

* War Work of National Service Labour Tribunals

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Tribute

“At a time when the war was going none too well, when India herself was threatened with invasion, we were confronted with a serious bottleneck in the supply of technical personnel urgently required for the fighting Services and our war industries. The National Service Labour Tribunals were set up under the stress of urgency. Technical man-power had to be mobilised with the utmost speed and because of our lack of experience our plans had necessarily to be somewhat hazy. The task was fraught with difficulties but its accomplishment is a great tribute to your efforts.”

Thus observed the Hon'ble Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Labour Member, Government of India, in his address to the Chairmen of National Service Labour Tribunals, who assembled in Simla on April 19 to discuss questions relating to technical training scheme, the National Service (Technical Personnel) Ordinance, and Employment Exchanges.

Continuing, the Labour Member said :

The Tribunals have directed nearly 15,000 technicians into national service. They have also exercised effective control over the movement of technical personnel. It was necessary to ask workmen to take up employment away from their homes or to prevent them from bettering their prospects by seeking employment elsewhere. In the United Kingdom such action is comparatively easy because conditions of employment are more or less standardised and the Ministry of Labour and National Service have a vast welfare organisation to watch the interests of a conscripted worker especially when he is required to go away from his home. The Tribunals in India were, however, placed in different circumstances, and on the whole it may be said that they have exercised their powers with commendable tact and restraint to the great

* Indian Information, May 15, 1945, pp. 639-40.

advantage of the war effort but without undue disregard to the interests of the workers.

There have been employers who have complained that the Tribunals have been unduly soft to the workers. On the other hand, there have been complaints that the Tribunals have been unduly harsh towards the workers. I have never tried to discourage these complaints either from employers or workers because I have always believed that the careful consideration of complaints will enable Government to prescribe the right course of action. You will find therefore that on the one hand we are suggesting the tightening of control over the drift of labour regarding which there are still serious complaints in Calcutta. On the other hand, we are also requiring Tribunals to give closer attention to the conditions of employment of workers who are directed into national service or prevented from bettering their employment.

Control With Justice

I do not propose to enter into any of the details of the suggestions which will come for consideration in the subsequent meeting but I should like to impress upon you the fact that the war has imposed a very heavy strain upon the workers and that if we have, on account of the war, to impose a further sacrifice upon them, we should ensure that this is not done arbitrarily. Whatever the pressure from employers, the war emergency should not be the occasion for deteriorating labour conditions or lowering the dignity of labour.

In the United Kingdom vast powers are vested in the minister of Labour and National Service but they are powers which can be exercised to an equal extent in both directions i.e., against the employer as much as against the worker. These powers have been used to bring employers and workers together so that there may be greater collaboration between them. It is this spirit of co-operation which I should like to see inculcated in India and I am sure that it can be done if we exercise control with firmness but with full justice.

There is one other aspect of the work of the National Service Labour Tribunals that deserves notice. The recruitment for our training schemes in India and the United Kingdom has been entrusted to them and I should like to express my sincere appreciation of the care with which this task has been undertaken. But for this our training schemes could not have been a success.

In the case of the Bevin Training Scheme I know that the Ministry of Labour and National Service were particularly impressed by the excellent selection of the trainees who were sent to the United Kingdom. No doubt there were some black sheep among the Bevin trainees but considering the numbers that have been sent, we may congratulate ourselves that they were so very few in regard to whom it cannot be said that the time and money spent on their training was wasted. On the other hand, most of the returned Bevin trainees will undoubtedly be of great help in raising the standard of our skilled workers. They have also brought back with them the unique experience of a nation fully mobilised for total war. What can a country not achieve when it is thus organised and why should these achievements be confined to war alone? Can we not extend them to the peace that we hope will follow shortly.

Resettlement Machinery

This brings me to the post-war issues which will confront us in no less bewildering a manner than the issues of war. The first and most important problem will be the resettlement of demobilised personnel and here I am thinking not only of the fighting Services but also of the large body of industrial workers engaged in war factories. No Government can leave the demobilised ex-service personnel and workers in war industries to their own fate during the transition from war to peace. Resettlement is a civil responsibility and Government have decided that it will fall on the Labour Department. Our resettlement proposals will be discussed with you. In the machinery that we hope to set up, the Chairman of the National Service Labour Tribunals will be called upon to play a very important part.

The problem of resettlement is one which has to be tackled by the Centre and the Provinces in the closest co-operation. In the Provinces the Chairman will be the head of the regional organisation. It will be his duty to maintain the closest contact with the organisation at the Centre and with the Departments of the Provincial Governments. Your duties will call for the highest degree of tact, energy and enterprise. I hope that in the discharge of these duties your contribution will be no less than in wartime.

Efficient Employment Service

I need not enter into the details of our resettlement organisation but I should like to emphasise that in addition to a very necessary service for ex-service demobilised personnel, the main purpose of the organisation that we propose to set up is to lay the foundation of an efficient employment service in this country. The important feature of such a service is a co-ordinated system of Employment Exchanges. We have already set up a few of these Exchanges some of which have shown good results but it is clear that we must organise this machinery on a sounder basis. We require above all trained staff to run the Exchanges and suitable buildings to which workers and employers can come. In both respects our existing Exchanges have started with a very considerable handicap. So far as staff is concerned, we are proposing to inaugurate very shortly a training scheme for Managers and Assistant Managers. We hope that this training will enable newer Exchanges to be built up on the right lines.

The resettlement organisation will also have to concern itself with the training and re-conditioning of demobilised personnel and their welfare (follow-up) and will have to watch their interests in the new employment. Provision has also been made for publicity and canvassing. The details of the organisation will come before you for consideration and we shall also await suggestions from Provincial Governments.

Task Of Great Magnitude

What is very important is that you, Gentlemen, should on your return to the Provinces discuss these proposals with the representatives of Provincial Governments and interest them in our scheme. We would like to avoid any misunderstanding as to its scope. If there are difficulties which you cannot resolve, we hope you will bring them to our notice and give us your own suggestions as to how they can be overcome. We have undertaken a task of great complexity and magnitude. We must therefore work together bearing in mind the higher interests that we have to serve.

I have taken much of your time and now, Gentlemen, before leaving you to your labours, I should like to wish you good speed and good luck.

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***APPOINTMENT OF REGIONAL LABOUR COMMISSIONERS**

Three Regional Labour Commissioners—Mr. D. G. Jadhav, Dr. Seth and Mr. Abu Talib—have been appointed by the Central Government at Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore respectively for administering their new machinery which has been set up to deal with industrial relations in industries and undertakings in the “central sphere.” The organisation is under Mr. S. C. Joshi, the Central Government’s Chief Labour Commissioner at the headquarters.

The new set-up also includes a Deputy Labour Commissioner at New Delhi, 9 Conciliation Officers and 24 Labour Inspectors (Central) located at various centres throughout India, and one Central Inspector of industrial canteens.

Industries falling in the “central sphere” are (1) all industrial establishments owned or controlled by the Government of India ; (2) Federal railways ; (3) mines and oilfields and (4) major ports.

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*Indian Information, August 15, 1945 p. 152.