

Malaysia: Remembering SA Ganapathy & Veerasenan on the 3rd and 4th of May

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On the 3rd and 4th of May two most prominent trade unionists were shot dead and hanged in 1949. Their only crime was that they stood alongside labourers in Malaya against the oppressing capitalists and the government which backed the capitalists. S.A Ganapathy and P. Veerasenan were the two trade unionists. P. Veerasenan was shot dead by Gurkha troops on the 3rd May 1949 and S.A Ganapathy was hanged on the 4th May 1949.

Remembering S.A Ganapathy's selfless service for the labour class in Malaya, the Trade Union Advisor to Malaya, John Brazier, paid tribute to Ganapathy in a keynote speech at a trade union conference in Malaya. In his tribute, to the dismay of the British authority, Brazier said;

"I cannot but mention a word about Mr. S.A Ganapathy who has been condemned to death for breaking the laws. Though Mr. Ganapathy has wrong political convictions, his sincere service to the workers for a long time cannot be forgotten. In appreciation of this service it is, but right to express our sympathy to him in his dark days. We hope that those responsible would recognize his service to the ignorant and poor workers and appreciate the amount of sympathy that has been kindled in the minds of those who have greatly benefitted by his service."

Following the death of S.A Ganapathy and P.Veerasenan, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) protested to the United Nations. WFTU also paid tribute to S.A Ganapathy:

"Paying tribute to the memory of Mr.Ganapathy and Veerasenan, the WFTU officially informs the United Nation of this fresh violation of trade union liberties and of these attacks on the life and rights of man. The WFTU energetically protests also to the British Government."

In United States, the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen Union protested in the strongest tone criticizing British government in Malaya. Condemning Ganapathy's execution to the British Embassy in Washington, the President of the union, Harry R. Bridges stated:

"The act can be called only British Imperialist murder and one of last desperate stabs of the dying imperialist system. More than 15,000 innocent Malaysians have been jailed flogged, tortured or killed by the British authority for the past year for no other crime but that of belonging to unions and advocating that British get out of their country and leave it to the people who truly own it. The crime of your government becomes all more shocking when we consider that in part it was carried out with weapons and money produced and furnished by the people and the trade union members of United States"

Meanwhile in India, the British-owned newspaper Calcutta Statesman conceded the execution was draconian punishment and that death sentence for carrying arms should be tempered in particular by tact and leniency. The newspaper added *that in the interest of Indo-British goodwill, Malayan authorities responsible for this ill-timed, unstateman-like handling of affair - which from the nature*

necessarily had international significance-, should be removed by Whitehall. The newspaper wanted the responsible authorities in Malaya who mishandled this case to be removed.

Meanwhile, the Nagpur Socialist Party observed 15th May 1949 as “Saheed (Martyr) Ganapathy Day”. In an appeal to Indian Government, Secretary of the Party, Suresh Gangga stated that execution of Ganapathy and the shooting of P.Veerasesan by the Malaya authorities compelled realization that the life of an Indian was very cheap in the eyes of foreigners.

Another India’s prominent socialist and trade union leader, Asoka Metha regarded Ganapathy’s execution like a pendant in the Commonwealth chain recently forged in London.

So much have been reported on Ganapathy’s execution yet very little has been written about him. The British colonial masters and capitalists, in pursuing their ambition to continue their influence over Malaya, went to the extreme extents to paint many genuine trade unionists like Ganapathy and P. Veerasesan as Communist Terrorists.

Many of the trade unionists’ records were kept away from public hence for many years their personalities, principles and values that they stood for were not discussed in the public domain. Only in the recent years when the Public Office Records released some of the files on Ganapathy, were we able to look into Ganapathy’s personality and derived the ideology of his struggles. Yet, Britain is still holding back a few of his files for unknown reasons!

Ganapathy’s life in brief

According to the colonial records, S.A Ganapathy was born in 1917 in Madras District Tamil Nadu. In 1929, he came to Singapore and subsequently obtained employment. He joined the Malayan Communist Party in 1939 at the age of 22. The records also revealed that Ganapathy was an instructor in the Indian National Army (INA) during the Japanese occupation. After the liberation, he resumed his service for the Malayan Communist Party in organizing the Indian Section of the General Labour Union (GLU) of which he was appointed as Secretary in November 1945. During 1946 and 1947 his active involvement in GLU elevated him to the position of the President of Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions.

When Ganapathy was elected as President of Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions in February 1947, the federation represented more than sixty percent of the workforce in Malaya with 400,000 members.

