

# Unravelling the Build Up to Bombay's Textile Mill Strike of 1982

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**An extract from Hub van Wersch's book recounts how Mumbai's textile mill workers decided to accept the leadership of trade unionist Datta Samant.**

*In January 1982, over two lakh workers in Mumbai's textile mills went on an indefinite strike. While some workers had been already agitating about wage issues with their respective employers, this was a concerted, industry-wide action that left mill owners and the government stunned. They were also taken aback by the workers' spontaneous decision to discard established unions and leaders and accept the leadership of a new trade unionist - Datta Samant.*

*Samant, a qualified medical doctor, had successfully led strikes in several companies, obtaining benefits hitherto unheard of. One day, thousands of workers from the textile mills walked across to his home and demanded that he lead them. With that, a new phase began in the city's century and its textile sector. By the end of the strike - which went on for nearly two years - thousands of workers were out of a job and many mills had been shut down.*

*The most comprehensive account of the strike was written by a Dutch academic Hub Van Wersch but for several years, the book was unavailable. A reprint by Speaking Tiger brings the history of the strike to a new readership, telling the story of a major event that changed the face of Mumbai forever. This exclusive extract from The 1982-83 Bombay Textile Strike and the Unmaking of a Labourers' City recounts the moment when the workers decided to bring in Samant as their leader.*

When textile workers struck work for a day in September 1981 there was no indication that this event, bearing the characteristics of a ritual, would in due time turn into the biggest strike the Indian subcontinent has ever witnessed. The term 'biggest strike' is somewhat ambiguous as the criteria for scale and duration are being mixed up.

Although it is not too difficult to find examples of strikes lasting longer than the officially acknowledged eighteen-and-a-half months that the textile strike lasted, or involving more people than the roughly 2.5 lakh textile workers, it will be very difficult to find examples matching both these figures simultaneously. There may not even be another parallel in world history.

Just as in any other year, the agitation was for a proper bonus settlement and, as before, the prevailing expectation was that the unrest would subside after some positive result had been achieved. The amount of bonus to be paid differed from mill to mill, changed over the years and depended, inter alia, on the formula being used to arrive at the allocable surplus.

The concept of bonus too changed considerably, as is clear from the many amendments to the Bonus Act of 1965. The Payment of Bonus Ordinance, 1980 provided for a minimum of 8.33% and a maximum of 20%, and its special feature was that from 1980 onwards bonus could be linked with productivity instead of being based on profits. Payment of bonus is a form of profit-sharing and a reward for the contribution of labour to capital. Some employers, however, had still not understood

the nature of this payment.

Although the Trade Union Joint Action Committee (TUJAC), a platform for unions belonging to the opposition, threatened an indefinite strike in the event of their demands not being met, no one took this very seriously. The one-day strike in September was nevertheless a great success and a noteworthy aspect was the participation of workers belonging to the Girni Kamgar Sena in spite of instructions by its leaders to the contrary.

A few weeks later the RMMS and the MOA thought that they had sorted out the problems and on October 22, they presented an agreement which would cost the private mills Rs 20.6 crores. The thirteen mills under the National Textile Corporation (NTC) declared that a bonus would be paid amounting to Rs 2.4 crores.

The differences in the paying capacity of the mills had been taken into account and because of that, the bonus varied between 8.33% (the minimum required by law) and 17.33%. Nine mills (including Standard Mills) were to pay the highest amount whereas thirty-four mills were to pay less than 12.5%.

However, unlike earlier years the matter did not end here. The next day workers from fifteen mills staged a sit-down strike to protest the outcome of the negotiations. Sensing the mood of the workers, the Mumbai Girni Kamgar Union threatened an indefinite strike.

This time too, the cry failed to evoke a strong response as the union no longer had a large following among the workers. On October 22 everything at first seemed to follow the usual pattern when workers of seven mills resumed duty. Something appeared to be wrong, however, when the workers of the other mills remained on strike. The percentage of bonus to be given in these mills was as follows: Prakash Cotton Mills 8.33%; Hindoostan Spinning and Weaving (four mills) 11%; Shree Niwas 12 and Standard Mills 17.33%.

Apart from the strike for a higher bonus in these seven mills, another strike was on in Madhusudan Mills, but here the agitation was for a wage hike. All in all some 34,000 workers had struck work which represented roughly 14% of the workforce.

Still, there seemed no reason for the mill owners to panic, accustomed as they were to acts of defiance on the part of the workers at bonus time. There had been resistance against the quantum of the bonus before and usually, such agitation subsided within days. There seemed no reason to think it would be any different this time. Yet, dramatic events lay ahead.

The very next day, October 23, proved to be decisive for much of what was to follow. On that day striking workers, totally ignoring the presence of all established trade unions in the textile industry, decided to seek the intervention of an outsider who had fired their imagination and whose stature had risen over the years in spite of the countless attacks on him and on the way he dealt with labour problems.

In fact, what was mostly ridiculed or despised as adventurism or irresponsible trade unionism by employers and trade unionists alike, was precisely what seemed to draw workers towards him. Hundreds of workers from Standard Mills, one of the mills that would have to pay the highest bonus, walked that day from the gates of the mill to the residence of the both famous and infamous Datta Samant (the adjective generally depending on political preferences or economic interests) in Ghatkopar with the demand that he should lead them in the strike.

