

The Great Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946 and beyond - A mortal blow to the British Raj

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It is often said the victors always write history. This is nowhere more appropriate than in the case of the struggle for Indian independence from the British Raj and carving up of the Indian subcontinent resulting in the killings of over one million and enforced migration of over twenty million. Indian and Pakistan bourgeois over the last 70 years have repeatedly been shouting from their respective pulpits that independence was won by the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi and Nehru and Muslim League led by Jinnah while ignoring the role played by workers, peasants and the Indian army, navy, air force and the police in the struggle for independence.

Contents

- [Royal Indian Navy Revolt \(...\)](#)
- [General Strike in Bombay](#)
- [Karachi](#)
- [Revolt in the in IAF](#)
- [Revolt of the INA](#)
- [Mutiny in the British Indian](#)
- [British facing revolt at \(...\)](#)
- [Workers Struggle](#)
- [Role of Congress, CPI and ML](#)



This year is the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the mutiny or revolt of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN). This revolt that transformed into a revolutionary situation broke out on February 18, 1946, and, in only five days spread throughout India delivering a mortal blow to the entire structure of the British Raj and resulting in its hasty retreat.

The war had caused rapid expansion of the RIN. In 1945, it was 10 times larger than its size in 1939. Due to war and as with the army recruitment was no longer confined to martial races; men from different social strata, including many educated up to the college level were recruited. Marx explained during the first war of independence that British captured India by using the Indian army. However by 1946 British were no longer confident that they can rely on Indians in the British armed forces to maintain their coercive rule.

Ruling classes throughout history have always depended on the state machinery to maintain their exploitative system of loot and plunder. Lenin explained in *State and Revolution*, “The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively cannot be reconciled.” Similarly, Marx explained that state could fundamentally be reduced to “armed bodies of men”.

The refusal of these armed bodies of men to carry out orders shook the British imperialist rule. British imperialism was always sensitive to the revolt amongst the Indian army. The “First War of Independence” or the great Indian “Sepoys” Mutiny of 1857 as the British called it left a very deep mark on the British imperialism’s psyche. During this Sepoys Mutiny, both Hindus and Muslims demonstrated a unity that was never seen before in India.

The imperialist and capitalist classes have always and will always attempt to confuse, deflect and undermine class struggle and international solidarity of the proletarian masses and deny the correct description by using terminologies like ‘mutiny’, ‘coup’, ‘Arab Spring’, ‘green, orange, velvet revolution’, etc., when they are faced with struggles, revolts, movements, uprisings and revolutions against their system. They do this to undermine the revolutionary character of the event or the movement and to disguise the underlying class conflicts and antagonisms. The attitudes of the British imperialists to the 1946 RIN revolt were very similar. This was not a mutiny but a full-fledged revolutionary insurrection supported by the Indian proletariat particularly the textile workers of Bombay.

The navy revolt did not happen overnight. The revolt took place due to the accumulation of resentment over a long period among the sailors. The salary of the British sailors was 10 times more than that of the Indian sailors. In addition, British sailors had better food, better quarters, and better quality uniforms and travelled comfortably in individual berths. The Indian barracks were ‘pigsties’, the food was often inedible and Indians were herded into train compartments. However with the war coming to end demobilization and the anxiety of unemployment was hovering over the sailors. However, the major cause of the revolt was political and the trial of the Indian National Army (INA) leaders acted as pouring petrol over the fire.

Subash Chandra Bose’s struggle for freedom and the exploits of INA during the siege of Imphal, when the INA inflicted massive damage on the British army were an inspiration to the sailors. It gave them courage and belief that the mighty British Empire was not all that invincible. B. C. Dutt, one of the RIN leaders wrote in his book *Mutiny of the Innocents*: “What have we been fighting for—the preservation of empire? Shouldn’t our own country be free?” He goes on to say that Phillip Mason, the War secretary’s despite his valiant attempts to describe the revolt or the mutiny as an attempt to secure better terms of service was forced to acknowledge that sailors also wished to make a protest to the Government of India regarding the INA policy, the firing on the public at various places, and the use of Indian troops in Indonesia and the Middle East.”

