



Artwork by Chittaprosad Bhattacharya

The Spectre of Communism

A glimpse into the early stages of the labour movement in eastern Bengal

KHOKA ROY

Alongside playing an active role in the independence movement, the Communist Party had begun working on organising labourers, farmers and other workers in then East Bengal since 1937-38. Here we are talking about the Party's activities among the labourers in East Bengal.

Under the British imperial rule, industrial developments were mainly confined to Kolkata and its surrounding areas. East Bengal was industrially underdeveloped. Against this backdrop, activities that the Party initiated among the working class were too focused on Kolkata and its nearby industrial areas.

However, a decade later in 1937-38, since the Communist Party started its journey in Dhaka, district leaders Nepal Nag and Anil Mukherjee took the first step to establish a democratic trade union movement and form an organisation to that end among the workers at a spinning mill in Dhakeswari. Working tirelessly

on end, they succeeded in starting off a trade union comprising workers within a short while. In fact, they had become hugely popular among mill workers. Mrinal Chakravarty, Sunil Roy, and Nani Chowdhury were among the well-known co-workers of Nepal Nag and Anil Mukherjee at that time.

Dhakeswari workers' union grew stronger as a result of the joint efforts put in by different Party leaders, defying all the opposition from the owners. A very large number of workers had become members of this union. Dhakeswari Spinning Mill Union was considered one of the strongest unions in the history of trade union movement in the entire Indian subcontinent.

From the very beginning, this union had been organising different movements for various demands in the interest of the workers. One of those movements in 1946 was very remarkable. Under union leadership, Dhakeswari Spinning Mill workers organised a glorious strike to realise their demands for a pay raise and some rights issues. Shaheed Suhrawardy was then the chief minister of East Bengal. His government, teaming up with a band

of leaders who had contributed to this union included Rawshan Ali and Dhiren Das Gupta. Apart from those two spinning mills, Communist Party members were active among the railway workers' in East Bengal. Located inside East Bengal, Parbotipur and Syedpur stations, which formed part of the East Bengal Rail (EBR), had gradually become the strongholds of EBR Workers' Union (former West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu was the then president of this union), thanks to political activities taken up by Communist Party members. Those who made a remarkable contribution to establishing those branches included Communist Party member Hari Sadhan Dutta (Chattagram), Dharani Roy (Dhaka), MahadebSanyal (Mymensingh), Jasimuddin Mandal (Ishwardi), Bimal Sen and Sudhir Dhar (Syedpur).

Congress followers and activists, under the leadership of Professor Humayun Kabir, formed a counter union among the EBR workers. Another union was formed by a worker named Chirag Ali of Muslim League (Parbotipur).

But it was proven in the 1946 general elections that the EBR workers' union was the true representative of railway workers under the leadership of the Communist Party.

There was a workers' movement in 1938-39 in the district of Sylhet as well. Of these, the movements in tea estates and at Chatak Cement Company were remarkable. Among the movements in tea estates, the forty-five day-long strike enforced by Arunabanda tea-estate workers in Kachar district was the most memorable one. Those who played an important role in the formation of trade union movements in Sylhet included Barin Dutta, Dijen Das Gupta, and Angira Sharma.



of goons hired by the owners, attacked workers during the strike. But the movement went on for a long period of time. Finally, the owners were forced to fulfil some of their demands.

A workers' union was also formed by Communist Party members in Kustia Mohini Mohon Spinning Mill. Renowned

This is an excerpt from the autobiography of veteran communist leader Khoka Roy (1907-1992), titled "Sangramer Tin Dashak" (Three decades of struggle). All throughout his active career, he was closely involved with the labour movement. Translated by anubad.net.

1936

Payment of Wages Act. Workers in Mohini Mill (Kushtia) raises a strong protest demanding provident fund, withdrawal of false cases against labour leaders and so on.

1938

The Employment of Children Act is passed.

1939

Bengal Maternity Benefit Act is passed.