

TEXTILE STRIKE

The Wages Of Wrath

ON JANUARY 18 the strike by 2.5 lakh textile workers in Bombay's 60 mills will complete a year; 25,000 of these workers in eight mills have been on strike since October 1981. In every way, the lengthening strike has become a grim milestone in India's industrial history, with the opposing sides only gaining in belligerence, and determination as the stalemate draws interminably on. The mood in Bombay, and in the villages where most of the workers have returned to, grows darker every day. What makes so many men fight so doggedly for so long in a battle where the odds are stacked against their victory? Correspondent CHAITANYA KALBAG visited Bombay's textile areas and travelled through Pune, Satara, Kolhapur and Sindhudurg districts to gauge the strikers' mood and find out how the strike has affected them. His report:

PROLONGED hardship can only gird the souls of the meekest of men with steel. Last fortnight, the mood among Bombay's striking textile workers turned darker as the 365th day of their struggle approached. It had been a long and cruel year, and the battle between the workers and the mill managements had reached epic proportions. The city's anaemic winter landscape was lanced by cold chimneys; riot squads of police at the ready patrolled the byways of Girangaon, the mills area. In the working-class chawls in Parel, Lalbag and Chinchpokli, workers who had stayed back in Bombay sat morosely in their windows, unshaven and haggard. Every day had become a battle for survival, but their spirit showed no signs of flagging.

Dattaram Laxman Salunke is a sober, quiet-spoken man, often restraining impetuous strikers who want to break out of the impasse by taking to the streets. Salunke has worked for 22 years in the 'semi' department of the Jupiter Mills in Parel. When the strike began he was earning Rs 675 a month, and supported a wife, five children, a widowed sister and his mother

on that sum.

Unwavering Determination: Salunke lives in a room 10 feet by 16 feet in the Sadguru Sadan chawl in Lalbag, for which he pays a monthly rent of Rs 85. "I stayed back in Bombay," he says, "because I thought the strike would end in a couple of months. We live on *paav and usal* (rough bread and dry pulses). Many of my friends survive by selling bananas, hawking newspapers, or vending sugarcane juice."

But Salunke is steadfast in his support for firebrand union leader Datta Samant,

large areas of the city, and many mill-level leaders have been forced to sign bonds for Rs 5,000 by the police, rendering them liable for arrest if they so much as participate in a peaceful morcha. But the workers find ways of defiance. A morcha from Byculla Station is dispersed by police; workers silently enter the station, stand on its platforms, and shout slogans and sing militant songs to the accompaniment of cymbals and *dholak*, aware that the police cannot arrest them on railway property.

Sustained Morale: Most of the workers staying on in Bombay have done so because they have no choice. Almost three-quarters of the strikers have returned to their villages and their families. The majority of the workers belong to the Konkan coastal belt, and also live in sizeable pockets in the districts of Pune, Satara and Kolhapur—known as the 'Desh' belt. Samant's Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU) by itself would never have been able to sustain the strikers' morale in the villages. That job has been efficiently done by the cadres of the Lal Nishan Party (LNP), a localised Maharashtra splinter from the national communist movement born decades ago, and by its labour affiliate, the Sarva Shramik Sangh (sss).

The exodus into the countryside has been the single most important tactic to have helped the workers hold out against a settlement. They survive in the villages, either making do with incomes from paltry land-holdings or from hard labour. The strike has

brought them closer to their families, and many clearly enjoy the break from their expatriate lives in Bombay's crowded chawls. There are over 10,000 workers in Bhore taluka of Pune district, for instance. "Most of them don't have money for chappals or cloth caps," says Dnyanoba Ghone, general secretary of the Bhore Kamgar Union, "but they are surviving."

The rainfall has been very poor last year in most parts of Maharashtra, and the semi-drought conditions have worsened the workers' situation. In Bamhangar



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—KRISHNA BHONDURE, Bamhangar Village

the one man most responsible for the unprecedented strike. "We are prepared to go back to work even if our monetary demands are not conceded," he says. "But the Government must recognise Samant's union as the legitimate one, and kick the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS) out of our lives."