At the time Ganapathy took the leadership of PMFTU, P. Veerasesan was elected to be the President of Singapore Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). Under Veerasesan’s leadership, Singapore saw the biggest May Day procession in 1947. SFTU organized a massive parade of 50,000 members for the May Day celebration in 1947. The celebration also saw delegates from the Soviet Union who congratulated SFTU and the Malayan Democratic Unions (MDU) for the efforts to mobilise such a huge crowd of labourers.

In the following year when SFTU pledged that 100,000 labourers shall take part in the May Day parade, the Singapore government banned all processions and rallies. Cheng Lu, the General Secretary of PMFTU, appealed all labourers to abandon their plans for celebration “*in view of Government’s threat to use military force to suppress them*”

Ganapathy continued to play vital roles in empowering the ‘rakyat’ not only on labour rights but also empowering them with political awareness. Realizing that only political will would be able to resolve the suffering of the working class, PMFTU forged an alliance with PUTERA-AMCJA to campaign for a

democratic constitution. Addressing the Executive Bureau of PMFTU on the 15th October 1947 in Ipoh, Ganapathy pointed out that a democratic constitution is vital to the promotion of the good standard of living of the working class. Ganapathy realized that large masses were illiterate and still in the stage of struggling for basic needs. Thus, he choose to relate the basic human needs - food, clothes and housing and related them to the democratic political ideology which the country would aspire.

“A fight for democratic constitution is a fight for better food and clothing” was repeated again and again by Ganapathy in galvanizing the working class to support PUTERA-AMCJA’s Hartal 1947.

Apart from commenting on basic needs, Ganapathy also touched on the importance to improve the economic status of Malaya through legislation. This was essential to improve industry sectors which in return would be able to uplift the status of labourers in the county.

“If the economy and the finance of the country is to be improved so as to place industries in a position to pay higher wages, if we are to have better social services, if there is to be equitable distribution of income and resources, these can only be secured by influencing the legislation of the country”

Speaking on the curtailment of civil liberties, Ganapathy condemned the use of the Societies’ Ordinance and the House to House Collections Ordinance, which requires a 10 days’ notice to the police for calling a mass meeting. (Sounds familiar?)

In the same meeting, Ganapathy also condemned the trespassing restrictions which were imposed by the plantations at the same time the government was professing trade union rights.

“Trespassing restrictions deprives the workers of their rights and dignity as human beings and reduces their status to that of a serf. This is an insult to the working class. By lifting these restrictions we would lay stable foundations for the development of democracy in Malaya”

Ganapathy also hit out on primitive planting methods practiced in plantations and criticized the inertness of Malayan Government to take steps to place Malayan economy on a sound basis by working out a plan of balancing economic development.

“If the economy of Malaya is balanced, if the civil liberties are guaranteed and if there is a democratic constitution through which the will of the people could influence legislation it would be much easier to promote the standard of living of the workers and alleviate his sufferings”

In upholding the class struggle, Ganapathy criticized the Trade Union Ordinance that prohibits Government employees from joining the non-government employees’ unions. According to Ganapathy, the workers belong to a single class with no racial, national or any other barriers. For a healthy democratic development of any country, it is essential that all workers should be united.

Touching on the wage issue, Ganapathy warned the authority that it was vital to fix minimum wage to ensure rehabilitation of working class and preservation of law and order in Malaya

“Today when real wages have shrunken to an alarmingly low level at a time when the working class is awakening in realising their rights, the fixing of a minimum wage is now vital for the quick rehabilitation of the country. I stress most strongly the needs for fixing a minimum wage because it is vital for the preservation of law and order in Malaya.

Ganapathy emphasized that communal and racial differences need to be overcome and pledged to work for working class to promote unification of trade union organizations. In order to widen

PMFTU leaders' knowledge and experience in union movement, the leaders were told to assist all ethnic groups to organize trade unions and to take part actively in labour disputes.

Ganapathy made a connection between unfair wages and the rise in crime. He pointed out that the Malayan government was responsible for the rise in crime rates due to the suppressed wages of the labourers.

'His Excellency the Governor in his talk over Radio Malaya pointed out, "The state of crime whether serious crime or petty, is generally found to have some relation with employment." But His Excellency went on to say there was full employment in Malaya. Then what is the economic cause for the rise in crime except the inadequate in wages. I wonder why His Excellency did not push his argument to its logical conclusion.'

