

Indian Labour Movement in the Estates in Kedah, Malaya 1945 - 1946

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Abstract

The Indian labour movement in the estates in Kedah, occurs within a short period of time without bringing any new changes to them. The experience of Indian labourers who joined the INA during the Second World War enabled them to join the labour movements to overcome oppression against them. The Indian labour movement in the estates in Kedah has undergone radical and militant changes within a short period of time. This change has been manifested in the form of a strike and disruption due to the willingness of Indian estate workers to cooperate with any parties willing to work with them in particular CPM. The Indian labour movement in the estates in Kedah was also stunted as they did not act individually to achieve their goals. The Indian estate labour movement's move to accept CPM as its counterpart is a major mistake as it has brought Indian labour movement particularly in the estates in Kedah and Malaya generally towards the brink of destruction.

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Introduction

The migration of Indian labourers to Malaya has been designed and managed by the British to meet its economic interests. The earliest Indian labour migration was to work in the coconut and sugarcane plantations in Penang and Province Wellesly in the year 1833.¹ Rubber plantations were introduced by the British later and soon it became the most important commodity besides tin-ore. In the state of Kedah, a northern state in Peninsular Malaya, rubber is the most important export crop for British. To develop the rubber industry, the British have relied on Indian labourers from South India. This is because, the cost of Indian labour is cheaper than the Chinese and Javanese labour force. In addition, most of the estates in Kedah belongs to the British under the supervision of a British officer who often have the experience of managing Indian labourers in India or in Ceylon. According to the population studies in Kedah, the estates in Kedah comprise 74% of Indians, 7% Chinese and 4% of Malays in the year 1946.² With a large number of Indians working as labourers in rubber estates, it is not surprising why crackdowns and commotion that occurred in the estates were dominated by those groups alone.

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Indeed the Indians are the majority in the rubber industry in the state of Kedah, with the overwhelming economic and social oppression, it is sufficient to produce militant and radical actions among them in the quest for fair treatment. In addition, since the coconut plantation is the second major commodity crop for Kedah after rubber, there are many toddy shops in Kedah.

This has subsequently triggered anti-toddy campaigns by social reform groups such as the 'Thondar Padai Movement'. In terms of the rise of labour awareness, Indian estate labourers in Kedah are also same like estate labourers in other states in Malaya that are slow due the nature of the protected and isolated estate environment and due to the form of the power hierarchy that exist in the estates which has undermined the spirit of Indian estate labourers.

Subsequently, the development of Indian labour movement in the estates in Kedah during the Japanese occupation and the Emergency declaration had indeed been linked and influenced by the development of Indian labour movement throughout Malaya. Indeed, there is a mutual influence-affecting one with another that cannot be denied. Thus, the expansion of Indian labourers in the estates in Kedah will be seen in terms of its background until the Second World War, the impact of Japanese occupation on Indian estate labourers, the development of Indian estate labourers from 1945 and the Indian labour movement in the estates.

Indian Labour Movement in the Estates between 1945 – 1946

The post-war Indian labourers in the estates are different from those before the war. Due to the influence of nationalists, they showed anti-British attitude especially among young people, consisting of former members of the Indian National Army (INA). There are those who are willing to deal with labour matters in relation to Indian estate labourers to overcome oppression against them through labour movements such as the Kedah Indian Labour Union. This union was established and led by A.M.Samy. He is a 50-year old shopkeeper in the estate who has no experience in the INA,MPAJA³ or MPAJU⁴ movements. Thus, the effects of the experiences of Indian estate labourers during the war, the Indian labourers, especially young people, former INA and MPAJA members, have shown the spirit of militant struggle among them. They are willing to oppose the employer and are willing to cooperate with any party who exhibits the same goals as those parties as they are formerly members of the INA. The struggle of this young Indian estate labourers has given the opportunity to the Communist Party of Malaya

(CPM) to utilize them.⁵ In the quest to achieve its own interest, the CPM has used its cadres who are former INA members to get closer with the young Indian estate labourers to influence the Indian labour movements. It is therefore not surprising that by mid-1946, most of the isolated Indian Labour Unions were incorporated into the General Labour Union (GLU) under the influence of CPM.⁶

