

The booklet 'Kovai Mill Workers in Public Service' was published by Kovai Mill Workers' Union during the year 1944 and sold for 4 Anna each.

This booklet was published during the wartime. At that time Kovai workers led a patriotic struggle to increase the productivity of nation in spite of all odds such as food scarcity, insufficient wage, long working hours, etc., but with the sole aim of saving the nation from falling into the fascist hold in the war.

This booklet contains (i) forward by Com K Ramani (ii) General Secretary's report in the 6th yearly meeting of Kovai Mill Workers' Union held on 28.07.1944 and (iii) various resolutions passed in the meeting.

Forward by Com K Ramani: In the forward speech Com K Ramani had pictured the short history of Kovai Mill Workers' Union and its association with Madras State Trade Union. He had also brought back into the memory the various struggles it led. In this speech, it was reported that Kovai Mill Workers' Union was established on 18th August 1936 and registered during the year 1938..

General Secretary's Report: General Secretary's report enumerated the various works undertaken by the Union in the previous one year.

- 1. Food Scarcity:** Madras State Trade Union's Conference was held at Coimbatore with the help of Kovai Mill Workers' Union during the month of July 1943g. In this conference, a policy of increasing the productivity was formulated based on the ground realities of that day such as world war and advancement of fascist forces. On those times, the food scarcity was posed as the direct threat for increasing the productivity. To allay the food scarcity and regulate the food supply, rationing system was implemented. The families of workers, who were attending works from villages from where there was no rationing system, were given ration goods from mill stores. Kovai Mill Workers' Union insisted and initiated movement for providing ration system in Singanallur and pccamedu where no ration system was implemented.
- 2. Bonus:** During the war, mundane expenditure shot up. Expenditure index rose to 230 points from 175 in a year. But the war allowance was not increased accordingly. So union demanded 3 months salary as bonus to meet the deteriorating status of workers and started agitation. However, management's union had agreed to give two months salary as bonus. Out of two-month salary, C.S.&W Company Mill had taken one-month salary for stores without workers acceptance. As workers protested for it

though union, management threatened the workers that this one-month salary would be given to war loan as per collector's plea. This irresponsible act of the above mill management gave a direct threat to production as the situation pushed to slip out of control leading to strike. Subsequent Union intervention and its continuous agitation and steps taken by conciliation officer helped to resolve the matter and the workers got their due finally.

- 3. Unity amongst Kovai-Singanallur workers:** Steps were taken to build unity between Kovai and Singanallur workers and bring 40000 cotton mill workers under one umbrella. A resolution was passed to organize all workers under the union established by Shri. N G Ramasamy. The union advised the workers that this unity would help to increase the productivity.
- 4. Movement for increasing the productivity:** To save the people from the fascist military onslaught, food scarcity, scarcity of cloths etc., prevailed at that time, the only way that was open to working class was to increase the production. The workers carried out this duty with patriotism. As the result of it, absenteeism in the mill had been reduced; machines kept idle due to the shortage of manpower were also run with minimum workers with the sole aim of increasing the production.
- 5. Plague problem:** The epidemic plague had spread. Dead rats fell on the head of workers in the mill. Mill management and Government did not make any preventive steps to stop the spreading of plague. Ultimately the union took effort to alleviate the situation so that the workers would not run out of the mill stopping production. Mills, workers' colonies, etc. were fumigated and plague menace was brought under check.
- 6. Bengal famine:** Bengal was under the grip of famine and starvation death became the normal events of the day. Kovai Mill Workers' Union brought this agony to the peoples' notice in the grassroots level and collected fund to retrieve the suffering in Bengal. Apart from that during this time, 'Russian Revolution Day' and 'Lenin Day' were also celebrated.
- 7. Increasing the War Allowance:** War Allowance was given at the rate of 12 Anna for one rupee of basic wage. But during the war period, expenditure index had risen up like anything. Not able to meet both ends, workers run away from the mill job and production tended to come for a halt. Union took up this issue in priority basis and agitated to increase the dearness allowance. Mill management forced to accede for this demand and accepted to enhance it. However it agreed to give the enhanced

allowance in the form of food grains. As this food grains distributed through mill stores, the already corrupt mill stores were brought to prominence which was detested by workers.

8. Co-operative Stores: To give food grain allowance properly, union demanded to democratize the stores management. Representations were made to mill management and government in this regard. Slowly co-operative stores were formed with workers' participation in managing its affair in different cotton mill. In addition to the supply of food grain allowance, ration goods were also distributed through the stores. In some of the stores, workers were supplied with cotton at ex-mill rate via these stores.