The police in Bombay have helped harden the strikers' attitudes. Dozens of strike leaders have been arrested under the National Security Act, Section 144 has been almost continuously clamped on

village, 20 km from Bhore, workers have been working at survival since the strike began. Their jobs in Bombay's mills had raised their standards of living; now they have had to return to their roots.

Precarious Existence: At Bamhanghar, Maosaheb Bhikole, who has worked in the weaving section of the Shreeniwas Cotton Mill in Bombay for 30 years, is busy supervising the earth-filling of a new road to the village dispensary. "Our land here is unirrigated and rain-fed," he says, "and the harvest has been poor this year. But we Bombaywallas have used our spare time to repair our houses, and now we are contributing voluntary labour to improve the village."

Many of Bamhanghar's strikers eke out a precarious existence by working in the Government's *rozgar hami* (employment guarantee) schemes, doing manual labour on roadsides or embankments for daily wages of Rs 3. Some of them get a daily wage of Rs 8 for working on a richer farmer's land. "We've even sent 80 sacks of jowar to feed our brothers in Bombay," says Bhikole proudly.

Deprivation constantly haunts many of the strikers in the villages. Krishna Bhondure, a spinner in the Bharat Textile Mills, lies emaciated and motionless in his dark hut in Bamhanghar. His right leg was amputated below the knee a month after the strike began because it developed septicaemia. Bhondure's wife and eldest son scrape together Rs 6 a day between them, but his son resents having had to give up an apprenticeship in a Bombay workshop in order to return to the village with his father. Said a despondent Bhondure: "The RMMS men tell me I will get police protection if I return to work, but how much can they protect me? A kilometre from the mill gates I will have to face strikers."

Constant Struggle: The countryside around Asangaon, 20 km from Satara town, seems to reflect the mood of the striking textile workers. Rocky and barren, it is interrupted occasionally by ragged fields of ragi, wheat and groundnut. In the gathering dusk, around 40 textile workers collect near Shankar Patil's house to discuss the strike. Dressed in shorts, shirts and white Gandhi caps, the men talk volubly about their struggle. They echo

each other in their conviction that the Government and the millowners are out to destroy them.

Patil operates four Sulzer looms in the Bombay Dyeing Textile Mills; he has been travelling constantly through the district, whipping up support for the strike in every gram panchayat. And Patil does not have to try very hard—the workers are very clear about their reasons for striking; "I earn Rs 1,200 a month and produce 1,600 metres of cloth in one eight-hour shift," says Patil, "but I am doing much more work than I used to before my mill modernized. How much money does the customer pay for that cloth? Where is all the profit going? We cannot surrender to the Government, because if we do we will be harassed forever afterwards." Patil and

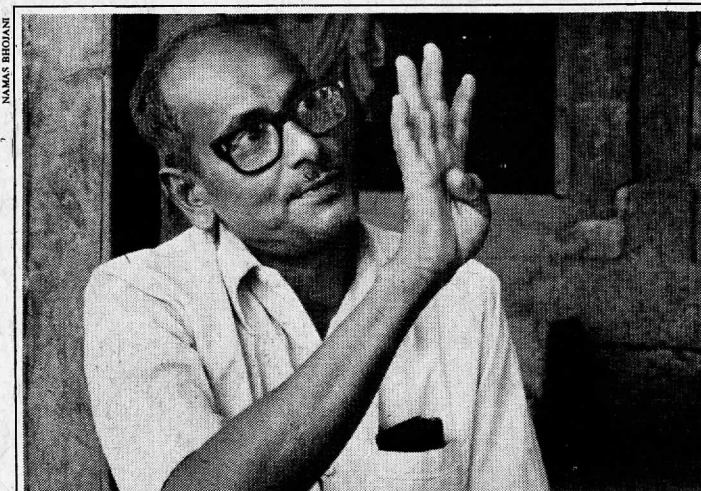
rocky land it stands on. Every striker in the village has reached out to the others, and together they form a community of opinion. Dhondu Shingre, who has worked in the ring-spinning department of Modern Mills for 30 years, says that the strike has gone on for so long only because each worker is willing to share whatever he has with the others. "Even the most apolitical worker knows and understands his own deprivation," he says. "We did not need Samant to tell us that. We had been mentally preparing to go on strike for two years before we actually did."

