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“We don’t need no education”: Lessons from the (Un)making of Lahore’s Proletarian Vanguard (ca. 1920–2000)

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Abstract

This article marks an experiment in narrating a *longue durée* intellectual history ‘from below’ of West Punjab’s organised labour movement (c.1920–2000). This movement bridges the late colonial and post-colonial periods and links the histories of working-class movements across the Indian and Pakistani States. Punjab’s revolutionary heritage of the twentieth century has been, over the last decade, at the heart of broader theoretical arguments on the relationship of the internationalist Left with localised articulations of radical politics across South Asia. This resurgent scholarship, I argue in my paper, overstates and presents in a somewhat uncomplicated and teleological frame the role of left ideologies and institutions in the formation of the revolutionary subjectivities of Punjab’s working classes and poor. It crafts in a deeply hagiographic mode a narrative of the working classes’ intellectual emancipation through contact with what are generally taken to be the enlightened and progressive elements amongst the bourgeoisie of those times. This is made possible only by glossing over tensions haunting the potentially transgressive relationship between the worker and the intellectual and which this paper brings to the fore. By focusing on the upheavals attending the fraught relationship between Lahore’s worker militants and its renegade bourgeois intellectuals of the political and academic left over three generations, I question these narratives and their underlying assumptions. It is argued that instead of emancipating the worker, an education in the theory of socialism and the practical experience of left activism alongside bourgeois comrades ultimately reinforced the social and intellectual hierarchies separating the two. The processes through which this inequality was further enshrined are partly revealed by looking at the discursive formation of these workers as a proletarian vanguard, both by the State and the Communist party. Sources used for this purpose include colonial and post-colonial State records, official inquiry reports and their evidence volumes, the internal documents (in Urdu) of the Lahore district branch of the Communist party and newspapers in English and Urdu published from Lahore for the colonial and post-colonial periods. For this proletarian vanguard’s perspective on its own making and unmaking the article draws upon oral interviews (in Punjabi and Urdu) of worker leaders in the archives of local NGOs, published memoirs, as well as formal interviews and informal conversations with trade-unionists and leftist intellectuals directly involved in the workers’ movement, especially through study circles and other ‘educational’ projects, up till the late 1990s.

Keywords: Colonial Punjab; Lahore; Trade-unionism; Labour movements; Railways; workers' education; intellectual emancipation

Introduction

This is the story of a labor movement, which, though spearheaded by the organized industrial workers of Lahore's railway workshops, came to include in its sweep the entire province of late-colonial and post-partition Punjab.¹ As far as possible, this paper attempts to tell that story from the perspective of successive generations of proletarian trade-unionists that led the movement over most of the twentieth century. The effort of these working-class labor leaders to relate the ebbs and flows of the movement and their own life-trajectories, as grasped retrospectively, casts their experience in fresh light. Crucially, their narratives vigorously challenge the idea that the *education* of the worker militant by bourgeois progressive intellectuals—as committed and theoretically *pure* as they come—marked a step on the path of intellectual emancipation for the worker comrade. In fact, the following account, largely constructed with fragmentary biographical sources, turns this fantasy on its head, demonstrating how this journey culminated, time after time, in the absolute surrender of the workers' intellect to their elite comrades' intelligence. The following stories then present altogether a somewhat somber perspective but also one that must be reckoned with if this grim cycle is ever to be broken.

Lahore's railway workshops, modern and massive structures built in the neighborhood of Mughalpura in 1912 were, by a wide margin, the biggest single employer of organized industrial labor in the province of Punjab throughout the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, therefore, they served as the fulcrum of labor politics in the broader region and a template generally of trade-unionism from the early 1920s under the leadership of an ex-railway guard of Irish stock named J.B. Miller. Father to the labor movement in the eyes of workers, a demagogue in the rhetoric of the state's functionaries and a false prophet waylaying the workers as far as the Communist Party could see, Miller will be the first in our line-up of legendary proletarian leaders of Lahore. Like those that followed in his footsteps, his personal making and undoing are crucial for coming to terms with the larger movement.

Despite the movement's wide reach, it largely excluded the vast majority of the proletariat of the region through two obvious and related groups: the informal sector workers and women. This paper thus constitutes an attempt at reclaiming a shattered dream of only a fragment of the proletariat.² It is story of men belonging to a labor aristocracy,³ told by these men in a consciously masculine frame. It therefore cannot help but be a story of deep emasculation as well.⁴ The deliberate exclusion of women, in other words, says much about the cultural frameworks within which these men constructed and deconstructed their selves and their sense of self-worth.

