

# MY WORK AS LABOUR OFFICER

by

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In dealing with the problem of labour in India, one should remember what Miss Rathbone pointed out in "The Case for Family Allowance" that it was a poor sort of loyalty to the working classes that compelled their champions to pretend that every young worker was like a young God, incorruptible instead of like the rest of us, a creature who finds it easy to form habits. We have no right to expect these workers to behave as perfect angels. Over 70 per cent of these are illiterate and the strain due to fatigue in work, bad housing conditions, bad and insufficient food, poverty, etc. is heavy. Those of us who have espoused the cause of labour must recognise the deficiencies in the make-up of the working classes, deficiencies not due necessarily to any fault of the workers, but due to the neglect of their education, and the low standard of living, which is a technical way of expressing their poverty.

In my work as Labour Officer, I have never forgotten the qualifications which the Whitley Commission on Labour laid down in 1931 as necessary for a Labour Officer—integrity; personality, energy, sense of humour, gift of understanding individuals and linguistic facility. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Labour Officer must be an expert psychologist who must develop a sixth sense to gauge immediately the worker's troubles and grievances. The Labour Officer must develop personality to make the workers and the management to have confidence in his judgment. He must show to the workers by his attitude and his actions that in all honesty and straight-forwardness, he is out to help the worker's cause. It is the duty of the Labour Officer to make the workers realise that there is a sense of fairness, justice and honesty in his dealings with the workers and then it does not very much matter whether he can remove the grievances or not. It is the business of the Labour Officer to conduct

labour negotiations and to represent the general management in dealing with the employees. The authority of the Labour Officer, like the authority of any functional manager, is both direct and functional authority. His task is above all a task of stimulation and inspiration and of giving specialised advice and service. His mission is to inform and advise the general management in matters relating to personnel management and assisting the general management to establish personnel policies, preserving the morale, securing the co-operation and increasing the working efficiency of the employees and to establish a uniform and consistent administration of personnel policies. As the Labour Officer will be called upon to decide between the employee and the management, his outstanding qualification must be a great sense of fairness. That does not mean that he is not for the employees against the firm or for the firm against the employees, but he must have the courage of his convictions and so, when he himself finds or believes that the employee is right and the management is wrong, he must not be afraid to fight for what he believes to be right. One of the most important obligations of the Labour Officer is to see that the management follows all legislation and official regulations and to see to it that the stipulations are kept by the firm. The Labour Officer also represents the management in governmental labour agencies and in negotiations with trade unions, *e. g.* Conciliation Board, Labour Court, Industrial Court, etc. In his negotiations with the workers or with the managerial staff, the Labour Officer must not be a good trader in the sense that he can outsmart the employees. No sound employee-employer relationship can be built up by either side trying to outsmart the other. The Labour Officer has to create mutual confidence in each other.

These are some of the important points in regard to the functions of a Labour Office which I have borne in mind and my long experience has made me realise that straightforwardness and fair dealing with workers and the management is, like honesty, the best policy. One cannot develop this kind of judicial minded attitude, unless one is backed up by factual knowledge and information. I have come across, I know and I am known to literally thousands of workers in the working class area. I have tried to befriend them and

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this attempt of befriending, successful as it has been, has paid wonderful dividends with compound interest by way of winning the confidence, trust and affection of the workers and the consciousness that these efforts result in the happiness of the workers, (a) by removal of grievances, (b) by doing something for the amelioration of their living and working conditions. There is nothing paternalistic in this. It is humanitarian philosophy and decency at work.