Inspiring Leadership: The strike has also gone on for so long because of some help from the union. Samant says that over Rs 2 crore have been collected from his long roster of engineering and chemical unions and distributed among the strikers. At least once last year over 70,000 strikers collected a dole of Rs 50, and regular distribution of rice and wheat in Bombay's working-class areas has helped many strikers immensely. Moreover, with Samant's help, unions sympathetic to him in other industries in Bombay have provided temporary employment to thousands of strikers.

Baban Kolte is a thin, wiry encyclopaedia of resentment about the condition the workers find themselves in. "I get only five days of casual leave every year—if I work a minimum of 240 days," he says angrily, "and I earn only Rs 725 after all these years, whereas the most unskilled worker in the Guest Keen Williams factory at Bhandup earns Rs 1,045 a month. I was an acid machineman once, and handled acid every day, but the millowners could not provide me with a pair of hand-gloves. This strike means everything to me now. Nobody else in India will be

allowed to go on strike if we fail."

The strike's long duration has also helped the workers take a longer view of their futures. Gangaram Valanju in Karool has not been able to do any manual labour because of poor health. But sitting on his porch of packed mud, he says he would not mind quitting his job if the millowners paid him all his dues. "We are fighting not only for ourselves, but also for the next generation of workers," he says. "Why did we choose Datta Samant? Because there was no



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—DHONDU SHINGRE, Karool Village

other activists of the MGKU have ensured that on January 18, the strike's anniversary day, and on Republic Day, thousands of strikers will collect in Satara to take a black-flag demonstration to the collector.

Across the Western Ghats from Kolhapur is the village of Karool, where the mood is indicative of the strikers' rigid stand throughout the vital Konkan region, which supplies skilled workers to the mills' weaving, drawing-in, sizing, folding and spinning departments. Karool's rough lanes dip and rise with the contours of the

other leader in sight before him."

Everywhere, the strikers are adamant that they will not go back to Bombay until Samant asks them to. Samant has acquired a messianic tinge in the strikers' conversations, and signs of his hold are apparent at his home in the middle-class housing colony of Pantnagar in Ghatkopar, a Bombay suburb. Dozens of workers stand around waiting patiently for a moment with the union leader; while he works from behind a crescent-shaped desk, a bunch of petitioners stand outside the door, shifting from one foot to another and waiting for the buzzer to summon Samant's peon. Everything in the waiting area speaks of Samant's successes—the glass-panel aluminium door to his office, the watercooler in a corner, the framed photographs of Samant signing agreements with managements—all inscribed gratefully by the workers who have donated them.

SAMANT's popularity has baffled Bombay's millowners, but the truth is that the strike has gradually radicalised the union leader's posture. Last month, with the textile strike looming over the industrial world, Samant signed some of his quickest and best wage agreements with Bombay managements; at Bayer the workers got a flat raise of Rs 500 and a minimum salary of Rs 1,500, at Firestone they got a raise of Rs 600 and an average salary of Rs 2,400, and at Advani-Oerlikon they got a raise of Rs 450 and an average pay of Rs 1,600.

Such news travels quickly to the villages where the textile strikers are holding out. At Karool, Shingre points out that all the 150 strikers in the village are confident of an eventual victory precisely because of Samant's track record. Yashwant Lad says he has gained confidence because so many thousands of workers are also with him. "I have small children so I am certainly worried about the future," he says. But village life has

mellowed his initial anger, and he is now ready for a "permanent" strike. "In Bombay I used to wait anxiously for payday, the 10th of the month," he says. "Now I don't."

Much of the strike's success is due to the animosity the workers bear towards the RMMS, a hatred that has gained strength over the years. A creation of the Bombay Industrial Relations Act (BIR Act), 1946, the RMMS is the sole bargaining agent for the workers, but it has time and again signed 'rationalisation' and work-force-reduction agreements with individual

mills declared bonus payments of between 12.5 per cent and 20 per cent, the RMMS subtracted a minimum of 2.5 per cent bonus from each worker's Diwali packet.

