

Political Prisoners in India

By Evelyn-Roy.

At the moment of writing there are between 20,000 to 25,000 political prisoners in Indian jails, undergoing sentences of from three months to three years for their activities in the Nationalist movement of Non-Violent Non-Cooperation against the British-Indian Government. Exaggerated estimates by the nationalists themselves place this estimate as high as forty thousand, and it is possible that during the high water mark of repression, in the past eight months, this figure was not incorrect, but the consensus of opinion is that 25,000 prisoners still lie incarcerated on various charges arising out of the campaign of passive resistance initiated in 1920 by Mr. M. K. Gandhi.

In addition to this number, there are various outstanding personalities, leaders of the movement such as Mr. Gandhi himself, who have been sentenced to longer and more severe prison-terms. Six years is the average sentence for those singled out for such exemplary punishment.

Class War Prisoners.

In addition to the political prisoners there are thousands of workers and peasants lying in jail under ordinary criminal charges, for taking part in various forms of direct action, such as strikes, riots etc., either in connection with the nationalist movement, or in their own campaign for the improvement of their miserable working and living conditions. The number of these cannot be estimated even roughly, but they run well into the thousands, even by taking only a few of the most prominent judgments of the past few years. For example, the agrarian revolt of the Moplahs of Malabar, Southern India, which lasted eight months, ended in the hanging of five leaders and the sentencing of 6,689 participants to various long terms of imprisonment. Seventy Moplahs died of suffocation while being transported in a railway van from one prison to another. Another of the recent prominent cases of agrarian unrest in the United Provinces, which led to the riot of Chauri Chaura by a mob of 5,000 villagers against a local police station, resulted in the arrest of 227 peasants, 172 of whom have in the month of January been condemned to death. Six died in jail of alleged ill-treatment. The sensational passive resistance campaign of the Akali Sikhs, an agrarian people of the province of the Punjab in Northern India, led to the arrest of 5,603 on technical charges of trespass and theft, all of whom have been given various sentences of from six months to two years.

Both agrarian and industrial workers lying under prison sentence are subjected to the ordinary jail-rules applied to criminal convicts, and only in the case of the arrested nationalists, coming mostly from the middle-class, is some exceptional treatment beginning to be made and their status as political prisoners recognized, owing to the pressure of educated Indian opinion, which has forced the Government to make some concession in this respect.

Apart from being forced to perform prison labor, political and class war prisoners are subjected to special forms of corporal punishment and torture for infringement of prison rules, or offending the sensibilities of the warders. Flogging is permitted under jail rules and frequently indulged in as one of the ordinary forms of punishment, inflicted at the will of the warder, for such trivial offences as refusing to stand up when ordered, or refusing to stand at attention when ordered. Cases of illness and death due to illness brought on by conditions and treatment meted out in jail are common.

What is needed to Remedy conditions.

In addition to other means for the relief of prisoners, the following measures should be adopted:

Organization of an All-India Political and Class War Prisoners' Bureau with sub-bureau in each province and important city, divided into three main branches or functions:

- a. Legal
- b. Publicity
- c. Welfare and Relief
- d. Financial

The legal department should provide the assistance of expert lawyers for all political and class-war prisoners, to defend cases and protect the rights of prisoners before and after conviction. It should also agitate for the recognition of the full legal status of such prisoners and their right to exceptional treatment from the ordinary criminal prison rules.

The Publicity Department should keep the public informed of prison conditions, treatment of prisoners, the conduct of cases, judgments passed and every detail of prison life. This department should function, not only nationally, but internationally, in order that the peculiar brutalities of Indian prison life should become as notorious as was that of the Russian Czarist regime. It should also agitate for funds to conduct the general work of the Bureau.

The Welfare and Relief Department would supplement the labors of the two foregoing, by providing food, clothing, medical aid, books and other prison-necessities and comforts where such are allowed, as well as to arrange for visits, letters, help to stricken families and to bring to the notice of the other departments of the Bureau the general condition of prisoners and cases of ill-treatment and abuse.

The Financial Department would collect funds for the carrying on of the above work, to be amplified from time to time as conditions demand.

Conclusion.

Since the Indian struggle at the present time and for some time to come, is predominantly national in character, the organization of a joint Bureau for Political and Class-War prisoners becomes imperative, and the nationalist movement must at the same time be made to shoulder the responsibility of the agrarian and proletarian movement which it constantly calls upon to militate in the nationalist cause. The reason is doubly imperative, since the Indian proletariat is too poor, oppressed and illiterate to take the initiative in any steps for self-defense that require a nation-wide scope and organizing power. The trade-unions can be relied upon to a certain extent, but only to the extent that these are sympathetic towards and working with the nationalist cause. All other labor organizations bear too much of the official government stamp to be relied upon for any sincere and effective work in the organization of a class-war prisoners' relief.