Despite, or precisely through, these omissions (amongst others) the following narratives, taken from three generations of Mughalpura's working-class leaders, effectively convey this self-conscious proletarian vanguard's sense of its own making and unmaking. The version of the story they repeat implicates the usual suspects but also points fingers at some unusual ones. They learned the familiar *Left* critique of the material and ideological structures of class domination only too well, eventually extending and deepening it to encapsulate the *progressive* project of workers'

emancipation itself. The trajectories of their lives, in their own eyes and in retrospect, pose serious questions about the Left's broad schemes for proletarian uplift through *education*, in all its practical and theoretical aspects. In important ways, these worker leaders' reckoning with their movement consistently appears at odds with various overarching discourses—official as well as anti-official, and also academic—which have over time appropriated it, as symbol or symptom.

This paper notes their dogged resistance to such appropriation, especially by Left discourses. It registers the proletarian's dissent to the means through which the progressive bourgeois historian-activist-comrade, albeit through hagiographic representations mostly, presumes to bequeath meaning to his life and struggle. The proletarian struggle, from this perspective, appears first and foremost a struggle to make one's own meaning by telling one's own story; to articulate that which clashes with a *science* or *theology* of the working-classes not necessarily originating from them but embraced ardently by them in many of its principles. These stumblings are the means and the end of the proletarian mission for intellectual liberation, inseparable from all other freedoms, and therefore we will follow attentively.

One crucial aspect in which the proletarian and non-proletarian retellings differ concerns the role and place of individual proletarians in the story. As we shall observe shortly, all contemporary sources on the movement, be they official, popular, or of the Communist Party, eulogized and demonized the leaders of the movement as per their shifting agenda. This was not the exclusive prerogative of the workers, and thus on the surface there appears to be a common tendency to articulate the movement's perceived successes and failures in terms of the virtues and shortcomings of persons at the helm. However, the shared obsession with working-class heroes and villains falsely combines vastly different projects—of proletarian rehabilitation, on the one hand, and their emancipation, on the other. Proletarian stories of the proletarian revolution literally *revolve* around individuals; they form the center of the constellation of workers' politics, the metaphorical sun that sustains all proletarian struggles and maintains their trajectories, until it consumes them in its own moment of destruction. In this worldview, Miller *is*, in a more than strictly metaphorical sense, the movement.

On the contrary, the non-proletarian constructions we find, peripheralized individual leaders of the movement at the same time as they made them the focus. Those desiring the rehabilitation of labor within the bourgeois order (foremost amongst whom would be the employer and the state—one and the same in this instance since the railways were state-owned and managed) will be seen to emphasize the eccentricities of Miller, pointing unfailingly to his quirks and flourishes. As a consequence, it becomes impossible to view Miller as an embodiment of a collective will, or the articulation of a general plebeian consciousness; he is beholden to his own impulses, entirely his own person—the *ideal* individual. At the opposite pole, we find radical (as an umbrella term covering a fairly wide array of contemporary Left tendencies) commentators de-individualizing Miller, stripping him of his personality, until the flesh and blood proletarian is subsumed within the general image of the proletariat, as it seems to form always and only in the gaze of the radical intelligentsia. To be more specific, in the discourse of the interwar Left Miller was simply the human face of all those forces that threatened to mislead the workers' revolutionary

movement toward the abyss that was “reformism.” In his own person he meant nothing to the movement or its history; he only enters the stage of history as a surrogate will, as an agent in disguise for hidden powers. The metaphorical dark matter to the proletarian sun; an all-consuming void, a vortex of pure negativity.

