

19

* First Session of Plenary Labour Conference

Dr. Ambedkar on Social Security

Following is the full text of the speech delivered by the Hon'ble Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Member for Labour, at the first session of the Plenary Labour Conference in New Delhi, Monday, September 6 :—

I welcome you to the first session of the Plenary Labour Conference. Thirteen months ago, on August 7 last year, the representatives of the Provincial Governments, Indian States, Employers and Employees were invited by the Government of India to meet in Delhi in a Tripartite Labour Conference.

The motive for calling such a Conference was twofold. For a long time the conviction had gained ground that the industrial problems and problems of Labour Welfare could not be solved unless the three parties—Government, Employers and Employees—developed a sense of responsibility towards one another, showed more respect for the views of one another and agreed to work in a spirit of give and take and that there was not much chance of such a sense of mutual respect and responsibility growing up so long as one was engaged in talking at the other. A plan to bring them together and to let them talk to each other across the table was felt to be necessary for the realization of this purpose.

Although the idea of such Tripartite Organization was there, it is doubtful if it would have taken concrete shape so quickly if the war had not made the maintenance of Labour Morale an urgent and immediate necessity. The war has hastened the implementation of the Tripartite Organization in another way.

* Indian Information, September 15, 1943, pp. 143-44.

Bold Policy

Under the stress of the war, the Government of India was called upon in increasing degree to deal with industrial problems and problems of Labour Welfare and I am glad to be able to say that it did not hesitate to take a very bold line of action.

It undertook the task of converting unskilled men by giving them technical training and establishing numerous training schools.

It introduced two new principles in the prevailing Labour Code which are of far-reaching importance and which mark a significant departure from tradition.

It took upon itself as its duty and responsibility the right to prescribe fair wages and fair conditions of service.

It also took upon itself as its duty and responsibility to compel employers and employees to submit their disputes to arbitration. This is not all. The Government of India undertook the responsibility for ensuring the welfare of Labour, not merely by directing what should be done for the well-being of the workers but also by appointing an agency of its own to see if the directions issued by it are carried out or not.

This bold policy was taken on its own initiative and judgment. It was, however, felt that it would be better for the Labour policy of the Government of India if a machinery was created to enable it to obtain advice from Provincial and State Governments, from Employers and Employees to enable it to act confidently in the discharge of the new duties which had fallen upon it.

Two Bodies Constituted

It was for this double purpose that the Tripartite Labour Conference was called. It was put to the Conference whether the time had not arrived for establishing a permanent and a representative body to discuss industrial problems of Labour Welfare both in their legislative and administrative aspects and also to advise the Government of India as to the most satisfactory line of action in dealing with those problems. The representatives who were then present unanimously accepted the proposal and resolved to constitute two bodies, one bigger to be called the Plenary Labour Conference and the other smaller to be called the Standing Labour Committee.

The Tripartite Labour Conference has its genesis in the exigencies of war. But I am happy to say that it is to last beyond the war. It is going to be an institution which will have a permanent place in the economic structure of the country.

Nobody, I am sure, will have any doubt as to the wisdom of the decision taken in favour of having such a representative forum for the discussion of industrial and labour problems. A survey of the work done during the last 13 months will be sufficient to remove it.

Since August 7, 1942, when these two bodies came into being there have been three meetings of the Standing labour Committee. The Agenda of the first meeting of the Standing Labour Committee comprised subjects such as Wartime Labour Legislation, Problems of production such as settlement of disputes, absenteeism, Hours of work, Industrial Fatigue, Health Research Boards, Earnings of Labour, Dearness Allowances, Profit Bonuses, Savings, Questions of Welfare, Cost-price grain shops, Joint Committee for A.R.P. and Welfare work ; and Rounding-off Wage Payments in view of the shortage of small coins.

The Agenda for the second meeting covered subjects like : Supply of Essential food articles to Labour, Joint Adjudication under Defence of India Rule 81-A, and Deferred Bonuses.

The third meeting was devoted to the consideration of a fair wage clause in Government Contracts, Joint Production Committees, Appointment of Labour Officers in Industrial undertakings, Working of the Defence of India Rule 81-A, Establishment of Employment Exchanges, and Collection of Statistics under the Industrial Statistics Act.

This will give an idea of the very wide range of the subjects which have been discussed by the Standing Labour Committee. It has not been possible to come to unanimous decisions on matters which have been discussed.

Extremely Useful

But the discussions have been extremely useful and the Government of India having been greatly benefitted by them. Owing to want of unanimity the Government of India could not take positive action on most of the matters that were discussed. But where there has been

unanimity the Government of India has not been slow to accept those decisions and give effect to them. In support of this I would refer here to certain items such as the War Injuries (Compensation Insurance) Act and the National Service (Technical Personnel Amendment) Ordinance. Other instances would be the Industrial Statistics Act and the Employment Exchanges Scheme. Action in consonance with the decisions of the Conference under both these will be taken very soon.