Royal Indian Navy Revolt - Bombay

The Royal Indian Navy revolt started on 18th February 1946, when 1100 sailors on the HMIS Talwar stopped work and declared an official strike at dawn. The sailors unanimously elected signalman M.S Khan as President and petty officer telegraphist Madan Singh as Vice-President. Leading signaller Bedi Basant Singh, S.C. Sen Gupta, Chief Petty Officer, School Master Nawaz, Seaman Ashraf Khan, Able Stokers Gomez and Mohammad Hussain were also elected to the Central Strike Committee.

The Central Strike Committee was clear about the nature of their struggle for independence and

economic gains. This can be gauged from their action of dropping the 'Royal' prefix and called themselves the 'Indian National Navy' (INN) following the footsteps of Bose and the INA. They also drew up a charter of demands demanding the release of all the political prisoners, the withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia and Egypt, for immediate improvement in their conditions, and the provision of equal status with the British officers. The committee in the midst of huge support and cheers got the charter accepted from their fellow sailors.

In Bombay harbour, the revolt quickly spread to 22 ships and the Castle Barracks and Fort Barracks shore bases. The Central Strike first step was to take possession of Butcher Island, where Bombay Presidency's entire ammunition hold was stored including telephone and wireless equipment. By taking over the wireless system under their control, they used it to spread their revolt to other sailors and ships. The strikes spread like wild fire to military establishments in Karachi, Madras, Vishakhapatnam, Calcutta, Delhi, Cochin, Jamnagar, and Andaman's Islands on to the shores of the Middle East in Bahrain and Aden. They were able to win over almost all the 70 ships and all the 20 seashore establishments with over 30,000 sailors actively participating in the revolt. They had secured control over the civilian telephone exchange, the cable network and, above all, over the transmission centre at Kirkee, which was under the supervision of the Navy. This was the channel of communication between the Indian Government and the British.

The next morning Indian sailors seized military vehicles in the dockyards, and drove around Bombay shouting slogans in support of the INA prisoners and chanting slogans like 'Hindu-Muslim eik han.' A peaceful mass rally was held at the Azad Maidaan. The Central Strike Committee issued a leaflet that ended with the call: 'long live the solidarity of workers, soldiers, students and peasants. Long live Revolution'.

By the 20th February, British destroyers positioned themselves near the Gateway of India. The British Government, now headed by the Labour Party under Clement Attlee's premiership was alarmed and it gave orders to the Royal Navy to put down the sailors revolt. Admiral JH Godfrey, the Flag Officer in command of the Royal Indian Navy, gave an ultimatum to the striking sailors to submit or perish. On the other side, a wave of patriotic fervour swept Bombay and the rest of the country in favour of the revolutionary striking sailors. The sailors from the clerks to the cleaning hands, cooks and wireless operators were united to face the might of the British imperialism.

On the morning of February 21, 1946 British guards opened fire at the Indian sailors in the Castle Barracks and this transformed a peaceful revolt into a violent armed uprising. By this time the Central Strike Committee shifted command to the RIN flagship Narba. The sailors in Calcutta, Madras, Karachi, Vizag and other naval centres, also went on strike with the slogans "Strike for Bombay" and "Release 11,000 INA prisoners"



The strike, which began on HMIS Talwar, soon took serious proportions. Hundreds of strikers from ships, minesweepers and shore establishments in Bombay demonstrated near the Victoria Terminus of the Indian Railways. The strikers who were armed with steel rods, hammers and even hockey sticks singled out British personnel of the Defence forces for attacks. When British ordered Indian soldiers to fire at the striking sailors, the latter refused to shoot at their fellow Indian brothers. B. C. Dutt again writes: The navy sailors addressed the soldiers over the loud-speaker in Hindustani: "Brothers! We are not fighting to fill our stomachs with better food and for a softer life. We are

fighting for the country's freedom. You are as much sons of the soil as we are. Don't heap shame on the heads of your descendants by pointing your rifles at us...Almost immediately, the firing ceased. It was obvious that the Indian soldiers did not need much persuading. Their hearts were in the right place."