I argue that narrativizing around individuals need not be taken as a sign of proletarian naivete or antipathy toward theory; on the contrary, it can be seen as a consciously counter-hegemonic effort to theorize on the basis of working-class experience and to prevent its annihilation through assimilation in established frameworks for writing histories of the Left. For instance, when the worker in our narrative describes intellectuals as a fixed social bloc, deploying the language of caste and invoking traditional forms of cross-generational bondage, it is not merely a rhetorical flourish. It is meant as a denial of the bourgeois comrade’s teleological framework predicting the inevitable extension, through *education*, of the intellectual’s privileges to the worker. For the *worker intellectuals* of Mughalpura, their miseries, in hindsight, were the price of believing in and proudly living this fundamental but forbidden truth. The worker militant must be heard *theorizing*—meaningfully structuring the flow of the working-life and struggle, and finding himself through this creative process—if intellectual history from below is to mean more than the intellectualized history of the subalterns, or in other words, a means of their incorporation, collectively or piecemeal, in elite narratives. Insofar as the distinctions between elite and subaltern, intellectual, and worker, are tenaciously held on to by our proletarian protagonists, the following narrative faithfully reconstructs such binaries, at the peril of being called “unimaginative” by certain quarters of the *new* social and intellectual historians of the Left in South Asia.⁵

On my part, I will be content in giving reason to pause the contemporary tilt toward internationalizing/de-provincializing the histories of the Punjabi Left. This important strain of revisionism vividly re-imagines interwar Punjab as an inextricable part of a transnational tapestry of utopian visions of subaltern emancipation. In doing so, it emphasizes the breathtaking fluidity, openness, and potential of transgressive liaisons between radical intellectuals and worker militants across disparate contexts. I suggest revisiting this terrain from another perspective, one that insistently foregrounds instead the limits of these adventures and evokes the image of the blind alley (or the cul-de-sac) and falls back on the vocabulary of defeats and failure.⁶ The “failure” of these projects had different consequences for the worker and the intellectual and the worker is reminding us that it must always be so, as long as the stakes remain uneven. It is the worker who goes all in and goes bust; the intellectual can always repurpose the fragments of the dream and sell these for profit and glory. Or so the failed worker revolutionaries we listen to in the following pages forewarn us.

Section 1

It was in the turbulent aftermath of WWI that the Indian-born Irishman by the name of J.B. Miller surfaced in Lahore and won over to his union, at what appears to be an obscene pace, the railway workers of Lahore. Miller had relocated to Lahore after being dismissed from his post as a railway guard in Saharanpur.⁷ In April 1920,

soon after arriving on the scene, Miller was leading a railway workers' strike, which lasted roughly three months and included at its peak upwards of ten thousand railway workers, drawn mainly from the Mughalpura workshops of Lahore.⁸ Before discussing the strike and its aftermath, I would like to attempt to recover as much of Miller as possible from the archival record. In the process, it is hoped, the reader shall develop a sense of the mix of imperatives—official, scholarly, and popular—behind the making of the Mughalpura movement into a peculiar artifact of history. One that has proven remarkably amenable to appropriation by opposed ideological projects, which nevertheless share a certain unmentionable—for, as we shall see, it was so very obviously uncharitable—view of the workers' capacities.⁹

Miller's methods of recruitment were clearly seen as remarkably unusual by the intelligence department, and his antics were described as part of a greater spectacle meant to dazzle the audience. No other contemporary source commits as wholeheartedly to the nurturing of Miller's image as a troublesome but hugely popular showman—a rabble-rouser drawing "idle crowds" comprised of the "riffraff" with his performances.¹⁰ He is witnessed "haranguing" the workers, exploiting their fragile masculinities at one moment, winning them over with ostentatious displays of working-class solidarity at another.¹¹ This seemingly self-contradicting "general" marches his proverbial troops under the Union Jack but also threatens to fight the British Sarkar like his Irish brethren if the demands of the workers are not met.¹² Fights tooth and nail to guarantee the autonomy of his movement and secure its identity as a blue-collar movement, but also spares no opportunity to share a platform with, or offer one to, bourgeois nationalist parties.¹³

Naturally predisposed to direct action, Miller shares the helm with a committed constitutionalist like M.A. Khan, who presents a stark contrast, owing to his middle-class background and history of employment as a white-collar servant of the railways.¹⁴ Miller settles on the title of "Chief Mobiliser" for himself and Khan assumes chief responsibility for overseeing the much less glamorous realm of bureaucratic-diplomatic negotiations. At various points, the relationship between these two shows signs of strain but still perseveres through the turbulent interwar years. It is during this period that together they lay the foundations, in Punjab, of the approach to workers' organization, which claimed for itself the name of "genuine trade unionism." This brand of trade-unionism reflected the idiosyncrasies of its founders just as they foreshadowed in their persons the tensions of the emerging movements of the *organizing* working-classes of late colonial Punjab.