Fundamental Change In Outlook

There may be many to whom this progress may appear to be very meagre. To them I would say that theirs is the wrong perspective. There are no short cuts to progress and one cannot be sure that short cuts will be right cuts. Progress by peaceful means is always a slow process and to impatient idealists like myself it is sometimes painfully slow. In an old country like India, with no tradition of collective action and no trace of social conscience progress is bound to be slower. No one need be disheartened by this. For to my mind what matters is not so much the rate of progress as the nature of the outlook.

Looking at the Tripartite Conference from this point of view I have no hesitation in saying that the great achievement of the Tripartite Conference is the fundamental change it has brought about in the outlook of Government and of Employers and of Employees on labour problems. No one who has participated in these Conferences could have failed to sense it. Assured of a healthy and wholesome change in the outlook we can confidently hope for acceleration in the rate of our progress.

ITEMS ON AGENDA

The Agenda of this Plenary Labour Conference include eight items. They are:—

- (i) Involuntary unemployment, due to shortage of coal, raw materials etc.
- (ii) Social Security; Minimum wages.
- (iii) Principles of fixing dearness allowance.
- (iv) Provisions for standing orders on the lines of the provisions in Chapter V of the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act, in large industrial concerns.

- (v) Adoption of the Rules of Procedure for the Plenary Conference.
- (vi) Setting up of Tripartite Organizations in Provinces.
- (vii) Representation of Labour in the Legislatures and other Bodies.
- (viii) Model Rules for Provident Funds.

Of these items, there are two the importance of which I am sure will not escape you. I refer to Social Security and the Representation of Labour. They are inseparable. What is significant is that they are inescapable. They are matters of serious consideration all over the world and the Beveridge Report is only one instance of the general interest which the problem has aroused all over the world. We in India cannot shut our eyes to them. It is not for me to tell you how you should deal with them or what would be the correct attitude to take in regard to them. But you will permit me to make two observations which are germane to the issues which they cover. The first is this.

Two Contradictions

Those who are living under the capitalistic form of industrial organization and under the form of political organization called Parliamentary Democracy must recognize the contradictions of their systems. The first contradiction is between fabulous wealth and abject poverty not in its simple form but in its aggravated form in which we see it, wealth to those who do not work and poverty for those who do.

The second contradiction lies between the political and the economic systems. In politics, equality ; in economics, inequality. One man one vote, one vote one value is our political maxim. Our maxim in economics is a negation of our political maxim. There might be differences of opinion in the matter of resolving these contrasts. But there can be no difference of opinion on the point that these contradictions do exist.

It is true these contradictions, though glaring, passed unnoticed by the mass of the people. But today the situation has changed and the contrasts which even the *keenest* was not aware of are now brought home even to the *dullest*.

The second observation I wish to make is this. Ever since the basis of social life was changed from status to contract insecurity of life has

become a social problem and its solution has occupied the thoughts of all those who believe in the betterment of human life. There has been an enormous energy spent in enunciating the rights of man and the different sorts of freedom which must be regarded as his inalienable birthright. All this, of course, is very good, very cheering. What I wish to say is that there will be very little security unless and until, to use the words of the Report of the Economic Group of the Pacific Relations Conference, these rights are translated into terms which the common man can understand, namely, peace, a house, adequate clothing, education, good health, and, above all, the right to walk with dignity on the world's great boulevards without the fear of a fall.

For Dignified Existence

We, in India, cannot fail to recognize these problems or bypass them. We must be prepared for the revaluation of values. It will not be enough to make industrial development of India as our goal. We shall have to agree that any such industrial development shall be maintained at a socially desirable level. It will not be enough to bend our energies for the production of more wealth in India. We shall have to agree not merely to recognise the basic right of all Indians to share in that wealth as a means for a decent and dignified existence but to devise ways and means to insure him against insecurity.

Before I conclude there is one matter to which I would like to make reference. Discussions at our meetings have sometimes tended to be rather discursive and unbusinesslike.

I have no intention to be over-critical in this matter, but I would ask delegates to be as brief as possible and to keep to the point at issue. I do not wish to restrict the opportunities of any delegate to participate in the discussion and to make his contribution but I would ask you to remember that what we want to get at is the view of the delegate. He is welcome to explain his views. But the statement of his views need not always be accompanied by an elaborate chain of reasoning, at any rate where the reasoning is of the obvious kind. I am sure every one of you is as anxious as I am to make our proceedings thoroughly businesslike and thereby avoid laying ourselves open to the charge which Carlyle levelled against the House of Commons.