Apart from that, union had achieved success in handling dismissal, suspension and accident compensation cases. It made workers to have faith in the union. Another important issue came to the forefront at that time was shortage of firewood. To thwart it, the Government engaged trader union to regulate the supply the firewood and ensured no shortfall. But the traders with a view to multiply the profit, increased the rate of firewood and tried to supply to the demand of firewood through black market. Union plunged into action, captured the firewood in the black-market, and supplied them to the public.

General Secretary further stressed the areas where union had to put up its mind and work.

(i) Union had to require to bring all workers in Coimbatore area under one umbrella organization; (ii) Union had to work relentlessly to increase the productivity and production; and (iii) Union had openly called all section from proprietor to ordinary workers to co-operate with each other to enhance the production and thereby improve their standard of living.

Kovai Mill Workers' Union had conducted 80 public meeting, 7 processions, 3 petitions, and 3 general body meetings and distributed 9 notices from 16.10.1943 to 31.05.1944.

Resolutions: The resolutions were passed in the meetings as follows:

- **Production:** During the wartime, it was important to increase the production to meet out the any emergency arising out of it. Workers understood it, did their maximum to increase the production, and exhibited their patriotism. But mill management and various management elements did not extend their co-operation with the workers and failed to perceive the development in the changed light. So a resolution was passed in the meeting that the workers and others had to act as exemplary in work, maintain their machines well, increase the production, and suggest the union with various suggestion to increase the productivity, if any.

- **Co-operation between union and mill management:** The importance of keeping co-operation between union and mill management was the need of the time at that juncture. But hindrance had existed even in the mutual letter correspondence between union and the mill management. Every discussion was routed through conciliation officer and this cumbersome process led to enormous time delay. This delay put the real issue in the back burner. So the meeting had resolved that the **union** and management had to make mutual co-operation and settle the issue and problems then and there.
- **Sick and privilege leave:** As per the press note No: 2 of development department of the Government, 13 days sick and privilege leave had to be given with effect from 01.06.1939. However mill management did not allow the workers to avail these leaves. So the meeting had resolved to implement this leave system in all mills as per the rule and to claim compensation for not allowing availing these leave from 01.06.1939.
- **Rise in wage:** As household expenditure shot up especially after the war, war allowance was given after workers' agitation. As war allowance was calculated based on basic and basic wage was very meager, it did not mitigate the workers' sufferings. So to improve the workers' standard of living, it was resolved in the meeting that the basic wage had to be risen to a minimum of 25 per cent.
- **9-Hour shift:** Kalliswara Mill observed 9 hour shift in its mill. But most of the other mills maintained their work timings as per their will, wish, and not respected any law. So the meeting had resolved to observe 9 hour shift in all the mills.
- **Bonus:** It was resolved in the meeting to demand 3 months salary as bonus.
- **Hospital benefit:** Scarcity of food grains and availability of under quality food grains were the main causes behind the repeated fall of illness amongst the worker in those times. It, in turn, affected the production and productivity. So it was resolved in the meeting that a dispensary had to be set up at the mill premises itself and a well facilitated hospital had to be established in a common place approachable to most of the mill workers.
- **Co-operative store:** Co-operative stores had to democratize well with the participation of workers, who were the actual consumers, for managing the affairs of stores. All the corrupt practices had to be curtailed in the co-operative store. So the

meeting resolved to start co-operative store in all mills such as Kothari mill, Somasundra Mill, Kalleswara Mill, etc.

- **Ration of Firewood:** Union stressed the importance of bringing scarcely available firewood at that time under ration system. But the government gave to the traders the burden of supplying the firewood to the public. As the traders union got monopoly control over the distribution of firewood, they refused to give the right to sell the firewood to the retailers traders who were not the members of the traders union. Traders utilized this opportunity and tried to multiply their profit by selling firewood at exorbitant rate and in the black-market. So the meeting resolved that the unbroken firewood was to be sold at 4 Anna per mananku and all retailers were also to be supplied with enough stock of firewood.
- **Unity of two unions:** Existence of two unions was well unutilized by the mill management and in due course of time, the management refused to hear even the just demands of workers and tried to subject the workers under repression. In order to strengthen the workers capability of bargaining, it is resolved to ascertain the unity amongst the two unions.
- **Political resolution:** Rajaji had issued a plan at that time with the full approval of Gandhiji for congress-league unity. Kovai Mill Workers' Union fully endorsed the above move and supported it wholeheartedly.

After the resolution, a list of office bearers and committee members selected to run the union for the year 1944-45 was also printed. In addition to that income and expenditure account pertaining to the year 1943-44 was also printed in the booklet.