Due to CPM's influence in labour movements, Indian estate workers in Kedah have become radical in their demands. When the employers acted to reduce the wages of Indian estate labourers, the Indian estate labourers in Kedah had acted by launching a strike. Due to that, in November 1945 there were several strikes. The aim of the strike was to demand for more wages.⁷ Thus, even though the CPM said it was involved in the strike of the Indian estate labourers, but the demands of the Indian estate labourers were more towards economic issues and not politics. This is evident from British Military Administration's (BMA) own report which acknowledges that the cause of the strike and the chaos that occurred. As a result, the BMA has considered CPM's involvement in the strike as merely because it concerns the existing economic problems.

Until January 1946, the BMA had considered that the strike and the turmoil was due to the economic problems faced by Indian estate labourers due to the state of the country being destroyed by the war.⁸ The BMA's response was then changed. This is because of the shortage of labour has given the Indian estate labourers more bargaining power. This position has threatened the recovery process of Britain's own economy. The BMA has begun to portray the causes of strikes launched by Indian estate labourers and the turmoil in the estates as politically motivated and not as an economic motive.⁹ As a result, every strike launched by Indian estate labourers in Kedah has begun to be suspected as a result of the seditious elements of the communist aimed at crippling the country's economy and further to weakened the BMA's administration.

The change of BMA's attitude to the cause of the strike and the chaos has led the BMA to take firm measures against the movements of the Indian estate labourers who were involved in the strikes as the main purpose of the BMA itself to eradicate "bad

elements” before the Public Administration returns to power in Malaya. As a step towards eliminating the threats of “bad elements” of its administration and at the same time abolishing the strike and disruption of communism, the BMA has used the Labour Ordinance of 1933. In fact, the BMA has tried to use the Ordinance as a tool to restore security and integrity of its administration. Under the Ordinance, the BMA has acted to expel the “bad elements” deemed as responsible for any strikes that occurred.¹⁰ As a result, the BMA not only had the opportunity to act to eliminate the threats to its administration from “bad elements” but also had the opportunity to act to eliminate the radical nature of the movements of Indian estate labourers by acting to deprive the Indian estate labourers who were regarded as militant, radical or communist agents aimed at demolishing the BMA’s administration.

Overall, the BMA’s actions are less successful in eliminating “bad elements”. In fact, it has added more confronting situations between BMA and the labourers, as Indian estate labourers in Kedah are determined to improve their position.¹¹ While the BMA government and estate entrepreneurs have been trying to keep the Indian estate labourers same as pre-war conditions with low wages, even they are facing a high cost of living. They refused to carry out social reforms or increase the wages of Indian estate labourers. At the same time, the estate entrepreneurs who return back after the war have been retaining the estate staff who had abetted the Japanese and oppressed the Indian estate labourers during the war. This action has caused dissatisfaction among Indian estate labourers and has embraced the anti-British sentiment. This is because Indian estate labourers have anticipated that with the return of the British to Malaya, the estate staff who have been working with the enemy, namely Japan during the war, will be arrested and convicted as traitors. They were annoyed and frustrated that the estate staff were honored as rubber industry rescuers and were given wage arrears by estate entrepreneurs who returned back¹², while Indian estate labourers were oppressed by the estate staff and had suffered from the war was abandoned by estate entrepreneurs as well as by the BMA government itself.

