

A tribute to Mirza Ibrahim

Monday 11 August 2008, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 11 August 2008).

Known as Baba-e-Mehnat-kashan (father of toilers), Mirza Ibrahim pioneered as well as personified the trade union movement in Pakistan. When he passed away on Aug 11, 1999, at the age of 94, Mirza Ibrahim had spent almost a quarter of his life behind bars, besides having lived the horrors of the notorious torture cell at the Lahore Fort.

A committed communist and a revered trade unionist, Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim was born into a poor family in 1905 at village Kala Goojran in district Jhelum in Punjab. He did not get the chance to attend a school. But he had an early exposure to politics when, at the age of 16, he got radicalised as the Khilafat Movement caught hold of the Indian subcontinent. He was first arrested for his active participation in the movement.

In 1924, Mirza Ibrahim moved to Rawalpindi and found employment as a brick kiln worker. Briefly, he also worked as a gardener at a British household. Finally, in 1926, he was employed at the railway workshops at Jhelum. It was this job at the railways that became his lifetime identity. His metamorphosis, however, occurred when he was posted to Lahore in 1930. Lahore was an important political and cultural centre even during the colonial era. Here he came in contact with trade union movement and leftwing activists. He joined the Communist Party of India, became active in the trade union movement and was consequently elected as vice president of the Railways Federation. At the time, the federation's president was V V Giri, who was later to become Indian president. Jyoti Basu, the long-time communist chief minister of West Bengal, was also active at that time in trade union activities under Ibrahim's leadership.

The year 1946 was a revolutionary year in India. At the end of World War II, the government wanted to fire railway workers in their hundreds of thousands on the plea that with the end of the war their services were not required any more. On May 1, railway workers went on strike under the militant leadership of Mirza Ibrahim, who in those days was the president of the North-Western Railway Workers Union. The government had to bow before the striking workers. The strike action not merely helped save their jobs, they won a twenty-rupees rise in their salaries.

After the partition of India in 1947, he became active in establishing the Pakistan Trade Union Federation (PTUF). The PTUF was affiliated with the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), and stalwarts like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and C R Aslam were advised by the CPP to help the PTUF organising industrial workers. However, it was Mirza Ibrahim which the PTUF elected as its president. Although Faiz's presence in PTUF ranks was symbolic, he was elected as vice president of the Federation. In 1950, he contested elections to the Punjab Assembly from a Lahore constituency. Mirza Ibrahim's enormous popularity was evident when ballot boxes were found stuffed with votes as well as currency notes. Thousands of working-class voters left one-to-five-rupee notes, inscribed with Mirza's name, as contributions towards the creation of a fund for his political projects. He won the election but the government candidate was fraudulently declared victorious. It was election rigging in his constituency that assigned currency to the term jhurloo (rigging) in Punjab. In 1951, he was implicated in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case and was tortured at the notorious Lahore Fort. From then on, he was jailed a number of times until Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship came to its end in 1988.

He contested the elections in 1970, but this time his legend did not attract the voters amid the Bhutto bandwagon. The railway activists lobbied with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to nominate him as PPP candidate and it would have materialised, but Mirza did not want to contest elections from the PPP platform.

Brutally repressed by Zia dictatorship and in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the trade union movement in Pakistan suffered a massive setback. However, despite his failing health Mirza Ibrahim stuck to his commitment. He now began playing a leading role in forging a broad-based trade union alliance. His efforts, in collaboration with a number of leading unionists, led to the formation of the Pakistan Trade Union Confederation. Formed in 1994, this was an umbrella organisation of nine trade union federations. For the last five years of his life, he spent most of the time in his native village but regularly visited Lahore for prolonged stays.

Since his death, the trade union movement has, on the one hand, suffered even more as the IRO 2000 introduced by the Musharraf regime further curtailed the workers' rights and new curbs were imposed on unionism. On the other hand, the trade union movement has shown remarkable recovery too. Militant struggles by PTCL workers and garment workers, successful strikes by brick-kiln workers, anti-privatisation campaigns by teachers and doctors in Punjab, all point to a turn of the tide. And Mirza Ibrahim will remain an inspiration every time a new generation of workers gets organised. Hail to thee, Mirza Ibrahim!

P.S.

* From Today's The News:

http://thenews.jang.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=129318