In the meeting, Ganapathy ensured that PMFTU would give its whole-hearted support to the Malaya-wide campaign carried out by the Putera-AMCJA against the acceptance of the Revised Constitutional Proposals.

*"A democratic constitution is most vital to the struggle for the improvement of our standard of living. If the economic and financial situation of the country is to be so improved so as to place industries in a position to pay higher wages, if we are to have better social services, if there is to be equitable distribution of income these can only be secured by influencing legislation in the country. This cannot be done without a democratic constitution through which the will of the people can be expressed. **Therefore the fight for a democratic constitution is a fight for better food and clothing.**"*

Even though many would argue that Ganapathy did not have any political aspirations towards independence as his approaches and views were only revolved around trade union movements, his efforts to agitate for workers' right underpinned the democratic principles which is vital in forming a nation.

Ganapathy's involvement in propelling PUTERA-AMCJA's aspiration for an independent democratic nation revealed that Ganapathy actively supported the independence movement in the country.

The end of the Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions

Towards the end of 1947, when all other measures to stop PMFTU advancement failed, the government and capitalists turned to legislation. Using the existing provisions of the Trade Union Enactment 1940, the registrar pressured trade unions to align away from the PMFTU. Following the existing enactment that stopped union funds for political use, more stringent amendments were introduced. These amendments were passed in May 1948.

To further paralyze the PMFTU, John Brazier succeeded in disenfranchising remaining independent unions. The laws regulating trade unions had enabled union busting by the authorities.

Even though PMFTU took very early initiative to seek official recognition in November 1946, the government did not give any indication that PMFTU and its alliance were about to be banned. Since the Government of Singapore had already registered SFTU in August 1946 and exempted it from the Trade Union Ordinance, PMFTU hoped that it could be registered as well. Moreover, Brazier led PMFTU to believe that similar arrangements could have been made. But in July 1948, the Registrar of Trade Unions struck off 95 unions. Due to constant pressure from the government, by the end of September 1948 the membership of PMFTU had dropped from 154,434 (in April 1948) to 75,564.

It took more than 20 months for the government to respond to PMFTU's application for registration.

On the 12th June 1948, PMFTU was officially notified that its application for registration was rejected. Subsequently, on the 13th June 1948, PMFTU, the largest and powerful labour organization in Malaya was banned and made illegal. Radical unionists were arrested and effectively eliminated from trade unions.

After the declaration of Emergency in June 1948, many unionists such as Ganapathy and Veerasenan were hunted down by the British administration.

Ganapathy and Veerasenan disappeared from public view when the Emergency was declared. On the 1st March 1949, Ganapathy was caught when he was in hiding in a rubber estate (Waterfall Estate, Rawang Selangor). He was arrested by the Acting Manager of the estate, J.W.W Simons who was assisted by a group of special constables. Ganapathy was accused in court, they alleged that he refused to surrender, put up a struggle and tried to draw his revolver from his belt. He was said to have been overpowered and handed to the OCPD of Rawang.

On 15th March 1949, Ganapathy was tried and sentenced to death by hanging for unlawful possession of a .45 revolver and carrying six rounds of ammunition. In the trial, two of the special constables and the OCPD of Rawang gave evidence against Ganapathy. Ganapathy's case was further appealed in Supreme Court but was dismissed on the April 1st, 1949. Further on April 23rd, The Selangor State Executive confirmed Ganapathy's sentence.

P. Veerasenan joined the First Brigade of Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and was shot dead on the 3rd May 1949 near Pertang, Jelebu by a Gurkha unit from 1/7 Gurkha Rifles.

Even though the trajectory of trade union struggles in this country had taken many dramatic turns over the years, the core issues of the working class still remain the same. Wage issues, health care assistance and social security are some of the core issues which continue to be manipulated by employers. The influx of migrant labour to Malaysia to take up unskilled, low paid and harmful work reveals capitalism is truly entrenched in our economy. Malaysia is keen to embrace neoliberal policies in becoming party to corrosive trade agreements like the CPTPPA and RCEP. Thus, raising the awareness of the laboring class would be very critical to ensure that labourers are not manipulated for the benefit of the capitalists.

Being illiterate or with a little education and without financial influence, it would have taken sheer determinations and hard work for individuals like S.A Ganapathy and Veerasenan to lead a multi-racial union like the PMFTU. Constant thoughts on the social welfare and economic development of labour class are reflected in their actions, words and legacy of their struggles.

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P.S.

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