Unpopular Union: The resentment against the RMMS has leapfrogged since November last year. To begin with, although the RMMS's effective membership lists showed that its membership had dropped from 38,281 in December 1981 to 18,032 in January 1982 to a pathetic 1,116 in February 1982, a month after the strike began, Additional Registrar of Trade Unions S. Bhattacharjee ruled on November 5

that the RMMS would nevertheless continue to be the 'recognised' union because it was not in a position to collect fees from its members on account of the "economic hardship" of the striking workers.

Then, after the millowners put out a sweetener for Diwali, promising an 8.33 per cent bonus for 1981 and an "advance" that would together add up to Rs 2,500 at the least, dozens of state transport buses were hired by the RMMS to go into the villages to lure strikers back. The experiment ended in disaster, and RMMS activists in the countryside were attacked at quite a few places. In December, two RMMS activists who were allegedly trying to lure blacklegs into mills were murdered in Bombay.

The RMMS's partisanship towards managements also came through in 1974 when, days before S.A. Dange

led a 42-day strike, the RMMS signed an agreement with the Millowners Association (MOA) for merging Rs 221.80 of the dearness allowance (DA) with an 8 per cent wage raise. To rub salt in the workers' wounds, Dange himself abruptly withdrew the strike after obtaining paltry annual increments of Rs 4 for the workers for three years. In 1979, the Girni Kamgar Sabha-led strike was called off after the workers got another token raise of Rs 45 and annual increments of Rs 6 for another four years.



"This strike means everything to me. Nobody else in India will be allowed to go on strike if we fail; the RMMS has to go."

—BABAN KOLTE, Karool Village

millowners, never gone on strike, prevented secret balloting to determine its exact popularity, and created tension by making sure its members get more pay and work less than the others. *Badli* (temporary) workers, who comprise 40 per cent of the mills' workforce, have to pay the RMMS a cut from their pay every month if they want to retain their jobs. RMMS officials virtually act as surrogate management representatives, cracking down too harshly on shopfloor dissent or even unpunctuality. In 1981, for instance, although many

A study by the Ambedkar Institute for Labour Studies on behalf of the RMMS on textile workers' indebtedness in 1975 showed that as many as 90 per cent of the workers had take-home wages of Rs 400 or less, and "disposable wages" of only Rs 248.30 per month on average. The workers' real monthly earnings, based on the 1960 Consumer Price Index, have risen marginally from Rs 134.70 in 1965 to Rs 139.10 in April 1982.

Good Organisation: This time around, the workers' experience in organising millwise cooperative societies and workers' committees has stood them in good stead. In Bombay, the mills have been grouped in six zones, and their zonal committees meet regularly to chalk out strategies. The committees' decisions are discussed in open meetings of the workers, and the workers themselves assess the strike situation and plan further programmes.

Datta Samant himself estimates that 10 per cent of the workers will never return to work even if the strike were to end. Last fortnight there were no signs of a resumption of negotiations between the strikers and the millowners and the Government. In late October last year, after a visit to Bombay by Union Ministers Pranab Mukherjee, Veerendra Patil and Shivraj Patil, Mukherjee went to the extent of suggesting that the BIR Act be scrapped and the RMMS be derecognised. But the BIR Act's provisions, which do not permit any strikes whatsoever and stipulate that only the RMMS can negotiate wage increases, has effectively rendered the Government's stand farcical.

