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THE

CEYLON WORKERS' CONGRESS

TENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

Mr. K. RAJALINGAM, M.P.

ON

SATURDAY THE 21st APRIL, 1951

AT

"LAKSHMANAPURI"

WATTEGAMA

1504

Sisters, Brothers and Friends,

You have chosen to elect me as President for the third term and I accept office in a humble spirit of service. The confidence and co-operation which you have showered on me in our long trek together in the past are heartening to me and I look to the future with courage in the faith that you will all pull together at any hour of need.

Men, women and children; Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslims; Hundus, Buddhists, Christians and Mohamedans we all stood hand in hand fighting for our betterment. We seek not to fight men but institutions—institutions that tend to retard human—especially workers—progress. We are not concerned with differences of language, religion or race; we cannot, in these days of enlightenment, be diverted from our united effort by petty references to paltry considerations. We stand firm, as a group and as a section of the community, which is called upon to face problem peculiar to itself alone, and we are worldly-wise enough to know that if we do not function as an unit, we shall not succeed in throwing off our burdens.

As a trade union we do not dabble in politics. But what human can, in these days of democracy, cut himself away from questions political? We often hear words of wisdom that workers—especially plantation workers—should have nothing to do with political. There was, for instance, that oracle fom Dickoya who, speaking at a Planters' Association meeting, stepped into questions beyond his depth but did not tread—nor speak—like an angel. He did not mention—perhaps because of his child—like innocence of it—that unless a man is prepared jealously to safeguard his political status, he will cease to be treated as a man. Nor does he care that, by a series of political manoeuvres the Ceylon Indian Worker is being reduced to the plight of a serf; the former's only concern is that the

workers must not "come up against estate discipline" meaning thereby no doubt that a worker ought unquestioningly to bow down to the sort of treatment that may be meted out by men of such want of understanding as he, by his political references, shows himself to be.

When you are told that, if you are not recognised by Government as a citizen, you will have to lose your vote, that you may be displaced from your kanganiship or K. P. ship, that your son cannot even aspire to be a peon in Government Service, that you may not be granted relief under an employment relief scheme or that you may be excluded from provident fund or pension schemes, you are automatically dragged into politics and no amount of criticism emanating from ignorance can prevent it. So that it is essential that we should keep wide awake on this question and take all steps to safeguard our interests.

The Knavesmire judgement of the Privy Council has nailed on the head the practice of using the criminal courts as a cheap and convenient method of evicting labourers from their dwellings. The estate worker was for so long treated in an unfair manner as against those who were in occupation of rented houses, for instance; where as one group could be evicted only through civil procedure, the others could be and were sent to jail. The Knavesmire judgment is, forsooth, a character of liberty as far as resident workers are concerned. Once more, however, there are efforts being made to find short-cuts in the process of evicting workers from their estate dwellings. I would point out to those concerned that it is unbecoming and unfair to attempt to pit their strength against that of the humble worker; but if the intention is to trap the latter in some way, he has already proved himself equal to meeting such challenge.

During the course of last year we have forged ahead to some degree and the period of prosperity that the planting industry is passing through has no doubt helped in our

progress. But it cannot be denied that it was due to our vigilance and organisational efforts that we have been able to move on. On the other hand, we have been confronted with a number of evil forces in the Trade Union field and elsewhere but I have a feeling, that we have stood well up to them and have shown of our mettle.

In the purely trade union field, there has been a great deal of activity and we have had to face problems not encountered so far. Unfortunately, we have had our hands full with cases like dismissals for frivolous reasons and victimisation for trade union activity, and little time is available for constructive work.

