

Less Man Days Lost, Despite More Disputes

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THE Draft Five Year Plan made three main points in regard to labour and industrial relations, so that labour may properly play its role in the country's industrial endeavours. They are:

- (a) Peace in industry is essential for the fulfilment of the targets of the Plan;
- (b) Labour must properly realise that "in an undeveloped economy it cannot build for itself a better life except on the foundation of a higher level of productivity to which it itself can make substantial contribution"; and
- (c) The workers must be satisfied that they are getting a fair deal.

It would therefore be instructive to survey the conditions of labour and industrial relations since last Diwali to seek an answer to the questions: How far has industrial peace been maintained? What is the trend of *per capita* productivity? Does the worker realise and if he does, how far does he realise that primarily it would be his increasing efficiency that would bring him better returns? How regular and disciplined is the worker? Is he getting a fair deal? How far

is he satisfied that he gets a fair deal?

The end of the war saw a sudden flare up in the industrial disputes and more than 12.7 million mandays lost in 1946 compared to a little over 4 million in the preceding year. In the following year, 16.6 million mandays were lost but in the succeeding year, there was a welcome drop to 7.8 million. In 1950, the mandays lost at 12.8 million were almost double the figure for 1949. The last Diwali heralded a welcome change in the gloomy situation and mandays lost in November stood at 3,19,000 roughly as against 2.27 million in October. Table 1 shows the monthly figures of workdays lost as a result of industrial disputes since November 1950. It would be seen that, for the time being at least, there has definitely been a substantial improvement. This is indeed, remarkable as prices have continued to rise over the whole of the period, albeit at a lower rate. The improvement is to be attributed to a greater sense of responsibility shown by labour and especially by the union leaders

witness the indefinite postponement of the threatened Railway strike. Despite the provocative political and economic situation, this has been made possible through

the increasing use of conciliation and arbitration agencies of, the Government enjoined by the various industrial laws. The effect of the conciliation and arbitration machinery is reflected significantly in the decreasing amount of time lost though the number of disputes and that of the workers involved has tended to increase.

Viewing the disputes industry-wise, it is clear that it is our largest industry (Table II) that shows the highest, time loss during the period under review. Textiles, food, drink and tobacco, and engineering have in all the months figured most preponderantly and have generally accounted for around 3/5th of the time loss. As a result, it is in West Bengal, Bombay, Bihar and to a smaller extent in UP, MP and Madras that the incidence of disputes, has been the heaviest geographically. Recent months have shown a deterioration in railways, docks and ports, wood, stone and glass and plantations also though fortunately the national organisations of workers in the field have always shown an enlightened spirit and prevented such disputes from spreading any wider.

Classified according to causes, industrial disputes in the majority of cases arise on problems of wages and personnel which account for substantially more than half the disputes during the period, this is only to be expected in as much as prices have continued to rise and in many an industry wages are nowhere near the minimum living wage level, much less to the fair wage level. The demand was justified by the Pay Commission that workers should be broadly classed into a minimum of categories for payment of wages and wage differentials should be narrowed down to the minimum possible levels, consistent with differences in skill, responsibility, training and experience, and the -train, fatigue and other relevant factors involved.

It is to be noted that though money wages have continued to increase, the real income of the worker has been falling since the increases granted have continually been falling short of the rise in prices.

Table 1. Industrial Disputes in India

Month	No. of Disputes		No. of workers involved		
	Starting during the period	Total in progress during a part or the whole of the period	Starting during the period	Total in progress during a part or the whole of the period	Total No. of Mandays lost during the period
1950					
Nov.	77	84	51,302	56,736	313,837
Dec.	58	68	30,393	41,061	163,718
1951					
Jan.	102	120	81,039	91,045	324,922
Feb.	45	61	40,995	44,025	203,660
March*	66	79	37,898	47,723	317,869
April*	103	119	88,754	104,689	371,359
May*	94	107	40,506	44,055	209,252
June†	116	144	81,651	89,019	379,046

* Revised, yet provisional.

† Provisional.

Source: *Indian Labour Gazette*.

During the period there have been no significant change in the wage rate differentials which continue to remain unduly wide and ought to be narrowed down as a matter of social policy in order that living wages can accrue to the largest number of workers. As a result of the various adjudication awards, however, workers are increasingly being divided into three broad categories—skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled—instead of being divided into numerous categories as before and are being assured of a fairer opportunity to acquire skill and derive the benefits attendant thereon.

Turning to the field of production, we have recently been deluged with pronouncement of big and prominent industrialists that the worker is producing less and less. Unfortunately such statements are made without any factual basis. It would be more honest to say that no definite opinion can be formed about the trend of productivity in this country for the problem has not been studied at all. At least one eminent

industrialist group which has been studying labour productivity scientifically for some time past has come to the conclusion that the worker is not to be blamed for the low level of productivity. Though known to the wider public, the fact seems to be little appreciated by industrialists that obsolescence of the bulk of our industrial equipment is the major impediment today to all efforts to raise the level of productivity. The re-tooling and renovation of our manufacturing equipment still remain the biggest hurdle. Unfortunately, the unavailability abroad of the necessary equipment which has been further accentuated by the pre-occupation of the industrialised countries with their own defence needs, more than the lack of funds, has made the prospects bleak. Nor has any significant progress been made towards rationalisation without which productivity cannot be increased substantially. The worker in fact can be said to be working more efficiently today inasmuch as absenteeism in manufacturing indus-

tries has been generally lower than the average for 1950, which in turn was lower than that in 1949. In the woollen, engineering and cement industries and in telegraph and ordnance workshops, however, absenteeism has been going up. It is hoped that the growing sense of responsibility shown by labour in the case of industrial disputes would also be reflected in lower absenteeism.