General Strike in Bombay

On February 20 and 21, the striking sailors gave a call for a general strike, which evoked tremendous public response. Three hundred thousand workers put down their tools and walked out of textile factories, mills, and railways and from other industries. This sent shockwaves to their British imperial oppressors. Peaceful meetings and demonstrations developed into violent clashes as the police intervened. Barricades were set up on the streets that were the scene of pitched battles with the police and the army. Two army battalions were needed to restore order in the city. The strike was a direct challenge to the Raj's authority. In Calcutta, over 120,000 people came out and all major Indian cities witnessed strikes and demonstrations on a similar scale.

The British again had to resort to deploy their own forces from the army against the civilians in Bombay on 22nd and 23rd February 1946. As a result of indiscriminate firing and use of tanks and artillery the British had blood of over 300 people on their hands. All navy ships were taken over by the striking sailors including taking over of the ships guns. The sailors then raised steam and began to hoot on the ships whistle declaring their intention of defending their comrades on shore. The sheer noise could be heard for miles away unnerved the British. This was a revolt that received unprecedented passionate public support. By this time, the striking naval sailors had seized all the armouries of the ships and establishments. The deck and engine hands, stewards, cooks and wireless operators of the striking ship armed themselves with whatever weapon was available to resist the British destroyers that had sailed from Colombo and Trincomalee in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In Madras and Pune, the Indians in British army garrisons went on strike. A detachment of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps had tried to join the sailors. Over a thousand men in the Royal Indian Air Force camps in Bombay came out in support of the revolt. Ground crews mutinied in Madras, Karachi, Poona, Allahabad and Delhi.

Nearly 2000 men in the Royal Indian Army Signal Corps mutinied near Jabalpur. There were mini-revolts by Indian gunners in Madras, signallers at Allahabad, and clerical staff at army headquarters in Delhi. Nor were the British forces stationed in India totally reliable. Indian officers of the RIAF refused to fly out troops, and the transport units refused to ferry British troops to fight the naval sailors and the Indian officers refused to pilot planes to bomb the ships. Felled trees blocked train tracks and roads.

While the British troops were going berserk with the gunfire over the city, masses, in turn, took vented their anger at symbols of British authority, like banks, post offices, banks, government buildings and shops. Troops fired live ammunition at youth, who resisted with rocks and bottles. Workers dug up the streets and built barricades. The textile factory districts looked like a battle zone, BC Dutt, recalled: "For the first time in Bombay, the British had to bring in tanks to put down the workers. The industrial workers of Bombay knew that the sailors were trying to do something great for the country, particularly when they heard that water had been cut off to Talwar and Castle Barracks and that we were being starved into surrender. That infuriated them". The role played by women was equally courageous and heroic. Women of Bhindi Bazaar and Dongri joined in the rebellion by throwing hot water and pans, from the rooftops, at the British soldiers. These same women welcomed the striking sailors and public who were resisting the British onslaught with fresh flowers. During the revolt they also ensured no sailor went hungry and provided all the food on the

ships.

Karachi

In Karachi, sailors struck on the HMIS Hindustan off Manora Island. The ship alongside the establishment on the shore was taken over by strikers. Later HMIS Bahadur was also taken over. The sailors then took out a procession through the streets of Manora shouting anti-British slogans. Local residents of Manora joined the procession in large numbers as well. British authorities were extremely alarmed by these developments. The Local British army commander sent two platoons of Baluch soldiers to suppress the revolt. The Baluch refused to fire upon their Indian brother. The British then called on the Gorkha troops to put down the revolt on HMIS Hindustan. Gorkha soldiers have been the cornerstone for the British Imperialism during their occupation of India and historically relied upon them to do the most difficult tasks. In this case, Gorkhas who were not immune to the nationalist struggle taking place refused to fire upon the Karachi striking sailors. Then the British troops were summoned and HMIS Hindustan was surrounded from all sides. The British troops started firing and the sailors on the ship retaliated. The firing and attacks and counter-attacks continued for four hours. Six of the sailors were killed, more than 30 were wounded. Trade unions in Karachi called a general strike and the whole city was shut down. More than 35,000 people, Hindus and Muslims marched towards Eidgah and held a massive rally despite intimidation, harassment, arrests, baton charge and live injuring more than 50 civilians in the process.