So it is not surprising that the feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction with the anti-British sentiments among Indian labourers in the estates in Kedah has finally been manifested in the form of strikes and chaos aimed at obtaining appropriate treatment from their employers. It is clear that, the thinking of Indian estate labourers has changed. They are not willing to be isolated in the rubber industry and begin to realise their political, economic and social position. Some of the young Indian estate labourers have joined the Thondar Padai movement which was initiated by A.M. Samy, the head of the Indian Labor Union in Kedah.¹³ This movement was started in the Harvard Estate, Bedong, Kedah. Thondar Padai movement was a radical social reformist movement. It is aimed at improving the social weaknesses that existed among Indian estate labourers in Kedah. The most prominent action of Thondar Padai movement in overcoming social blunder was the campaign against drinking toddy. The Thondar Padai movement had organised campaigns to prevent toddy drinking radically namely by preventing the elderly Indian estate labourers from entering the toddy shops and punish those who violate the rules in relation to toddy drinking. Apart from the role in overcoming social inequalities, Thondar Padai movement in Kedah under the leadership of A.M. Samy was also instrumental in enforcing the strike launched by the Indian estate labourers in Kedah against their employers.¹⁴

It is clear that Indian estate labourers in Kedah are now determined to change their destiny. Only their employers and BMA are the main obstacles for them. As a result, the conflict between Indian estate labourers in Kedah with estate entrepreneurs and BMA is inevitable. Thus, when negotiations with the employers failed, Indian estate labourers had acted on launching a strike. It cannot be denied that the strike actions by the Indian estate labourers were the result of communist persecution. This is because the main strategy of the CPM to achieve their goal is to control the labour movement. Communists recognise the role played by Indian estate labourers in the Malayan economic sector as well as the importance of their energy to the estate entrepreneurs and the BMA government. As a result of this awareness, throughout

1946, the communists through the Pan Malayan General Labour Union (PMGLU) had sought to secure the support of Indian estate labourers. They have been keen to attract the Indian Labor Unions to become General Labour Union (GLU) members. As a first step toward this end, PMGLU leaders have been sending their representatives to attend the INA Relief Funds Committees meetings as a sign of their support and sympathy for the nationalist idea and goals of the Indian estate labourers.¹⁵ At the same time, to demonstrate the earnestness in their support for Indian labourers, Indian members in PMGLU have been highly regarded in the movement with the freedom of voicing Indian nationalist ideas to Indians in the labour unions.¹⁶

Indeed, CPM has devoted its energy to labour organizations in developing successful unions rather than their political goals in 1946.¹⁷ This is because CPM is aware that in order to dominate the trade union movement, it is necessary to demonstrate its ability to obtain a better wage and working conditions for the labourers. When CPM did so through PMGLU, it had received support from the labour force until almost all labour movements in Malaya was controlled by PMGLU. This is because, generally, the labourers are willing to support and join any trade unions who are ready to protect themselves and fight for their rights. Thus, for Indian estate laborers, the PMGLU's willingness to use its own resources to improve the position of oppressed Indian labourers, especially in estates, and the successes gained by PMGLU on behalf of labourers in the wage issues and working conditions, have finally convinced them to "paddle" under PMGLU. As a result, all Indian Trade Unions, except for the Negeri Sembilan Indian Trade Union, have become GLU members. The extension of the PMGLU's influence on these trade unions has resulted in the BMA acted to abolish it through the enforcement of the 1940 Trade Union Ordinance on 1st April 1946 which the required registration of all trade unions that existed in Malaya.

In Kedah, the position of the Indian Trade Unions as a member of the GLU led the Thondar Padai movement in Kedah also involved in the activities of GLU. This is because most of the members of the Kedah Indian Trade Union are members of Thondar

Padai movement as well as the head of the Kedah Indian Trade Union, A.M. Samy is not only the founder of the Indian Trade Union but also the leader of Thondar Padai movement in Kedah. On 22nd July 1946, Indian labourers at Harvard and Dublin estates in Kedah launched a strike.¹⁸ According to the Labour Office, the strike had not only been fully supported by Indian labourers in the estates but also supported by the Kedah Indian Trade Union. Labour Officers who visited the estates had found that the discomfort among the estate labourers on their working conditions and their wages were the reasons for the strike.¹⁹

The Labour Officer also found that young estate labourers were very active in trade union activities in the estates. The strike by Indian labourers in Dublin estate was finally terminated on 26th August 1946 in collaboration with the Kedah General Trade Unions. The strike in Harvard estate continue until one month and it was only terminated after Indian labourers in Harvard estate comply with the advice to accept the terms of the settlement of the strike as Indian labourers in Dublin estate from Mr. Chettur, the representative of the Indian government who was visiting Malaya at that time.²⁰

