

Harbans Singh

Harbans Singh is one of the living veteran TU leaders of Kanpur which once called “Red Kanpur’ due to the domination of the left. Like Madanlal Didi he too is in his 80s but is surprisingly trim and slim and healthy for his advanced age. A man of simple life style but a wonderful aesthetic sense very much reflected in his nice looking interior decor of his.

Harbans Singh was born on 18th Aug. 1924 in Punjab. His first entry into politics was in his student and youth days when as a young boy he joined the 1942 Quit India Movement against the British Raj and in the process got arrested and was sentenced to two and a half year’s imprisonment. However he was released due to the intervention of Dr. Radhakrishnan in only 9 months. In 1947 he graduated from an Engineering College and was made the General Secretary of the UP AISF. And immediately he had to go underground for over 2 years till 1950 due to the BTR line of armed revolution.

After the leagling of the CPI in 1950 he was given the responsibility to reorganise the TU movement in Kanpur which as a result of the failure of the BTR line had suffered major reverses for the CPI in the TU front. In 1950 when he came out of jail to Kanpur all the leaders were in jail and even the AITUC office was destroyed by the police. Along with the help of one comrade restarted the TU work. First Harbans Singh restarted the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha a union formed in 1928. In 1950 there were over 12 textile mills in Kanpur and employing over 500,000 workers. The Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha was founded by two great leaders i.e. Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi in Gwaltoli and Sant Singh Yusuf a textile leader and R.D. Bhardwaj who had the task of education while underground. Due to their struggles the first historic strike in 1935 at Kanpur of textile workers was organised for wage increase. They of course were the leaders of the TU movement of Kanpur later. This strike was historic in the sense that these leaders managed to involve the teachers, bank employees, insurance workers and others into supporting this textile workers strike. Thus virtually the whole of Kanpur was brought to a halt. The uniqueness about the union called Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha was that it was the first trade union to be registered under the newly formulated TU Act.

By 1953 Kanpur had 6 TUs all belonging to different political parties. It was also the time the great P.C. Joshi after he was removed from Gen-Secretaryship he took over as Distt. Secretary of Kanpur. Harbans Singh says he personally felt great to work with P.C. Joshi who didn’t feel it as a demotion or anything that he had to come down from G- Secretaryship at the national level to a district level. P.C. Joshi after coming to Kanpur at that time immediately worked the ‘Joshi magic’ and united all those 6 different textile unions under one name i.e. Soothi Mill Mazdoor Sabha. On 1st May 1954 the Soothi Mill Mazdoor Sabha called for a massive strike in the whole Kanpur textile

industry. All the union leaders were put behind bars except P.C. Joshi. The union also supported the UP general strike. That strike was a world record and it went on for 80 days and they won a partial victory in the way of the govt. agreeing to form a Rationalisation Committee to look in the wage question of the textile mill workers. It was in that strike that produced another great future leader for the TU movement i.e. S.M. Banerjee who won the Lok Sabha seat of Kanpur in 1967 and then kept winning it for 20 years.

The 1962 Indo-China war led to the split in the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha and also the Soothi Mill Mazdoor Sabha and another one called the United Soothi Mill Mazdoor Sabha. In 1971-72 the National Textile Corporation (NTC) took over many of the sick textile mills in Kanpur after the coming in of foreign yarn which and also the corruption by the management of the mills which hit the profitability of the mills.

But according to Harbans Singh the real tragic chapter of the Indian public sector textile mills started in 1984 with the announcement of the new textile policy well in line with the today's WTO and free trade regime which resulted in the collapse of local textile mills due to cheap cotton products imports due to liberalisation. By 1990s end most of the mills in Kanpur are closed leading to massive unemployment for the common workers. Kanpur once was hailed the Manchester of India today is almost closed down.

The other great thing which the presence of the left in the majority of the working class since pre-independence resulted in the working class never being communalised since 1947. But with the collapse of the working itself due to closure of the textile industry in Kanpur the working class went out of the control of the left and recently in 2001 for the first time since 1935 massive communal riots took place. Harbans Singh said Kanpur tragically has come a full circle from being called 'Red Kanpur' to now being called 'Riot Kanpur'. Then Harbans Singh also worked among the tannery workers who are plenty in Kanpur. Otherwise Harbans Singh apart from being a UP textile leader also reached the national leadership of the AITUC. This is broadly the life and TU life of one of the veterans named Harbans Singh of Kanpur.