If only the proprietary interests as represented by the C. E. E. F. would take an enlightened view of labour problems and if, perhaps, the progressive planter is permitted to deal with the questions that arise, without legal twistings and turnings being allowed to mar trade union settlements, the relations between employers and employees cannot but change out of all recognition. It is one thing for the plantation workers in their state of illiteracy and backwardness to seek trade union assistance in their difficulties, especially since they organise primarily for defensive purposes, and secondly to make progress as peacefully as may be; it is quite another matter and decidedly shortsighted to organise in an attempt to maintain the status quo and to hold back the worker in a state of backwardness. It will be well and good if in this conflict, the worker succeeds in making reasonable headway for if he fails in his attempts and frustration sets in, the consequences certainly cannot be anything like those which some, in their day-dreams, contemplate.

As far as conferences with the C. E. E. F. representatives regarding dismissals and allied questions were concerned, we would have liked to see a spirit of conciliation prevail in the course of negotiation. If there is too much of a tendency

to hug the law and to rely on hair-splitting arguments to bolster up a case, then the time taken up in conferences becomes a waste.

There are a few planters who complain that we do not have the "correct type" of trade union leader on estates and that he is inclined to be "unruly". It seems to be forgotten that trade union development on many estates has a tendency to follow a certain pattern; there is at least in the beginning a great deal of antagonism to trade unions either from Superintendents, subordinate staffs, K. P. or Kanganies, and it is only the type of person who can face powerful opposition that can start a movement on such estate.

In the course of the development, however, the organiser and others in close association are made out as appearing aggressive whenever they draw attention to anything that is wrong and those against the movement are far too prone to detect "unruliness" when none exists. Where before, there was no question ever raised as to the correctness or otherwise of any action, it is perhaps natural that any standing-up for one's rights, however mildly done, should appear to be "unruly". A little tact and a sense of humour ought to suffice to smoothen out any difficulties that may arise during, what are sometimes called, the birth-pangs of trade unionism. But if the employer still regards with suspicion any attempt to organise, we are afraid that friction will be the inevitable result.

A new technique has been developed by a certain type of proprietor who has just entered into planting from other fields of business. Concerned only with profits, he does not know nor does he care about questions relating to trade unionism or human considerations. The methods that he adopts in gaining his ends are aggressively primitive and with this type of mentality it will be too much to expect happy management-labour relations.

We have the examples of the Glencorse and Tillyrie Estates, where our members, who are without work owing to lock-out or strike action, have had to face brazen thuggery and crude treatment. All social intercourse is prohibited; in the fact not even the relatives of the workers are permitted to enter the estates. There was an instance when a car was not allowed into the estate for removing a child to the hospital; as a result, it died owing to lack of medical attention.

Moreover the management at first refused to allow the child to be buried on the estate but, after representation to the authorities were made, permission was granted. There are boards put up preventing the use of paths by the estate workers as against others; no firewood on the estate can be picked by them, nor can they enjoy the produce of their vegetable plots. By such means it is attempted to beat down the worker to submission; but the workers on these estates are to be commended for their courage and perseverance in the face of these difficulties and for their determination to continue their struggle till success is achieved.

It is peculiar too how law is called to the aid of the employer when there is a struggle between workers and managements. Trade Union leaders are prevented by the proprietor from holding meetings on the estate; while there is no other place available for the purpose, the police prevent the holding of meetings even by the roadside either on the pretext that it results in obstructing or on the plea that a breach of peace might result. It is difficult to understand why the police should not be present to guard against any breach of peace, if such is apprehended, and why they should, in effect, lend their support to the suppression of the rights of meeting of the workers. There was a contrast when meeting of a small group of workers supporting the employers was held and

at which a Minister was to address; the police came in extraordinary numbers either for purposes of protection or to form a crowd!

If, however, anyone feels that we can be suppressed or that our enthusiasm daunted by such methods, he is likely to be disillusioned; for when problems confront us we are sufficiently trained to face them with courage!

Where then are we and what is the goal of our movements? Are we going to be satisfied with the task of defending the worker against unfair treatment or are we to take some positive action to raise his status and standard? Wage increases are hardly ever able catch up with the cost of living; and he remains always in a position of dependance on estate employment. Does he, in spite of all his tribulations, have some hope at least in respect of his children? Is there even a prospect that his son would be free from the clock-work tyranny of estate routine? When he leaves an estate or suffers temporary employment, does he have a resting place? In old-age what resources does he have to fall back on?

