

Lessons from the past: Interview with Com. Thangappan on struggle strategies, leadership and future of working class movement

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Com. Thangappan, with over 50 years of experience in organizing workers in their struggle against capital, is a treasure house of anecdotes when it comes to working class struggle in India. Having been baptized in the class struggles that gripped Bombay from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, he is an authority on working class strategies, making him one of the many sought after union leaders for advice and direction. Thozhillalar Koodam, sat down with him for an interview at Open World Conference 2016, Mumbai. Com. Thangappan, put down his views on various themes such as the form of working class struggle, the role of leadership, and the way forward, with a number of experiential struggles of the past. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

On Strategies for Working Class Struggle

Here in Bombay, there was a very senior union leader called R.J Mehta. He was an independent union leader, unaffiliated to the main central trade unions of that time. In the 1960s, there was a huge automobile workers struggle and the entire Bombay working class supported them, yet it failed.

After that out of his experience or out of frustration, he began to withdraw from all struggles of solidarity. He began to orient towards legalistic struggles. It only made his union workers more subservient to him. He would not even unite the workers in a factory by making a single charter of demands, he would have one for the staff, one for the workers and another for yet another group and this way, no case will end and workers would continue to depend on him.

But the long delays and frustration in this process led to the rise of Dutta Samant and his brand of open and militant struggle. He, on the other hand refused to play the legal game, he called it useless because the workers will be tired through the process. Rather than force the companies to have a settlement with workers periodically, the courts will only delay the process and even if the workers win, they will get no arrears and the owners will always profit. He began organizing strikes and struggles at the factory gate. The struggles were very militant and the culture remained strong for over 10 years, even after the emergency, up until the textile mill strikes. Much legislation were won due to these struggles.

Comparative costs of Legalism vs Strikes

In the 1960s when we were fighting cases, some of them even in Supreme Court, and the costs were much lower. For example in the Kamani Metals case, which has since become a precedent, for the entire case including the

Supreme Court appeal, it only would have cost us one lakh rupees. But today, a lawyer, after the discounts for unions, still takes anywhere close to 40000/- for a single appearance. Things have become very costly.

Earlier we used to argue our cases in labour courts and other lower courts. The companies used to bring in big lawyers, union members used to represent our workers. But today it is not that common, even though labour courts still allow for representations by members who are not advocates. In those days there used to be also a large pool of young lawyers willing to fight labour cases for unions and workers. Nowadays that has come down significantly. You also have to count the long duration that cases take to be resolved. So its not as if there are no costs here.

It is true that the victimization you face (by the management and even state on strikes and struggles) otherwise is very costly. But workers in the past century won major demands through struggles. Wage increases, improved working conditions, gratuity, dearness allowance were won not through legal means but by struggles and sacrifices. During the 1940s there were major struggles in the steel and textile sectors that brought about the concept of dearness allowance in India. In other colonial country do you find this being practised?. There are periodical wage revisions but no dearness allowance to compensate for inflation. Bombay was the harbinger of such things.

Certain things we cannot look in terms of cost and benefit, workers will have to make significant sacrifices. For example in Kamani Union or Blue star, if we were too much worried about keeping our jobs, the workers would not have struggled and established case laws that have remained relevant to this day. We have to be prepared to face anything. We might have to lose jobs but still fight. For this the workers have to come forward. For the demand of 8 hour work, Chicago workers had to die, but now we are worried about even going to court.

But court and all will come only after the struggle has established a certain legality. The Gratuity Law came in 1972, Bombay workers had got gratuity in number of struggles even prior to that. Bonus Act for example was an outcome of the struggle of textile workers in Bombay for bonus, not by legal route.

Adapting New Strategies

Earlier workers were in joint families and they supported each other, neighbours will help you out, unions might help out as well. Workers will go back to native place and live. That kind of thing is not there anymore.

For example the education cost of the children have gone up considerably, the monthly cost of the workers is high, even if for one month the workers don't get salary, it is very difficult. They would have taken credit outside and that has to be paid up. So workers capacity for enduring long struggle is far too less.