Revolt in the in IAF

The Second World War changed geopolitics. It also altered the way societies view the world and themselves. The Indian soldier was no exception. With the war coming to an end in 1945, there were nearly five million men and women in the British armed services. The British anxiety of stationing troops to secure its colonial territories were in direct contrast to the grievances of soldiers particularly over the conditions of slow demobilisation of their troops back home. In January 1946 the Royal Air Force (RAF) mutiny involving more than 50,000 men in over 60 RAF stations in India and South Asia shows the levels of discontent amongst the armed forces.

Just 5 months after the WW2, preceded by the navy revolt in Bombay, 2,000 British airmen from the Royal Air Force (RAF) went on strike, in January 1946 at Bamhrauli, Allahabad, India. The 2100 airmen at Mauripur, Karachi and 1200 airmen at Dum -Dum, Calcutta airfield quickly joined this strike. The strike then spread to Kanpur, Palam (Delhi), Poona, Vizagapatam, Allahabad, Dum Dum, Kallang, Chaklala, Lahore and Negombo. The strike also spread to South East Asia where 4000 airmen struck at Seletar, Singapore.

These strikes by the British Air Force were later a subject of the Channel 4 programme called "Secret History". According to this programme there were strikes at more than 60 RAF units, with more than fifty thousand men involved. These "incidents", some lasting only a few hours, others up to four days, all took place within eleven days of the initial protest at Allahabad and Drig Road, Karachi.

The Viceroy of India, General Wavell, held the RAF men guilty. Referring to the RIN revolt, he wrote, "I am afraid that the example of the Royal Air Force, who got away with what was really a mutiny, has some responsibility for the present situation".

Revolt of the INA

In 1945, the British realised that the days of the Raj were numbered. The Labour government came to the conclusion that it has no choice but to negotiate some kind of settlement with Congress and the Muslim League. The British often used the Indian soldiers as cannon fodder; they were the first soldiers on the front line in conflict whether it was in France, Turkey, Egypt, Hejaz or Iraq. In just the two great World Wars over a million of Indian soldiers died fighting for the British Empire with very little appreciation. While the Austrians, New Zealanders, South African and Canadian white settlers were being granted dominion status Indians were being subjugated ever increasing discrimination, slavery and broken promises. This also explains why Subhas Bose and INA rapidly became a real force.

There is no doubt that British made a huge mistake when it decided to an example of the INA men in order to prevent further revolts within the British Indian Armed Forces. The first to be tried were Captain Shah Nawaz, Captain PK Sahgal and Lieutenant GS Dhillon. This trial was indeed the turning point, as it would prove to be a triumph for the INA and disaster for the British. It is from here that the tide turned inexorably against the British. Mass demonstrations calling for the freedom of the INA prisoners rocked Calcutta and other cities in November 1945 and again in early February 1946. The demonstrations were significant not only for their size and militancy but also for the demonstration of the Hindu-Muslim unity. Unsurprisingly, the trial gave rise to a countrywide wave of protests. The government's intelligence agencies reported that seldom had a matter attracted so much public attention and sympathy. The three officers were later released from jail and given dishonourable discharges from the Indian army. But the INA trial and the protests had driven a nail into the Raj's coffin. Not only were the British increasingly unsure about the political reliability of the Indian army but they also realised that the army could no longer be taken for granted as a strategic tool of the empire.

There was a grave doubt whether the Indian Army could be used to suppress a rebellion. On the remission of sentence of Shah Nawaz, Sahgal and Dhillon, Auchinleck explained in a letter to all senior British officers "that any attempt to enforce the sentence would have led to chaos in the country at large and probably to mutiny and dissension in the Army, culminating in its dissolution".

