

THE COLONIES

Where are the Masses?

By *E. Roy.*

The third annual session of the Indian Trade Union Congress, which was scheduled to meet last November, and whose activities have been wrapped in a veil of mystery, met at last in Lahore on March 26th of this year. The five months' postponement did not seem to mar the composure of the organizers, and may have served rather to enhance the atmosphere of social breeding and culture which pervaded the whole assembly. The sessions of the third All-India Trade Union Congress were adorned, not merely by the presence of University graduates of several degrees of erudition, but by the chief figure-heads of nationalist politics, distinguished for their eloquence, beauty, or fame, and by many persons prominent in the intellectual circle of the labor movement, who added the proper "tone" to the function. Altogether, by waiting a trifling matter of five months, the energetic propagators of the Trade Union Congress idea succeeded in gathering together a

variegated assortment of delegates and visitors, who represented practically every class in Indian society except the working-class. Labor leaders there were in abundance, and perhaps one or two among them may at one time have swelled the ranks of the proletariat, but with the solitary and distinguished exception of Mr. Miller, Irish Railway Guard and organizer of the North Western Railway Union of the Punjab, there was present in that social and intellectual galaxy no worker or peasant who earned his bread by the sweat of his brow, and who had nothing to lose but his chains.

One can only guess at the motives which prompted the holding of this patriotic and laboristic conclave in the remote agricultural province of the Punjab, where the number of industrial proletariat is almost nil. The absence of proletarian elements was not compensated by the presence of the landless peasantry, with which that province abounds. Mr. C. R. Das, ex-President of the Indian National Congress, and Chairman of the Swaraj Party, was elected to preside over the gathering.

For the opening ceremony, let the Lahore "Nation" of March 27th speak in its own words:

"A huge fleet of motor-cars drove up to the gates of Bradlaugh Hall, and vociferous cheers greeted the arrival of the leaders. The Hall was gaily decorated with wreaths of flowers. Several parties of musicians were present who sang National Songs until the arrival of the President elect. As soon as Deshbandhu's car drove up, shouts of "Bande Mataram" and "Deshbandhu Das ki jai" went up from all quarters. Bi-Amman arrived in the middle of the proceedings, and was greeted by shouts of "Allah-ho-Akbar". Many other ladies and gentlemen were also present. The proceedings were charged with great enthusiasm. Deshbandhu Das' speech created a sensation in so far as it was a brilliant and passionate exposition of the case for the labor movement in India. Mr. Kanhaya Lal's speech was like a string of pearls, a fine performance finely delivered."

All of which makes charming reading for patriotic nationalists and labor dilettantes, but is painfully far removed from those sweating, toiling masses which this fashionable gathering had met together to represent. The atmosphere was as charged with "social uplift" and "moral welfare" as any philanthropists' club or Social Service League to be found in England or America. The only other note struck was that of earnest nationalism, as voiced by the Deshbandhu, or of honest trade unionism, as expounded by Mr. Miller, or of simple Menshevism, as expressed in the glittering phrases of the Oxford don, Mr. Chaman Lal, General Secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress, and of his chief assistant, Mr. Kanhaya Lal Gauba, whose opening speech as Chairman of the Reception Committee was so like unto a "string of pearls".

The difference in spirit between these amateur theatricals and the grim setting of the second session of the Trade Union Congress, held in 1921 in the coal-fields of Bengal at Jheria, was emphasized, perhaps unconsciously by Mr. Das, who described the machine-guns and cavalry called out by the government to patrol during its sittings, and the refusal of the coalmine owners to permit the workers to attend, leading to a three day's strike on the part of the latter, and the tendering of a public apology and an unfulfilled promise of a 20% wage-increase on the part of the employers. And the vision of the six thousand ragged delegates straight from the coal-pits, who attended that victorious conference must have risen before the mind's eye of some of the "ladies and gentlemen" who represented the cause of labor uplift in the present session, so devoid of the perspiring and noisome odour of the masses and the reprehensible spirit of the class-war.

The nearest one got to the subject of class-war was when Mr. Das ventured to quote the stirring peroration of Karl Marx, in the "Communist Manifesto"; "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains". The rest of the proceedings either trickled with the sugary sweetness of "labor uplift" or resounded with bombastic phrases of social reform. Mrs. Naidu, nationalist poetess of bourgeois India, "pleaded", in the words of the *Nation*, for a human status and an equal place among the nations of the world for 98% of India's population. She described "with great pathos", the condition of the ill-fed, ill-clothed laborers in the slums of Bombay and declared herself for the thousandth time to be "against identifying Indian labor organizations with those in the West". "The Indian Labor Movement should have a distinct character of its own", said the patriot-poetess, going on to speak of removing the stigma of untouchability from the lower castes, and of Mahatma Gandhi's mission of "compassion and sympathy", which has helped Indian leaders to grasp the fact that *Swaraj* could only be based on the liberty of the masses.

"There can be no better description of the aims of our Labor Party", declared Mr. K. L. Gauba, than that of "*Swaraj* for the Masses". And he went on to demand rhetorically; "Is

there a Labor Problem in India?" To which he himself replied, "Of course there is. The problems of labor are manifold, and in no country of the world do these problems require more careful handling and sympathetic encouragement than in India. The claim of Labor is that power should be decentralized, monopoly upset, and exploitation put an end to. These claims are not wild or extravagant,—they are based upon elements of natural equality." Then Mr. Gauba declared that "the day is coming when Government will be truly democratic.—Labor should be conscious of its rights before society crystallizes into hard and fast divisions. The example of Europe should be a standing lesson to all of us. A class-struggle is ensuing in many countries, and Russia only recently settled the question by a terrible and bloody revolution. We have enough divisions already; we do not want more."