The forms of struggle evolve from the conditions at the time and place and what the workers are able to come together in agreement. For example, Gherao movement that emerged in west Bengal in the 1960s, was not the brainchild of any one leader, but the outcome of situation at that time. Indefinite strikes and bandhs were very popular and effective in the 70s but employers found a way to defeat these methods.

In 1970s if I am not mistaken, around that period, HLL(Hindustan Lever Limited) declared a lock out. The lock out went for a longer period, more than two months and the learning of the struggle is very important as the textile workers struggle. Even as the unit was closed for many months, the company declared a huge profit.

The textile strike went for over a 18 months, that was the biggest struggle in the world, involving 2.5 lakh workers. My own assessment was that Bombay was the textile manufacturing center. If this struggle goes for a prolonged production shut down, the market will not have adequate textile products putting pressure on employers to restart the plant. But nothing of that sort happened. Both in Hindustan lever and textile mills, they had shifted production from composite units to small scale unit, such as power looms in Erode, Coimbatore. They get the clothes and brand it and sell.

Same way all their detergents were being manufactured from small factories with contract workers, they(Hindustan Lever) made profit. Another benefit for the companies was that the lands(where factories were situated) were sold and hundreds of crores of rupees were generated as profits, which in their lifetime they would not have generated for manufacturing their products. They have learned huge lessons. We have to learn, they can shift their production, continue to enjoy profits while crushing the workers.

We should be innovative and find strategies that will force the employers to concede. If not, a union should have huge financial strength to carry on a long strike which is impossible. We should have such discussion. These debates are important to evolve our strategies.

Role of a Leader in Organizing and Mobilizing Workers

This happened forty years back when a colleague of mine was arrested for minor offence and jailed in Maharashtra. During her absence, I was asked to take charge of General Secretary post and lead another union that she was leading. The management, a construction company, came to know that she was in jail. They retrenched 500 workers. The labour camp was at the construction site and could not be easily approached. Yet, we had a meeting with the workers in the night, the meeting went up to 11pm. They insisted that we go on strike the very next day. I had not come with any preparation, we had not given any notice, I did not even have the union flags with me. They said nothing doing. One group was bengali group, the other was a south indian group and both were militant. My age is 21, I struggled for 2 -3 hrs to postpone strike, so that we could give at least one day notice and get our flags and banners. Ultimately I asked why they were insisting about tomorrow. Then they said that French consultants are visiting this place and a meeting was planned, so if we strike now the management will come down.

Then I realised and agreed. I said I will send a person to get letter head in the morning, we will start by 6 in the morning, by 8 we will have the letter ready.. I went at 5:45 in the morning. The strike started at 6, before we could prepare the flags and letters, the matter was resolved, everyone was taken back with three days back wages. Workers are better judges than the leaders, they know what should be done and not done. No leader should forget, it is not the intelligence of the leaders that bring better results, it is the collective strength and wisdom of

the workers. I learnt from that struggle, demands should be their own, if the demand has come from somebody else they will not fight.

Kamani Metallica, was a small company with 80 workers, but with high rate of profit. After 1964 Bonus ordinance came, there was continuous profit for four years with 20% bonus. The company was making huge profits even after that. But at that time the Bonus Act's ceiling was 20%.

I worked the accounts of the company and came to the conclusion that we should demand 40% bonus for that year. I had presented it to the office bearers. After that I had to go back to native place for some personal work. During that time the company called the workers for a negotiation and readily agreed to give 20% bonus for the year as per the Act and the workers also agreed. When I came back and learned about this, I was very disappointed. I was the only one dissatisfied by the bonus.

I kept thinking why the workers did not recognize what I had presented. It struck me then that I had only limited my presentation to the office bearers, I did not present it to the workers in general. The next year, during the General Body Meeting, I gave a detailed assessment of the revenues and profits and suggested that we demand more bonus. That year, the workers fought and got 40% bonus. It was the first time workers had got much more than prescribed in Law. I realized then that it was essential that the demands are widely accepted by the workers if they have to struggle for it. For this, we have to communicate to the wider sections of the workers in ways they are able relate to.

What ever I have said is what I have learned from my experiences. I have read many books on Marxism and labour struggles, attended many discussions but the best lessons were from experience. That is very essential.

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