

K.L. Mahendra, Delhi

K.L. Mahendra was born on 25th November 1922 in Hyderabad currently the capital of Andhra Pradesh, then the capital of the Nizam's kingdom. His father worked in the Government Department and he died when Mahendra was just 2 years old. Apart from this he had 3 brothers and 1 sister.

From his childhood itself Mahendra was drawn into the national movement and in that one of his teacher's one Shri Chandrashekhar Shukla motivated me about the freedom struggle. In the ninth class itself Mahendra read Gandhi's magazine 'Harijan' and was deeply influenced by his writings. Next when he joined Osmania University the Nizam banned the singing of 'Vande Matarm'. In response there was an agitation in which the likes of P.V. Narsmiha Rao, V.D. Deshpande and bulk of the future AP leadership of all parties got actively involved. Mahendra was also one of its leaders along with Pt. Ravi Shanker Shukla.

After Osmania K.L. Mahendra joined Shanti Niketan. The atmosphere in Hyderabad state was extremely oppressive and the Nizam was acting in a way that to convert the whole state into an Islamic state. Telugu and Hindi were disallowed and the administration was totally Muslim dominated and there was an effort to convert the Hindus into Muslims by all means in a big way. As far as the rural areas is concerned it was totally feudal.

In Shanti Niketan he came into contact with Marxist literature and communist leaders. Then he had to leave Shanti Niketan due to his political activities and joined Burdwan College. There he came in touch with Harekrishna Konark and Benoy Chowdhary and joined the CPI. Then Benoy Chowdhary sent him to Asansol to organise TUs. And he started work among the steel workers and K.L. Mahendra organised the Steel Workers Union which still stands today. He became the General Secretary and remained so for many years. Apart from this Mahendra in one year of his coming to Asansol registered two unions i.e. the Asansol Iron and Steel Workers Union and the Asansol Coal Miners Workers Union (1943). By the time of independence when Inderjit Gupta contested in the Assembly elections there were major attacks on the union leadership established by Mahendra in Asansol and Burdwan area. After the Madras session of the AITUC which was the last united session of the AITUC attended by V.V. Giri 8 delegates went from Burnpur. There at the session Makhdoom Moinudeen asked P.C. Joshi to sent K.L. Mahendra back to Andhra Pradesh. And so he left Burnpur, Burdwan and Asansol for return to Hyderabad in July 1946.

Once back in Hyderabad K.L. Mahendra was registering 2 to 3 unions almost everyday. This was the period immediately after the Second World War. But this period was

shortlived. Then one of his comrade was martyred by the attacks by the landlords against their unionising activities. This killing was a precursor to the larger bloodbath that was to follow once the agitation against the Nizam was to gain strength. Till independence this struggle against the Razakars of the Nizam went on and Raj Bhadur Gour was the PC secretary in that period. On the day of independence K.L. Mahendra and others decided that they must hoist the national flag in all their unions and office and this was widely reported in all papers as it was still Nizam rule who was against India and therefore the national flag. This was also the period of the rise of the Telangana movement which went along with the struggle against the Nizam rule and for integration of the state of Hyderabad into the Indian Union. K.L. Mahendra's main job during this violent period was procuring arms and he also earned a name as a man who could execute successful escapes for leaders who were in jail. Both tasks he executed with success and earned a reputation and earned a reputation of a man who meant business.

Then once the Indian military came into the scene and Hyderabad was integrated the Telangana struggle started suffering its first major reverses as the peasantry who till the collapse of the Nizam were with the communists slowly started pleading the leaders and cadres to leave them as they started getting caught between the army operations and the armed struggle. So slowly the Telangana armed struggle for an armed revolution against the landlord-bourgeoisie government of Nehru started losing support among the peasants itself who felt hope of gaining something from the Nehru government and they started revealing more and more to the police and army whose action now solely focused on the communist armed struggle. Though the land question got highlighted prominently in the national debate but the army managed to kill more than 5,000 of the communist armed cadres. This loss of large number of fighting cadres finally led the leadership to end the armed struggle as the losses of men and material on the party had reached an impossible situation.