Mutiny in the British Indian Army Jabalpur

On the 26th February 1946 120 army men of the 'J' company of the Signals Training Centre (STC), Jabalpur rebelled against their British superiors and broke free from their barracks directly due to the naval revolt. Part of a radio signalling unit, they were sick and tired of the racist abuse heaped on them by their paranoid British counterparts.

The ranks of the mutineers swelled to 1,700 men, armed with nothing more than the combination of red flags. Shouting slogans, the soldiers protested peacefully for some days till a vicious bayonet charge by the Somerset Light Infantry, which killed 8 main leaders and seriously wounded at least 32, crushed the revolt in blood. Eighty men behind the revolt were court-martialled and dismissed without pay and pension. Forty-one others were sent to prison. But the incident was quickly hushed up. The Jabalpur mutiny, left a deep irreversible impact on the British. The then commander-in-chief of the British Indian army, Gen Sir Claude Auchinleck, sent several secret cables back to London, discussing a quick transfer of power from British hands to the Indians.

Gen. VK Singh explains in his book Contribution of the Armed Forces to the Freedom Movement of India, "Though the mutiny at Jabalpur was at that time not considered as 'serious' as the naval

mutiny, its repercussions were immense. The earlier revolts in the RIAF and RIN, though more widespread and larger in scale, did not really worry the British authorities, because the Indian Army, on which they depended for meeting external and internal threats, was still considered reliable, having proved its worth during World War II. The mutiny at Jabalpur was the first major uprising in the Indian Army during or after the war. This set alarm bells ringing from Delhi to London, and doubts began to be expressed on the steadfastness of the Indian Army. Ultimately, it forced Britain to reach a settlement with the political parties and quit India.”

No army, no navy, no air force, no communications, no police, restless railways, docks and postal workers, all highly politicised and ready to jump into the fray. This was a scenario British never ever expected to be faced with.

British facing revolt at home and in the Empire

In 1945, Labour Party led by Clement Atlee won a landslide victory defeated Churchill and his Conservative Party. Labour victory was a direct result of the Second World War. Both British industrial workers and the armed forces personnel became much radicalised during the war and they ensured a labour landslide for an end to war and improved living conditions. It was this pressure that catapulted Atlee government to nationalise railways, coal, steel, gas, electric, telephone, telegraph and laid the foundation for National Health Service free at a point of delivery. After decades of tireless struggle, British Raj exhausted by the war and paralysed by the radical mood of the British working class, fully understood the futility of trying to hold back the clock of the historical progress and very rapidly passed the responsibility for this impossible task to the Indian bourgeoisie.

Nicholas Mansergh who was appointed by Harold Wilson in 1967 as editor-in-chief of a multi-volume collection of documents from the India Office on the transfer of power to India in the 1940s had the following to say about those revolutionary days in India “It is pertinent to remember that one of the compelling reasons for the departure of the British from India was the apprehension that the loyalty of Indian armed forces was doubtful. Due to obvious reason, the staunchness of the Army was more worrisome than that of the other two Services. On 5 September 1946, in a note by the commander-in chief on the military aspects of the plan to withdraw from India, General Auchinleck was to record, “The importance of keeping the Indian Army steady is emphasised. It is the one disciplined force in which communal interests are subordinated to duty, and on it depends the stability of the country. The steadiness of the RIN and the RIAF is of lesser import but any general disaffection in them is likely seriously to affect the reliability of the army.”

Sir Stafford Cripps spoke in the debate at the British House of Commons.

“...The Indian Army in India is not obeying the British officers. We have recruited our workers for the war; they have been demobilised after the war. They are required to repair the factories damaged by Hitler’s bombers. Moreover, they want to join their kith and kin after five and a half years of separation. Their kith and kin also want to join them. In these conditions if we have to rule India for a long time, we have to keep a permanent British army for a long time in a vast country of four hundred million. We have no such army and money....”