That the worker is showing a greater awareness that a better life for him depends in the last analysis on his producing more, is an influence that is perhaps warranted by recent developments. The reduction in the number of mandays lost during the period, in spite of the greater number of disputes and of workers involved would seem to support such a conclusion. This is, however, not to deny that much room for progress is still left and that active efforts by the union leaders, employers and the State are necessary to educate the workers. The better the worker is educated

Table II. Man Days Lost—Distribution by Industries

Industry	1951					1950		
	June	May	April	March	Feb.	Jan.	Dec.	Nov.
TEXTILES:								
Cotton	114,509	77,163	88,119	192,261	100,791	145,445	40,590	76,729
Jute	4,246	240	—	6,672	—	74,015	44,000	80
Others	3,370	11,469	1,982	1,518	263	5,995	5,163	5,424
Engineering	39,323	9,325	11,292	31,455	23,436	7,179	4,673	31,539
MINERALS & METALS:								
Iron & Steel	2,740	1,285	3,400	3,355	15,795	2,890	—	—
Others	10,056	9,232	3,957	—	4,438	3,410	29	147
Food, Drinks &								
Tobacco	82,380	10,409	26,029	7,384	900	33,606	10,081	18,334
Chemicals & Dyes	18,357	420	840	168	—	187	4,362	15,596
Wood, Stone &								
Glass	10,010	10,944	7,279	29,908	8,699	198	24,266	—
Paper & Printing	7,559	920	7,746	2,680	2,800	40	*	43
Skins & Hides	—	—	1,428	5,130	5,086	167	—	325
Gins & Presses	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
MINES:								
Coal	4,270	16,400	18,873	2,816	10,466	10,356	8,054	159,942
Others	6,440	934	—	3,000	840	*	—	815
TRANSPORT								
Railways	20,177	19,125	16,100	316	1,150	101	1,925	225
Others	—	150	—	—	90	5,140	3,955	76
Docks & Ports	12,676	6,223	4,908	600	*	4,106	3,126	—
Plantations	2,405	—	—	—	1,836	—	—	—
Municipalities	7,329	179	980	600	60	*	85	*
Miscellaneous	33,199	34,744	178,426	32,362	26,985	31,887	13,409	4,577
Total	379,046	209,916	371,359	320,225	203,535	324,722	163,118	313,852

* Not Known.

Source: Indian Labour Gazette.

and more informed he is about the economic situation and of the activities of the enterprise he works for and its various problems, the more he would realise the relationship between higher productivity and better returns for himself. The growing tendency in this regard to equate literacy with education (abetted by the Planning Commission) is to be regretted. In recommending that special attention should be paid to the spread of literacy to achieve these ends, the Planning Commission has failed to appreciate the situation properly.

Apart from the spread of literacy, joint consultation in industry would go a long way towards inculcating in the worker a sense of responsibility and appreciation of his role in production, as well as in reassuring him that he is getting a fair deal, if such is really the case. During the period under review, no progress appears to have been made in this direction. The practice of appointing elected representatives of the workers as shop-stewards which helps to redress their grievances has not been adopted widely. Even when work and joint consultation committees are appointed, they are rarely entrusted with responsibility and are, more of km than not, mere show

pieces.

In the matter defining precisely the conditions of employment, which would enable the worker to know where he stands and that he is getting justice, however, substantial progress has been made, thanks to the central legislation which makes it obligatory for the employers to maintain certified standing orders. West Bengal and Bihar are working this out; Bombay and Madras, however, are lagging very much behind.

The omnibus Labour Relations Bill as amended in the Select Committee in December 1950 had been put in the cold storage and lapses with the present Parliament. The Plantations Bill regulating the conditions of labour in the plantations and allied industries has, however, been finally put on the statute book. The State Insurance Scheme is being applied to wider areas. The Government is also expected to bring a Bill shortly making provision *at* provident fund under the aegis of the State compulsory for all those concerns which do not currently have such schemes.

The implementation of the Minimum Wages Act is being delayed in execution indefinitely and the dates by which it was to come into

force is being postponed repeatedly.

It is hoped that industrial peace will be maintained in the coming year over a large part of the country. The hope can materialise if the price level does not misbehave or upset calculations, speedier measures of resolving disputes are introduced and a healthier appreciation of the economy is shown by workers as well as employers, more especially by the latter. In and around Bombay, however, the position is likely to deteriorate as a result of the short supply of power. The situation has disburting possibilities because it is not entirely "an act of God" as the Hon'ble State Minister for Public Works would like us to believe. The Government and more especially the Government of Bombay have been guilty of indifference and irresponsibility in not taking any action well in time when they had been duly appraised of the dangerous situation both by the hydro-electric companies and the Expert Committee on Power.

The low level of new investment and especially the slow pace of re-equipment referred to earlier, would restrict new employment and the growing unemployment indicated by the number of applicants on the live register is not likely to be mitigated, on present showing.

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