As far as the TU work, it suffered totally as the whole cadre got involved in the armed struggle in the hope the Nehru regime could be overthrown in a matter of time under the weight of a mighty peasant revolution that would like the Chinese model engulf the cities and the working class and other sections were going to rise up and revolt. Ultimately nothing like that happened and AITUC lost control of countless TUs in that period to the INTUC and HMS. In the TU front K.L. Mahendra when they came back after their arrest for the armed struggle was over the AITUC had lost everything and they had to literally start from scatch.

In AP and all over the country one positive impact of the Telangana movement though it failed in its ultimate goal was that the land question came to the center of debate even in right wing circles though Golwalkar still opposed it. However other right-wing elements like Acharya Vinobha Bhave were forced to accept the 'hunger for land of the

peasantry' and gave a call after himself personally coming and meeting the jailed activists of the Telangana movement of which K.L. Mahendra was one and it was after this experience that he gave the call for 'Bhoodan' to the landlords to give land voluntarily. Apart from this the military government after taking over the first notification it issued was abolishing the Jagirdari System under which more than half the state lands belonged as the personal property of the Nizam. Thus the great impact of the Telangana movement was very much there. The tenants got their land ownership of land as a result just after the independence itself whereas the same thing happened in West Bengal only in 1977 after the CPM led left government came to power under the 'Bargadar Movement' in the 70s i.e. much later. This in a way was an achievement of Telangana struggle despite its failure.

In 1946 at the Hyderabad All India Conference K.L. Mahendra was elected one of the Secretaries of the AITUC of the Hyderabad state. In the immediate period after CPI was legalised and came overground K.L. Mahendra formed more than 30 unions. Through the various struggles in that period in the TU movement K.L.M ahendra said they managed to force the government to establish the Hanumanth Rao Committee by which more D.A. and pay was given. During that period when Mahendra was active as one of the Secretary's of the AITUC of AP they managed to get back the unions in the Railways. Apart from this they built unions in Road Transport where the AITUC had over 40,000 members and then in the Coal Mines Unions they had a membership of over 60,000. Similarly the Singhereni Union was also won back but one of their leaders named Sheshgiri Rao was martyred. Makhdoom became the President of the AP AITUC for sometime, then Raj Bahadur Gour. K.L. Mahendra became the President of Singhereni Union in 1982.

The 1950s was a period of great struggles in various industries like- textiles, cement, gold mines i.e. Hatti Gold Mines where 150 workers were put in jail in Gulbarga for over 4 months. Apart from this Mahendra organised Hotel Workers and became President of the Hotel Workers Union and also organised a Cinema Workers Union which included workers from all South. In 1960s he organised the newly emerging engineering industries. Mahendra organised unions in Praga Tools, ECIC, Hindustan Cables. Apart from this got involved in Goa liberation struggle by sending styagrahies. Also organised the municipal workers and transport workers. The split in CPI in 1964 really weakened the AITUC unions all around and from 1964 onwards thus space grew as a result for the Shiv Sena to enter the fray of TU politics in a increasing manner. As a result of the split in CPI the Girni Kamgar Union in Maharashtra also split. In 1960s he was also involved in a movement to force the Nehru govt. to open up a steel plant in Vizag which they finally got.

He also fought a struggle against Sanjeeva Reddy's attempts to change the Industrial Dispute Act (ID) which he successfully fought off. Then the other great achievement

which Mahendra achieved in AP state was through his friend the CM Anjiah to recognise the system of 'secret ballot' for elections in TUs. AP is the only state in India where TU elections are according to law held through secret ballot while all TUs are fighting for implementing that system in all the other states.

Throughout 1970 to 1978 Mahendra led many state wide strikes of PWD workers, Municipal workers, Minimum wage struggle, Shop Employees workers, and various other unions. In 1987 Mahendra shifted to Delhi AITUC center. In 1996 he became the General Secretary and from then on he has been mobilizing against the impact on workers due to retrenchment caused by liberalisation. During his term he attempted to bring unity with HMS but could not. In the last 10 years since coming to the center he has been at the helm of organising over 6 major national level strikes. Now in 1999 he has become the President of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). This is broadly the biographical sketch of K.L Mahendra.