The Labour Officer's work is not merely confined to maintaining good relationship between the employees and the employers, important though this is. He has other obligations to the management and the workers, e.g. to establish standards for physical fitness of the workers. Unfortunately, pre-employment medical examination is not prevalent in factories in Bombay, nor is there any periodical medical examination. Some mills in Bombay have started this practice and the results so far known are almost heart-breaking. There is something very definitely wrong with the health of the workers, the main reason being, the terrible housing conditions about which the Government are hopelessly indifferent and inefficient, and malnutrition and under-nutrition. The Employees State Insurance Act was passed two years ago and there has been no serious attempt by the Government, Central and Provincial, to enforce the Act. The enforcement of this Act would mean sickness benefits to workers as well as free medical aid. Today, when a worker suffers from T. B. it results in his, quite rightly, immediate removal from the factory, because continuing the work inside the factory would not only aggravate the disease, but would spread it through contagion to other workers. The Indian Factories Act was passed in 1948 and we were told that it would be enforced from 1st April 1949. Even today it has not been enforced, as the Rules under the Act have not been finally settled by Government. There must be something wrong with the Governments, Central and Provincial, which passed pro-labour legislation and then "go slow" when the question of enforcement comes. I may be permitted to ask if it is the intention of the Government of India to pass this paper legislation only to make a good impression on the outside world and the International Labour Office.

One of our worst headaches in the industry is the high percentage of absenteeism. The main cause to my mind of this absenteeism is the terrible housing conditions resulting, if not in actual illness, in sickness and lethargy and restlessness. Mr. Khandubhai Desai, President of the Congress sponsored Indian National Trade Union Congress, rightly pointed out in his recent speech in the Parliament, to the breach by Government of the Tripartite Truce between Labour, Capital and Government in not having implemented their promise to provide adequate and decent housing for industrial workers.

As regards mal-nutrition and under-nutrition, this can to a certain extent be remedied by industrial canteens. These canteens would make workers restaurant-minded. Cheap and clean food would be given on hygienic basis providing sufficient calories and vitamin values.

Women workers need special attention. They are losing in heights and weights, anemia, T. B. constipation and influenza are the frequent troubles, all of them avoidable with proper care. For many years the word "labour welfare" had a bad odour. In the early twenties, labour welfare work was considered a strike-breaking instrument. Since the 1939-45 war, welfare has taken its rightful place as a direct obligation of the employers and the State towards the workers and their families, an obligation as necessary as the payment of direct wages.

The world is thinking now in terms of a Welfare State. England is already a Welfare State under active socialist government. Truman and the United States Government are working for a Welfare Deal, an improvement on Roosevelt's New Deal. There is not the slightest doubt that India is going to be, notwithstanding the re-actionaries and the conservatives trying to assert themselves since Gandhiji's death, a Welfare State.

Welfare work in factories must include the children of the working classes. This could be done through child nurseries inside the factories. But the factories can only provide for the children of the working mothers. Similar community centres, where children are looked after, must

be run by the Municipality where working fathers could leave their children for care and education and feeding; one such centre is being successfully run by the Madras Corporation, thanks to the initiative of Lady Colleen Nye.

I have emphasised the terrible conditions of housing in Bombay. More than half the population, 1.5 million people, live in one-room tenements. There are 76 slum areas in Bombay. The sanitary arrangements are very inadequate in the terrible over-crowded one-room chawls and in the slums.

Industrial accidents are far too prevalent inside the plants and most of them are preventable. The hospital facilities for treatment of accident cases are inadequate and the compensation paid under the Workmen's Compensation Act is equally inadequate. Lump sum payment are just not much help. The Health Insurance Act provides for regular fortnightly and monthly payments. When will this Act be put in force?

In my work, in my humble way, I deal with these problems. I visit workers in the chawls. I visit injured workers in hospitals. This helps them tremendously because of the psychological re-actions on the workers. No compensation is paid to the worker without my first interviewing him. I try to get him to deposit part of his compensation in the mills Co-operative Society and at the same time try to find for him an alternate job if he is no longer fit to resume his old work. This is one great problem, to find work for partially disabled workers, for the compensation given cannot last them for ever and such injured workers without work are a drain on the society. It is the responsibility of the State to find them work.