According to R.L.N. Vijayanagar, secretary-general of the MOA, however, one lakh workers of a claimed total of 1.8 lakh have now rejoined work. Vijayanagar insists that not more than 4,000 of these are new recruits, but some mills like Century have been advertising regularly in the Marathi papers for new recruits, and offering incentives like free accommoda-

tion in the mill premises and a midday meal. Reports also indicate that weaving sections in many mills are quite well-staffed because weavers from the powerloom sector in Bhiwandi, Pen and Alibag have been imported into Bombay to counter the strike. But a textile mill is a composite chain of operations, and so long as the spinning, carding and folding departments are not sufficiently manned, production cannot take place. Vijayanagar also claims that 22 mills are now working all three shifts, and 18 are working two shifts; but he admits that against a normal produc-

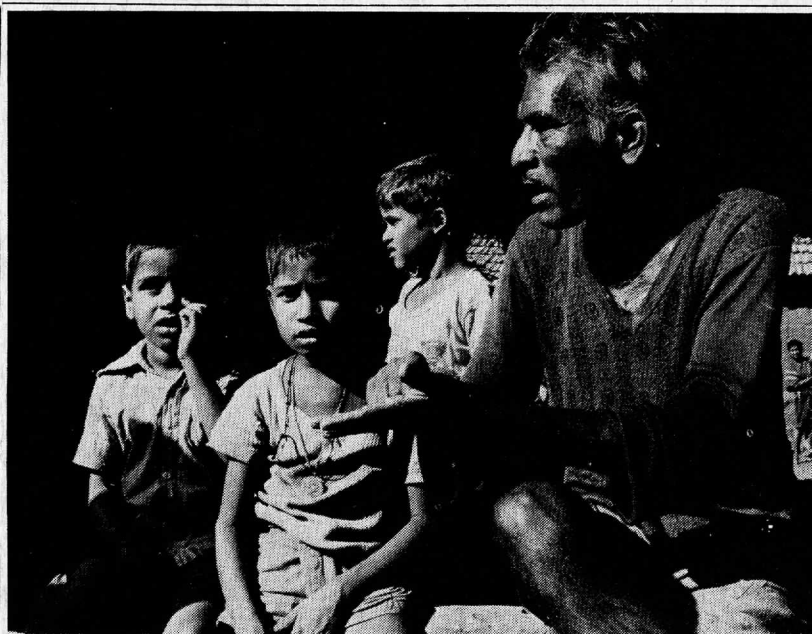
the Congress(I)'s future in Maharashtra. The snowballing antagonism towards the RMMS will affect the careers of a host of party leaders like N.M. Tidke, Balwantrao Gaekwad, Vasant Hoshing, Vasantdada Patil, P.K. Sawant, Bhai Bhosale, and Bhaurao Patil, all of whom have moved to larger responsibilities from the ranks of the RMMS.

Solomon Simon, a weaver in the New China Mills at Sewri, points out that in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement in 1956, which eventually led to the formation of Maharashtra and Gujarat, the tex-

tile workers had played a major role in ensuring a defeat for Congress candidates in the elections by fanning out into the villages to campaign. "We are ready to repeat history," he says. "Whenever the next elections are, whether this year or in 1985, we will show that the textile workers cannot be treated so callously. In 1956, 105 textile workers died during the Samyukta Maharashtra agitation. This time 10 times that number will willingly die, but the Government cannot break this strike."

There is now only a certainty that the workers owe it to themselves, and to all other workers in India, to hold out to the bitter end. The strikers have heard the rumbles of the repercussions of their fight. Many mills might close down, some might move out of Bombay altogether, and almost 80,000 *badli* workers might even lose their jobs altogether. But every strug-

gle carries a price tag, and the textile strike, aside from causing a cumulative loss of over Rs 1,000 crore and an all-time high loss of mandays, has also spread a desolate future before the strikers. The significance of the strike in a 'Year of Productivity' has not been lost. The Government's inability to solve the crisis illustrates its effeminacy and callousness all over again. Datta Samant is only the spokesman for the strikers; the real hero is undoubtedly the ordinary worker, endowed with true grit and extraordinary resilience.



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—GANGARAM VALANJU, Karool Village

tion of 35 lakh metres of cloth per day, the industry is currently turning out only 14.58 lakh metres per day.

Claims Refuted: But the millowners' claims of increasing attendance in the mills were refuted last fortnight when the Employees' State Insurance Scheme (ESIS) authorities in Bombay disclosed that as many as 1.69 lakh textile workers had been "disentitled" from the scheme because they had struck work.

In the longer term, however the textile strike will exert a malevolent influence on