General Auchinleck in his many cables to the British Government back in London was warning the British Government that the loyalty of the Indian troops couldn’t be taken for granted anymore. In one of his cable during the critical days of 1947 said “that we cannot hold India for three days”. The question to be asked is why was this? What forced the British to make this Strategic retreat of 1947? The answer lies in the effect of decades of strikes, mass demonstrations, daring and heroic guerrilla

actions as we witnessed with Bhagat Singh and his comrades, numerous and rapidly increasing revolts within the police, air force, navy and the army and the rapidly developing threat of violent mass insurrection from Calcutta to Karachi and Delhi to Colombo.

The seriousness of the situation can be judged from the extracts of a letter written by P.V. Chuckraborty, former Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, on 30th March 1976: "When I was acting as Governor of West Bengal in 1956, Lord Clement Attlee, who as the British Prime Minister in post war years was responsible for India's freedom, visited India and stayed in Raj Bhavan, Calcutta for two days. I put it straight to him like this: 'The Quit India Movement of Gandhi practically died out long before 1947 and there was nothing in the Indian situation at that time, which made it necessary for the British to leave India in a hurry. Why then did they do so?' In reply Attlee cited several reasons, the most important of which were the INA and activities of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, which weakened the very foundation of the British Empire in India, and the RIN Mutiny which made the British realise that the Indian armed forces could no longer be trusted to prop up the British. When asked about the extent to which the British decision to quit India was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's 1942 movement, Attlee's lips widened in a smile of disdain and he uttered, slowly, 'Minimal'."

Workers Struggle

Months immediately after the surrender of the Japanese on 2nd September 1945 India passed through a stormy resurgence of the working class movement. The workers in large numbers participated in the post-war political upsurge. Industrial strikes in virtually all the major cities - Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad, Delhi, Madras, and Karachi erupted with full force. The Indian working class courageously jumped into the fray ignoring massive state oppression, arrests, beatings and even bullets as the decisive force in the struggle of the Indian people for independence from the British bondage. Towards the end of 1945, the Bombay and Calcutta dockworkers refused to load ships going to Indonesia with supplies for troops meant to suppress the national liberation struggles there. Indian workers were the main force behind demonstrations protesting against the British imperialism's farcical Red Fort trials of members of the Indian National Army.

Calcutta

In September 1945, the militant streetcar workers struck bringing the city's transportation system to a halt. The bus and taxi drivers struck in sympathy with the car workers. During the same month workers at the Cassipore Gun and Shell Factory, near Calcutta, struck in sympathy with 100 discharged workers.

At the beginning of October several thousand engineering workers in different plants struck for bonus payment and reinstatement of discharged workers. Similar action was taken by 4,000 at Clive Jute Mills at Mitabriz, a suburb of Calcutta. The textile workers at Bouria, at the Vassari Cotton and Silk Mills and the Mafolta Spinning and Manufacturing Mill went out in the same period.

In November, during the general strike in protest against the Delhi Court Martials, 20,000 municipal workers struck in Delhi bringing all forms of transportation and public utilities to a standstill. Street barricades and roadblocks were erected including occupying railroad tracks to stop movements of trains.



RIN Uprising memorial Colaba, Mumbai

Bombay

Bombay followed with a strike of railway workers and this, in turn, set off a series of student demonstrations throughout India. Bombay was the scene of similar struggles during this period. Thus, the workers at the Ford Motor Co. Assembly Plant in Bombay and other Ford plants in the country went on a sit down strike against lay-offs. In December 8,000 Bombay dockworkers struck, demanding payment of three months bonus, upgraded scales of pay, medical aid and a guarantee of 20 days work a month. There were strikes by the electrical workers at Colaba and by the workers of the Burma Shell, Standard Vacuum and Caltex Oil Companies. A strike by the staff of the Bombay Electric Supply and Trolley Co leaving the city's 2,800,000 population without transport by bus or street car.

However at the beginning of 1946, this strike wave assumed a highly political character. On January 24 1946, 175,000 textile and industrial workers went on strike in Bombay to protest the shooting of demonstrators celebrating the birthday of Subhas Chandra Bose, leader of the "Azad (Free) Indian Government" and organizer of the Indian National Army.