In September 1946, Indian estate labourers in Kedah did not launch any strike to demand for better working conditions. The strikes they had launched were only in relation to the dissatisfaction with the behavior of junior offices in the estates.²¹ The strikes were launched by Indian labourers at the Paya Kemunting estate in Jitra and the Baling estate in Kuala Ketil. The strike in Baling estate was terminated on 27th September, 1946 with the cooperation of Indian officials in the GLU²², while the strike at the Paya Kemunting estate was terminated on 10th October, 1946.²³

The situation of Indian estate labourers who were more eager to express their feelings for action can be seen in November, 1946. Indeed, on 1st November, 65 rubber tappers from Bukit Kosa estate, Bedong suddenly without any claims have refused to work for 3 days, unless they were given more wages. Officers from the Rubber Estates Labour Union (RELU) and Kedah Federation of Trade Union (KFTU), the replacement of the Kedah GLU, were also involved in the strike but soon after, the estate

labourers returned to work without any increase in their wage.²⁴ Indian estate labourers in the Harvard estate have been reported to be practicing “slow” working policy if the rice subsidies are not provided by their employers, while in Pelam estates, Indian estate labourers have been aggressive after attending the Professional Indian Trade Union meeting. They have beaten up the managers and the junior officers of the estate.

In order to abolish the influence of CPM in the trade unions, the Malayan Union civil government which took over the Malaya administration from the BMA on 1st April, 1946 took steps to enforce the 1940 Trade Unions Ordinance in mid 1946.²⁵ Under the ordinance, registration is mandatory for all existing trade unions. The Registrar has the authority to review the financial and all activities of any trade union and registered unions are prohibited from receiving guidance from unregistered trade unions. The PMGLU under the authority of CPM has actually acted to refrain from registering and later changed to Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Union (PMFTU) officially, on 25th August 1946.²⁶

Overall, Indian estate labourers in Kedah throughout the year 1946 seemed to be increasingly losing their fears, hesitation and respect for their employers. Indian estate labourers are now often acting according to their feelings. They can be instantly incited to act either to launch a strike or to make chaos in their estates. Indian estate labourers, especially young people, want reforms in terms of wage, working condition and living standards. In recognizing this fact, competition has emerged among trade unions in Kedah to influence Indian estate labourers with their willingness to defend the fate of the labourers, in particular, after the GLU in Kedah was repealed under the Trade Unions Ordinance in November 1946 by the Malayan civil government.²⁷ In fact, an officer from the Kedah Federation of Trade Unions (KFTU) has tried to influence Indian estate workers in the Dublin estate by attracting attention and awakening their feelings through the following words:

“Brothers, we are no more slaves. The white people are under the impression that we have to behave as slaves again, but I tell you who are the slaves. Their wives and children are their slaves. We are not.”²⁸

Conclusion

It can be seen that, Indian estate labourers actions in Kedah throughout 1946 have clarified that the involvement of communists or any other parties in trade unions and their domination also did not conflict with their stand. This is because the support of Indian estate labourers in Kedah to any trade union is only based on the solvency and capability of a trade union in defending and improving their wages and working conditions. Such thinking of Indian estate labourers has resulted in competition to influence the Indian estate labourers among the existing trade unions. As a result, the Kedah Labour Department itself has reported that the chaos in Kedah is growing and chaos is expected to occur in “union” areas.

The Malayan Government should be blamed for the actions of the Indian labour movement movement in the estates in Kedah. This is because the Malayan government has allowed itself to ignore the conditions that have been urging Indian estate workers to do so. It has allowed itself to be influenced and utilized by the employers of Indian estate labourers in Kedah in their quest to safeguard economic interests that are directly tied to the interests of the British economy it self. Indeed, if the government has acted indiscriminately and show responsible on Indian estate labourers and dare to carry out what should be done to the suffering group, most likely Indian labour movement in the estates in Kedah will not be willing to cooperate with CPM.

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