The Presidential Address contained all of the sentiments of Mr. Das with which anyone who has read his public speeches during the past six months is already familiar. There was the same stressing of the necessity of organizing the masses to help win *Swaraj*; of aiming at a "*Swaraj* for the masses, and not for the classes", and of avoiding the class-war that rages in the West today.... Labor he described as "98% of the population", and the middle-class as 2%. If the 2% got power, Mr. Das declared that he would be the first to lead the struggle to wrest power from the hands of the selfish classes, and give it to the masses. "The uplift of the masses was necessary for culture, and for the national struggle for freedom." He stressed the necessity of labor organization, and urged that the Trade Union Congress send labor propagandists to the different provinces to form unions affiliated to the central organization. But the work of the Congress, he said, was to guide and not control, to offer advice and not to impose itself upon the branches. Labor should claim for every adult man a vote. In closing, he urged upon those present to avoid all congresses and conferences, and to take into their own hands the fight for freedom, the erection of the temple of Nationalism.

The resolutions passed were of the same variegated nature as the people who were present and the ideas they set forth. There was a Resolution congratulating Mr. Saklatvala, Indian Member of Parliament, on his election victory, and another moving thanks to the Workers' Welfare League for India, for its services to Indian labor, and moving for the creation of a separate fund for the support of Indian Labor, by that organization. There was a resolution moved against war, as detrimental to the laboring classes, and declaring that Indian labor should not participate in any war in future, especially if waged "unjustly and oppressively". Then there was a resolution against the system of forced labor, known as "Begar" which prevails in British India and the native states. It was moved that a sub-committee be appointed to examine thoroughly the whole question of taxation in India from the workers' point of view. Another resolution moved a request to have paid over to the All-India Trade Union Congress from the Indian National Congress a fund of 40,000 rupees, in accordance with the decision of the latter body to support the cause of labor-organization. A resolution against Railway Retrenchment taking the form of dismissal of workers, was carried, and another one to foster the spread of technical education as necessary to the industrial development of the country.

On the second day of the Congress more resolutions were passed, calling among other things, for protective legislation for trade unions, for an eight hour day and a forty-four hour week for clerical workers. Legislation providing for unemployment, sickness and old age insurance was demanded; improved housing and sanitation for the workers, and a minimum living wage in all industries, to be determined by a Committee of the Congress. A vote of censure was passed for failure of the Government to protect labor adequately in various industries, under the terms of the Factory Act, the Mines Bill and other legislation, and a resolution was carried approving the idea of finding out the condition of labor in India by means of a questionnaire or any other means judged fit by the Congress. Legislation providing for maternity benefits and the abolition of underground work for women in the coal industry was likewise called for. The Congress called upon the authorities, in another resolution, to "establish Conciliation Courts and Arbitration Boards in every industry". The betterment of the system of recruitment and of the conditions of service for Indian seamen was demanded. Finally, two resolutions, declaring in favor of adult suffrage and primary mass education for both sexes, were passed, and the Congress adjourned, after listening to the concluding speeches of the assembled leaders, and nominating officers for the coming year. These include, Mr. D. Chaman Lal, General Secretary, Mr. K. L. Gauba, Treasurer, and Mr. J. B. Miller, Organizing Secretary.

The concluding sentiments of the General Secretary, as well as some unexpected remarks of Mr. C. R. Das on private property, are of interest, as tending to throw more light, if light were needed, on the nature of the men who have suddenly assumed the guidance of Labor's destinies in India. Mr. Chaman Lal, after describing the condition of the Indian working-class, inquired: who had said there were no class distinctions in India? "We should aim at abolishing them, making India one whole, and carry the message of unity and brotherhood by propaganda and organization, throughout the country, to make India a land fit for heroes to live in," declared the speaker, in a burst of eloquence which was received with cheers by his auditors, but which, we fear, destroys his claim to pass as a disciple of Karl Marx,—or even of Karl Kautsky, the renegade Marxist.

Mr. Das, in bidding farewell to the Congress, gave vent to one of those disconcerting remarks which the faithful Reuter invariably cables to England for the edification of Die-Hard Toryism. "Let us hope", said the Deshbandhu amid cheers, "that the 98% of the people of this land will be the real proprietors of India. They are *in fact*, the real proprietors, but they do not yet realize their own power".

But lest this seem too much like Bolshevism, he hastily added an explanation of his idea of property. "I do not believe in property as generally understood. I believe in it, and I do not. The right of holding private property is useless and unjust unless it leads to a higher national interest.—I do not object to private property, but I object to the evil in it. The selfish man will give up being selfish if he thinks less of himself and more of humanity. It is the same with a nation. Let the right of property be so pursued, that each man will of his own accord, dedicate it to the country.—When people say that the right of private property should be done away with, do not be misled. It is, in short, the evil inherent in private property that should be done away with. This is true Socialism."

And amid shouts of "Deshbandhu Das ki jai!", the third session of the All-India Trade Union Congress, strange conglomeration of Nationalism, Utopianism and Reformism, (to say nothing of more dubious 'isms, such as Humanitarianism and Opportunism), came to a triumphant close. One hears nothing more of it, until, on turning the pages of the "Nation", we see a Social Item: "A Garden Party,—To Meet Mr. C. R. Das." It reads:

"This evening, Dewan and Mrs. Chaman Lal a Garden Party to meet Meshbandhu Das. The party was largely attended by delegates to the Trade Union Congress, and various prominent public men and numerous ladies. Among many others, one noticed, etc. The party was a great success."

So too, perhaps, was the Congress. But where, we would like to ask, were the Masses,—those Indian masses about whom it has become the fashion to speak? The new labor leaders of India have come no closer to them than the old Congress leaders. Where are the masses?