Having dealt with this problem in a general way, I should like to give three or four instances of individual cases. I remember a depressed class boy of 21, a cooly—who lost his finger in an accident in 1942. He received Rs. 225/- as compensation. He immediately cashed this against a wife from his village. Then he was found suffering from T. B.

Treatment and a change of air cured him of T. B. because he was taken in hand early.

A worker lost his right leg. The compensation came to Rs. 2200/-. When he saw me, accompanied by three relatives, I told the worker that I would not let him have his compensation in cash. This infuriated the relatives, who started quarrelling with me. This gave me an opportunity of pointing out to the worker that his relatives were after his money and it was much safer in the mill co-operative society than with him or with his relatives. The worker understood that I was right and he agreed to freeze his money. The management agreed to provide him with an artificial leg and as soon as he got accustomed to walk with the artificial leg, he was provided with a job, not quite as good as the one he had in the factory. Without the leg the man would have been completely useless and could have lived only on the mercy of his relatives in a joint family system or as a beggar in the street. Walking now fairly comfortably with an artificial leg, he has regained his confidence.

Two days after Diwali, a young woman worker was brought to me by the doctor. She was on authorised leave for six months as a small patch of T. B. was detected. The woman worker demanded work, which the doctor could not permit, as low fever still persisted and premature return to work might bring back the old trouble. So I advised the young woman to take two months more leave and promised to arrange for an ex-gratia payment to keep her going. She told me: "I have been living with my father's sister who feeds me. My husband is a permanent invalid and he is in the native place, looked after by his relatives. I am not sending him money. But how long can I live with my aunt? How long can I sponge on her? Besides I have not a pie in my pocket and all that I have by way of clothes is the sari that I am wearing." I asked her if she was drinking milk. This was a silly question, as I knew she had not the money to buy milk. I gave her Rs. 5/- for milk. She asked me when I wanted this money back. I replied: "When you become a multi-millionaire." She said: "No,

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no, you must tell me when you want this money back." I gently reminded her that just two days back it was "Bhan Bij" (second day after the Hindu New Year Day which is Brother's Day) and the Rs. 5/- I was giving her was my offering to her as a brother. She broke down. She did not mind receiving payment from the office for the enforced leave, but she felt immensely touched that I should give her this small token of fellow-feeling and friendship.

This is one of the many instances, which I come across in my work, showing the greatness of mind and spirit of the Indian industrial workers. They are brave people and they deserve better treatment at the hands of the Government, society and the trade unions. The trade unions do not understand their responsibilities. They are run for political exploitation. This, I am afraid, applies to all the trade unions working in the Textile Industry. Power politics and party politics are the bane of the trade union movement in India and no healthy trade union can grow, unless politics is forgotten.

And lastly, I must not forget one incident. In June 1939, about two months before the war started, the textile industry was in a bad way, passing through a crisis, and retrenchment was suggested. Some twenty women working in our mills came to see me. They were told that the axe would fall on them. The talk I had with these women was most revealing and was a great education to me. I shall not forget the lesson I learnt and the wonderful experience. I told these good friends that it would not be possible for me to save them all, but I would try to help (a) widows who had to earn money to keep themselves going, (b) pregnant women because their need for money was more, and those who had husbands would have unfortunately to go. They saw the fairness of my suggestion and agreed. Out of these 20 women, six were widows, 4 were pregnant and 10 more had husbands. But curiously enough I discovered that out of these 10 husbands only 5 were working, 3 were permanent invalids and 2 were too lazy to work. All this talk took about two hours and I noted down their names etc. Having come to

a satisfactory arrangement with them over the possible retrenchment, I asked them to meet me next morning when I would speak to the Manager and try to help them. An old woman of sixty immediately replied "Thank you for your kindness in listening to us so patiently. We shall meet you tomorrow. But it does not matter very much how much you can do for us. We know we have a good friend in you on whom we can rely. Today we have been face to face with our Pandurang."

Bombay, 17th February 1950

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