If they had thought that they would be received with open arms they were in for a rude shock. Dr Samant declined the honour and informed them that he didn't want to lead them as their industry

was regulated by the BIR Act. Because of this fact, it would be too difficult. Apart from that he had no wish to add to the burden of the many responsibilities he already shouldered.

However, the workers, not to be easily denied, staged a dharna\* at his home, staying there throughout the night in an effort to compel him to accept leadership. When Samant found that the workers were determined to face the problems ahead squarely and that the prospect of prolonged suffering in the course of a struggle would not deter them, he decided to give in.

The news spread like wildfire, and when Datta Samant addressed a gate meeting at Standard Mills in the morning of October 26, thousands of workers of the mills on strike gathered near the gate, turning the meeting into a massive rally. Interrupted by thunderous cheers of approval, Samant declared that the fight would not just be for a higher bonus but also for a wage increase and permanency of *badlis*.

It was the first of a series of meetings and rallies which would draw ever-larger audiences, of sometimes over a lakh. In the days to follow, Samant's office was flooded by workers from mills where no strike was taking place and who repeated the wish of the Standard Mill workers, which was that 'Doctor' should lead them in the struggle. Datta Samant grew convinced that the request made by the Standard workers was no accident but the expression of deeply felt anger shared by all workers.

The massive support from the workers for Samant took the other unions operating in the textile industry by surprise and left them with the question of what attitude to adopt.

There was only one red flag union that wasted no time in waiting for the cat to jump and this was the communist-oriented Sarva Shramik Sangh (SSS) led by the independent Lal Nishan Party, which had a union in the textile industry called the Kapad Kamgar Sanghatana. Their support to the workers' cause was immediate and unconditional, and it was the SSS again that would share the dais with Datta Samant on the eve of the strike.

Hoping to recover ground that they had lost a few years earlier, the Shiv Sena-affiliated Girni Kamgar Sena (GKS) also acted with speed. Sena leader Bal Thackeray at once called for a one-day strike on the first of November, putting up a charter of demands in which a wage increase of not less than Rs 200 per month was claimed.

To this was added the threat that an indefinite strike would follow if this demand was not met by mid-November. Practically all the workers participated in this strike but Thackeray's threat stood exposed as empty when the militant action ended there. The formidable response to the one-day strike was a sure indication of the workers' mood and their readiness for battle but in the process, it also showed that the workers at that point had not yet developed a strong commitment to Datta Samant.

This would change in the weeks ahead. There would be one more outburst of Shiv Sena militancy after about a year but the impact of that would be negligible as the party and its affiliated union had meanwhile lost all credibility among the textile workers.\* Pressurised by the textile workers of both the striking mills and those that were not on strike, Samant announced during a huge meeting on October 30 at the founding of a new textile union, the Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union (MGKU).

He too threatened to start an indefinite strike from mid-November onwards if the demands he had put up were not met. These demands included a wage hike of unheard proportions (Rs 200 to Rs 400 per month, depending on occupation), permanency for *badli* workers and improvement of leave facilities, but it is particularly the first demand that is remembered by the public at large.

The boldness of the demand was likely to send shivers down the spines of employers in the city and it was on this demand that the mill owners would concentrate when they attacked and ridiculed Samant for his irresponsible behaviour.

Yet there was a reason for the workers to believe that the demands stood a chance of being accepted. Had not the same Samant forced the management of Empire Dyeing, a processing unit, to give a wage increase of Rs 150 to Rs 200 just a few months earlier? In that mill, as in so many others in which Samant had no *locus standi*, the doctor had represented the workers' case even though his was not the representative union.

In Empire Dyeing, the MMS had the legal right to represent the workers. Leaving aside the case of Empire Dyeing, there was no gainsaying the fact that Samant's militancy had gained workers in many industries in the Bombay-Thane belt wage hikes that were unknown to the industrial world before he appeared on the scene. These achievements had been widely publicised and discussed.

In the course of the years, workers in new industries, such as chemicals and electronics, had rapidly taken a lead over the textile workers with regard to wages. The RMMS was aware of the fact that textile workers compared their income with that of workers in capital-intensive industries but this did not lead to remedial action.

What was true for wages was also true for the bonus, and percentages of 25 or even 30% bonus in these new industries were not unheard of. For the mill workers there seemed to be a tempting opportunity now to make up for the backlog in one blow by combining demands for higher bonus and wage increases.

Day by day tension increased and the voices demanding the immediate start of an indefinite strike became more vociferous and widespread. Comrade Dange, a prominent leader of the undisputedly greatest textile strike till that day (that is, in 1928), told the workers to prepare for a long struggle. Clouds were gathering rapidly over Bombay as the signal for the march towards the battlefield had been given and this was reflected in the newspaper articles of the time.

*Hub van Wersch is a social anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. His study of the Bombay Textile Strike of 1982-83, was widely acclaimed. He is also a novelist.*

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## **Hub van Wersch**

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