The power and militancy of the workers were most graphically demonstrated in support of the striking sailors of the Royal Indian Navy. In Bombay a series of huge demonstrations took place. "Some 60 textile mills were closed by strikes which also extended into some railway shops," reported the Associated Press on the 22nd February 1946. The following day: "Striking drivers of one of the city's principal transportation companies seized busses, festooned them with flags." Throughout the city trenches were dug across the roads, filled with inflammable materials and gasoline, thus erecting a veritable "wall of fire." In March, 45,000 primary school teachers in Bombay Province went on strike.

Cawnpore (Kanpur)

A Reuter's dispatch reports a mass demonstration held on 10th February of 100,000 members of all Indian parties in Cawnpore, leading industrial city in the United Provinces. This action was taken in protest against the 50 percent reduction in wheat rations. The meeting called upon Government officials to resign from their posts inasmuch as they had "failed to feed the country." On the day before the meeting "angry citizens marched through the streets, shouting protests against the ration cut and stopping and stoning private cars." All shops and industries were closed and no public transportation vehicles were on the streets that day. The city of Allahbad was paralyzed by a general strike on 12th February 1946. "50,000 hunger marchers paraded through the streets protesting cuts in food rations and demanding more wheat for bread," reported the Associated Press.

Rest of India

Elsewhere in the country, the strike of 10,000 tailors and labourers in the ordnance-clothing factory at Shahjahanpur was in its 18th day on 9th January. In four goldfields at Kolar in Madras province, 24,000 miners went on strike on 7th January for a basic minimum wage and increases. In Trichinopoly, 10,000 workers struck; a general strike was called in Karachi; the similar action was taken in Madras, where the demonstrators “stoned British military trucks and battled police forces around the city railway station.” Throughout all these demonstrations the inspiring and fiery slogan “Long Live the Revolution!” was repeatedly heard.

Workers struggles in 1947

The last years of colonial rule also saw a remarkably sharp increase in strikes on economic issues all over the country — the all-India strike of the Post and Telegraph Department employees being the most well known among them. The pent-up economic grievances during the War, coupled with the problems due to post-war demobilization and the continuation of high prices, scarcity of food and other essentials, and a drop in real wages, all combined to drive the working class to the limits of its tolerance.

Also, the mood in anticipation of freedom was pregnant with expectation. Independence was seen by all sections of the Indian people as signalling an end to their miseries. The workers were no exception. They too were now struggling for what they hoped freedom would bring them as a matter of right.

Role of Congress, CPI and ML

The revolutionary insurrections in the air force, navy, army, police, railways, civil servants etc. had erupted at the time when the Congress and Muslim League were focussed on campaigning for the 1946 elections for the constituent assembly. The last thing they wanted was another ‘Quit India’ movement. In a rare display of unity, the implacable rivals both condemned the Royal Indian Navy revolt in HMIS Talwar and other ships and shores across the country.

It is not surprising why the courageous striking sailors received no support at all from the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. Rather than supporting the rebels, they were in fact condemned for their actions. Mahatma Gandhi issued a statement criticizing the mutineers for revolting without any guidance from a political party. The Muslim League too denounced the mutineers, arguing that unrest on the streets was not the best way to deal with grievances and that protest should be through constitutional methods only.

Valabhbhai Patel demanded that the sailors surrender and summoned vice president of the sailors strike committee, Petty Officer Madan Singh in a flat at Bombay and literally shouted at him and demanded that he stop the revolt. Nehru did not want to be left behind Patel and in a meeting with Madan advised him and his comrades to surrender and bring the navy revolt to an end.

Gandhi declared that ‘a combination between Hindus and Muslims and others for the purpose of the violent action was unholy’. Nehru, the darling of the Congress left, held a press conference to chastise the mutineers.

The Communist Party of India was caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, the CPI wanted to ‘be with the people’, in order to restore some of its credibility lost during the war, when the party overtly supported the government in the name of ‘Peoples’ War’. Their rank-and-file, particularly the students, enthusiastically jumped into the fray in the uprisings in Bombay and Calcutta. On the other

hand, the more compromised leadership didn't want to jeopardise its would-be 'united front' with Gandhi's Congress and the Muslim League. And so, contrary to the myth, the CPI, in fact, had called on 'all parties' to give a 'peaceful expression to the protest against military atrocities'.

