo, the spark was lit which might have developed into a serious conflagration but for the economic depression.

In what ways did the radical trade-union leaders of the 1920's differ from their counterparts of earlier years? A striking difference was in the secularization not only of politics, but also of the leadership of the political movement. By the 1920's, the place of the Buddhist leaders of an earlier epoch, who had pioneered the urban labor movement, had been taken by a new generation of radicals. Some of these, like A. E. Goonesinha and George E. de Silva, were Buddhists, but several others, including Victor Corea, C. H. Z. Fernando, and Valentine Perera, were Christians. Although non-Western religion was no longer the main criterion of radicalism in politics, it remained a strong motivating force. A. E. Goonesinha, the most dynamic figure in the labor movement of the 1920's, had a Buddhist educational background and used to appeal to the Buddhist sentiments of urban workers even during the height of labor agitation. The plantation labor leader of the 1920's was also a person with a Hindu orientation. But in spite of their religious beliefs, which corresponded to the religions of the workers they were leading, A. E. Goonesinha and K. Natesa Aiyar were essentially secular

leaders, more concerned with nationalist politics and trade unionism than with religious uplift or anti-Christian propaganda.

It is interesting to note that the Ceylonese moderates, who were drawn from the landed and professional classes, and whose economic interests did not clash with British interests, often took the side of the authorities against the radicals. The moderate leaders expressed their views against militant trade-union activity, and complained about the "irresponsible" radicals. A good example of this was seen in 1923 during the general strike led by A. E. Goonesinha, when the moderate politicians James Peiris and D. B. Jayatilaka, who were in London, went to the Colonial Office to condemn the strike and to denounce Goonesinha. Again, H. L. de Mel, a member of the Legislative Council and a leading employer, on several occasions protested to the Ceylon Government about A. E. Goonesinha's trade-union activities. As far as the authorities were concerned, the political boat could be gently rocked by the few who were qualified by virtue of education and status to demand a greater participation in governing, but any violent movement by the masses and their radical leaders was to be resisted. Neither the moderates nor the British authorities in Ceylon were willing to advocate universal suffrage for the rural and urban masses, or to grant the demands by the trade-union movement for substantial economic concessions to the working class. Many of the Ceylonese moderates continued to oppose the idea of negotiating with or recognizing the trade-union movement led by A. E. Goonesinha even after the British employers had given him recognition. On several issues the policy of the British Labour Party proved too radical for the Ceylonese moderates. For instance, the moderates advocated a restricted franchise and opposed the British Labour Party and Goonesinha on the issue of universal suffrage. Further, in contrast to A. E. Goonesinha, the moderates did not protest when the government tried to introduce repressive trade-union legislation, and it was left to the Labour Government in Britain to prevent its implementation.

The early years of the labor and political movements had a decisive influence on the pattern of events of later years. For example, the religious revival of the 1880's, the Buddhist education move-

ment, and the political and trade-union struggles of the 1920's, were events whose impact was seen in the later periods. The adaptation of political parties and trade unions to parliamentary democracy, the continuation of political and trade struggles along constitutional lines, the influence of liberal ideology, and the close links between religion and politics, were some of the features of Ceylon's political history in the period after 1930. The patterns of interrelationship between religion, politics and the labor movement that prevailed in an earlier period may therefore be of some relevance when more contemporary history is written.

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