Intelligence reports from the time begrudgingly acknowledge that Miller's appeal spilt over into the broader sphere of plebeian politics of Lahore and beyond, his myth buoyed on the wings of song.¹⁵ Unofficial, nonwhite sources confirm that for a brief moment, Miller did occupy a central place, symbolically at least, in the political upheavals of the provincial capital. Local newspapers, in the vernacular, report frequently on the activities of Miller in minute detail.¹⁶ In fact, it is around (and through) his persona that we glimpse the temporary coalescence of a broad plebeian front, as well as its eventual dissolution, in the interwar period. He owns this grand ambition when he anoints his followers an "army of the poor and hungry," leaving the door open to an undefined and potentially unlimited constituency of local malcontents. However, as the *de facto* and *de jure* representative of the labor movement,

first and foremost, he reassures the government that the workers only demand “bread” and in the same breath warns them of a revolution on the “Bolshevik” model if it is denied them.¹⁷ These threats notwithstanding, under his leadership, the Mughalpura workers resolutely ward off any direct overtures from the communists and their allied groupings in the province during the interwar period. It is noted that he is simultaneously referred to as “Mahatma” and “General,” this apparent semantic contradiction crowning all the ambivalences embodied by Miller.

And thus, these reports lurch between incredulity and awe of this troublesome adversary. The intelligence department—eyes and ears of the state—chooses not to take on the added function of the brain in order to make sense of these seeming contradictions, dismissing them as just so much demagoguery. The Anglo-Indian press, likewise, attests to the “notoriety” of these “so-called” labor leaders, especially Miller, whose betrayal in their eyes must have been double-edged—the workers and the whites both falling victim of his villainy.¹⁸ In the imagination of these groups, Miller and his fellow proletarians of exalted status were always “dubious” champions of the working classes. Their brash, larger than life personas, it was implied, overshadowed the Labour movement. They contradicted through their irrepressible individualities what were presumed to be essential attributes of their class, and especially its political forms; Labour, after all, the workers’ representatives petitioned to the colonial powers, was “humble, weak, and grateful.”¹⁹ In other words, self-effacement, not self-assertion, is supposed to be the natural predisposition of the working-class hero. It would take the joint efforts of the state, railways bureaucracy, the Anglo-Indian community, nationalists of various stripes, and sections of the progressive intelligentsia, amongst others, to enshrine the image of Miller as the bearer of temptations leading to the fall of labor. In what follows, I attempt to show the ways in which these interests, which were aligned so perfectly, presented themselves as opposed irrevocably. It is a farce first fleshed out in the late colonial period, but has been re-enacted many times since. We must out it as such. To do so I propose beginning at its moment of inception—the railway strike of 1920.

This strike dragged out over three long months; the impasse being primarily over the Railway Board’s refusal to deal with Miller by labelling him an “outsider.” It ended with “General” Miller triumphantly leading a grand procession of his victorious troops back to the workshops. Miller and Khan’s union was officially recognized and facilitated in important ways, not least of which was the mandatory deduction of union dues from the workers’ salaries.²⁰ However, soon the Railway Board had propped up a rival union of exclusively white-collar Indian railway staff as part of a strategy to narrow Miller’s influence to blue-collar workers. This rift only widened with the passage of time; tensions came to the fore in 1925, leading to an attempt by Miller’s union to forcibly seize the offices of the recognized union.²¹ Another strike broke out soon after, which the recognized union opposed on the grounds that it was led by a union that did not in any way represent “literate” Indian railway servants and spoke solely for “illiterate” workmen.²² Miller and Khan responded by accepting the truth of this statement and arguing from there that they should be accepted as the only legitimate voice of *industrial* laborers, who they identified as the type of workers meant to be invoked by the politico-legal category of labor.²³ Such adversarial language vindicated the management’s divide and rule policies; the door to compromise

between the railway *mazdurs* and *babus* was shut at this moment. Miller's army had been whittled down from a broad alliance of diverse groups of the urban poor ("ghareeb fauj") to a narrowly defined body of industrial workers ("mazdur fauj").²⁴ However, this new, aggressively proletarian identity of the movement did not preclude the continued participation of bourgeois (*babu*) trade-unionists.