Surrender

The negotiations moved fast, keeping in view the extreme sensitivity of the situation and on the fourth day 22nd Feb 1946, most of the demands of the strikers were conceded in principle. Even after the sailors surrendered, there was sporadic resistance in the mill districts. Tanks rumbled through the streets. Small groups fought guerrilla-style battles. Mosquito bombers roared overhead. The British light carrier Glasgow steamed into the harbour. Sympathy strikes and mass protests continued in Calcutta, Madras, Madura and Trichinopoly. On 24th February 1946 white flags were raised from the decks of all ships to announce surrender. In its last session the strike committee passed a resolution that stated, "Our uprising was an important historical event in the lives of our people. For the first time the blood of uniformed and non-uniformed workers flowed in one current for the same collective cause. We the workers in uniform shall never forget this. We also know that you, our proletarian brothers and sisters shall also never forget this. The coming generations, learning its lessons shall accomplish what we have not been able to achieve. Long live the working masses. Long, lives Revolution".

The military arrested over 1300 ratings and dismissed 1000, contrary to Patel's promise of no victimisation. The CPI dissociated itself from a strike called for 26 February to protest against the repression. But it staged a joint rally with Sardar Patel in Calcutta.

Betrayal of the CPI

Between 1942 and 1945 in other words during the period when Second World War was at its peak and British imperialism particularly its occupation of India was at its weakest and the "Quit India" campaign was in full swing the Communist Party of India (CPI) went through an 180 degrees turn and renounced all agitation, graciously standing aside to allow Congress and Muslim League to seize CPI's crucial and historically necessary role. While the leaders of Congress were locked up and their newspapers banned, the CPI leaders and activist were free, receiving generous financial donations and carrying out mass recruitment of Indians into the British Indian army and mobilising for other war efforts. However when the time came for transfer of power the preferred option for British imperialism was Congress and League, as they wanted to ensure continuity of capitalist plunder.

As Marx explained in his writing after the first War of Independence that British imperialism conquered India using Indian troops, cynically buying off, manipulating and playing off against one another, the Indian people were amongst the first to light a torch for the colonial oppressed of two-thirds of the world. Had there been a mass revolutionary party in Bombay in 1946, soviets would have been the order of the day, like in Petrograd in 1905. The interview was given by the vice president of the Central Strike Committee, Madan Singh to the Tribune, a newspaper based in Chandigarh, clearly shows the rebel sailors did not want to make compromises with the British Raj and were determined to see an end to British occupation. Madan Singh recalled those stormy events. "After the outbreak of the mutiny, the first thing that we did was to free B.C. Dutt (who was arrested during General Auchinleck's visit). Then we took possession of Butcher Island (the entire ammunition meant for Bombay Presidency was stocked) and Kirkee near Pune. Our quick actions ensured that all the 70 ships and all the 20 seashore establishments were in our control. We had secured control over the civilian telephone exchange, the cable network and, above all, over the transmission centre at Kirkee manned by the Navy, which was the channel of communication between the Indian Government and the British."

The need of the hour was for a revolutionary leadership grounded in on the granite foundations of Marxism that could have provided a direction to the sailors as the restless Indian soldiers in the army and millions of workers who came out on the streets in all different parts of the country. Soviets could easily have been established in Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi, Allahabad, Madras, Kanpur, Delhi and many other metropolitan major cities. This would have enabled to wield control, galvanise millions and marshal them to batter down the bastions of imperialism. Unfortunately due to the criminal role played by the Comintern and the leadership of the CPI with the disastrous policy of forming 'people's front' with the "progressive bourgeois" of Congress and the Muslim League missed a historic opportunity. The necessity of the day was and still is the building up a revolutionary leadership, that is, a working-class party, armed with the arsenal of Marxism and conscious of its revolutionary historic role.

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P.S.

- "The Great Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946". Asian Marxist Review, November 7, 2016: <http://www.marxistreview.asia/the-great-royal-indian-navy-mutiny-of-1946/>