Those and similar questions have been consistently agitating us and continue to make us restive and impatient that comparatively minor issues should keep our hands tied. In putting forward our twenty-point demand, we lay stress on the immediate necessity of implementing provident fund and pensions' schemes. For, a worker should have at least this to look forward to when the time comes for him to lay down his implement, especially since the so-called pensions that are now granted to workers on some estates seems to be intended as a practical joke. The C. E. E. F's attitude has been far from encouraging. They do not as yet seem to have realised the desirability of ensuring a sense of security in the worker; they do not seem to see that, while the world moves on, Ramasamy's position is apparently deteriorating. Politically and socially, he has

been reduced to the position of a serf; economically too he seems to be faced with starvation the day his employment ceases.

Such conditions ought not to be tolerated and at least a sense of fair-play should make the C. E. E. F. aware of their responsibilities towards their workers. In any case when the employers in place like Malaya have agreed to a provident fund plan, why does the Ceylon employer desire to lag behind? Does he feel that Malayan conditions may warrant the grant of such amenities and unless circumstances so dictate, nothing need be done.

In any case, our efforts in the coming year will be directed towards the creation of a provident fund and it is hoped that necessary co-operation will be forthcoming.

The increase in the number of estates that have changed hands is an additional cause of worry to us, as a trade union. With every change of owner, the worker loses benefits that long service entitles him to; furthermore, he may even lose in the process amenities for which statutory provision is made. This is not all; for large estates are often parcelled out into small holdings and then the worker finds that he had to go in search of employment. He might have lived and worked on the estate for the third generation, but nevertheless he is thrown on the road. This is a major problem that has to be faced.

Serious attention ought to be paid to the question of organising some village settlement scheme. It is essential that a worker should have at least a hut to call his own and it is iniquitous that we should be ever at the mercy of the employer for shelter.

In the meanwhile, question of access to estate dwellings of the workers should be made free from all restrictions, for the present arrangement is highly unsatisfactory and anti-social. Why should an individual be at the mercy of an employer on a personal matter like receiving his relatives and friends

in his home? Even today there are instances where sons are not allowed to call on their parents except on the express permission of the employer. This sort of harassment meted out to workers and their families can in no way help employers either individually or as a whole and the C. E. F. would do well to enlighten their members in this regard.

The I. L. O. Committee on Plantations at Bandoeng has resolved that the right of meeting and office accommodation on estates should be granted to trade unions. This is very elementary right and ought not to be hemmed in by conditions which are equivalent almost to taking it away. In any case if access to estates and the facilities for meetings are not available, it will be futile to expect the growth of a trade union movements in a desirably healthy manner.

Problems we have plenty and difficulties seem to increase. Our only safeguard, however, is our organisation and we shall have to build it into a veritable fortress in our own interests. Our membership will have to be ever on the increase; for that will be an important means of gauging our influence among the workers.

You have, one and all rallied round the Organisation to good purpose and any progress that we have made is due to the active interest that you have taken in our work; for you have stood by the Congress and subjected yourself to its discipline. I have no doubt that the same active enthusiasm and co-operation will be forth-coming in the course of this year.

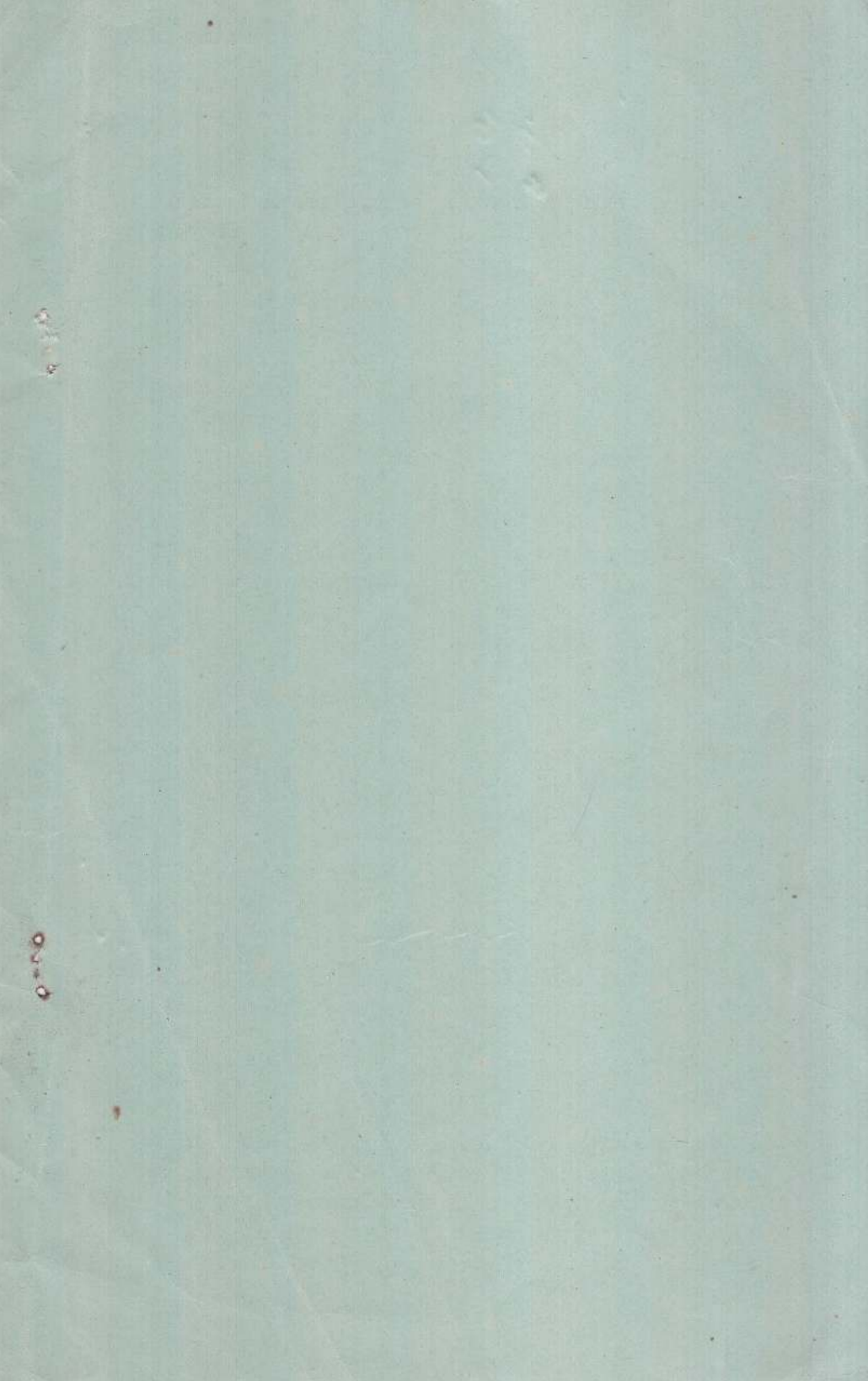
I have, in conclusion, to thank those who have been of assistance to us in our work.

The Labour Commissioner Mr. Rajanayagam, and his officers whom Mr. C. B. Kumarasinghe must be mentioned, deserve our thanks for their co-operation in all matters. Mr. P. S. Menon, the Indian Agent has solved for us many a knotty problem; and we are indebted to him.

The officers of the Congress, in the centre and the districts; the representatives and staff have all put their shoulder to the wheel and we are grateful to them.

The Reception Committee especially its Chairman, Mr. Gopalasari, and its General Secretary, Mr. Charles are be congratulated for their splendid arrangements for the Sessions.

Last but not least, I thank you all once again and appeal to you to stand firm and together.



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