The intervention of bourgeois, "professional" trade unionists had proven necessary wherever the worker had found himself in the crosshairs of the law, the company and the state; the middle-class meddler of the railway bosses' imagination, the "outsider" appeared as a benefactor from this side.²⁵ *Babus*, like Miller's long-time lieutenant M.A. Khan, occupied top positions in the union hierarchy and were indispensable in the execution of myriad quotidian tasks of the bureaucratic-managerial sort. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the railway workers' movement has, from its beginning, been led by bona fide proletarians. Miller, the railway guard, was succeeded by Mirza Ibrahim, a fitter in the Mughalpura workshops and crucially, an avowed communist in the early phase of his career. After Ibrahim, there has been a spate of lesser leaders, but all working-class. However, this never entailed the severance of ties with the renegade bourgeoisie and even elite defectors to the workers' cause; such violently exclusivist rhetoric finds place only in the discourse of the employers. I shall shortly turn to oral interviews with Ibrahim, where the relationship between the worker and the bourgeois comrade appears fraught with tension. To get from Miller to Ibrahim, however, one needs to go through another extremely influential self-professed "genuine" trade unionist of interwar and post-partition Punjab, who admittedly based his approach on Miller's—Bashir Ahmed Bakhtiar.

Section II

In its memorandum submitted to the Royal Commission on Labour, Miller's officially *unrecognized* union presented itself as a bulwark against extremisms of the Left and the Right. They argued to be seen as the only "genuine" representatives of labor, with the Congress speaking exclusively for the *babus* and the communists exploiting workers to their narrow political ends.²⁶ This anticongress, anticommunist stance was somewhat relaxed in the mid-1930s, allowing for a rapprochement between communists and the "genuine" trade unionists. The Amritsar Labour Federation (ALF) was a product of this collaboration; a ragtag coalition, including genuine trade-unionists, communists, and of course the ubiquitous neighborhood *dadas* (neighborhood strongmen), holding together dozens of small unions, many of which were very small-scale and would today be classified under the informal sector.²⁷ The ALF's leader, Bashir Ahmad Bakhtiar certainly was emblematic of this conjuncture.²⁸ Bakhtiar had been operating as a small-time labor organizer in Amritsar until both the communists and genuine trade unionists of Punjab entered the fray and breathed new life into the city's labor politics.

In his memoirs, published in the late 1960s, Bakhtiar shows that the merging of these two currents gave rise to a peculiar brand of labor radicalism that articulated itself through labor organization as much as through labor protest. In fact, the *theory* of socialism is only concretized through the approach and practice of trade-unionism according to this grass-roots, working-class pioneer of labor organization.²⁹ In his

perspective, the staggering proliferation of small-scale unions simultaneously reflected, and enabled, working-class solidarity. Bakhtiar confesses to have only grasped the true power and potential of trade-unionism after encountering Miller, who he holds up as the progenitor of “genuine trade-unionism.” This was the domain where workers were called upon to assert their full claim to those intellectual and spiritual functions traditionally usurped by the bourgeoisie—planning, organizing, managing, and all such activities blending manual and intellectual labor were the means through which the proletariat could “genuinely” know his true power. The communists appeared to him eager to somehow bypass this necessary work of labor organization, to fast-forward the gradual coming into its own of a labor movement. It was in this regard that they were not “genuine” to labor’s cause. In thinking this way these intellectual comrades were as much in the dark as he had been before the guiding light of genuine trade-unionism illuminated new horizons for him.

The last decade or so has witnessed a resurgence in academic output on interwar *revolutionary* tendencies in India and their transnational connections. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that a distinct academic field, focused squarely on the phenomenon of revolutionary *internationalism* has been established in recent years.³⁰ Such political and intellectual crisscrossing of the local and the global appears particularly intense for Punjab and as a consequence it is the region that has drawn the most attention from practitioners of the new revolutionary/Left histories of the region.³¹ The contemporary *internationalist* thrust has further discredited attempts at grasping revolutionary politics through a *nationalist* (both in the spatial and ideological sense) framework. It is also refreshing to be rid of an especially commonplace tendency of the past to conflate organized labor politics with *true* revolutionary practice—the proletariat in that framework having to bear the unbearable lightness of a pure, idealized revolutionary consciousness. However, that ideological project of history did produce many detailed investigations of particular working-classes over the longue durée. The goal might have been too narrowly defined but the procedure could still potentially yield meaningful, empirically grounded, micro-histories of the intellectual/ideological moorings of workers’ politics, or in other words, their *revolutionary* quest for emancipation. In their stead, recent scholarship on Left ideologies and movements, especially for the region of Punjab, presents a series of kaleidoscopic reconfigurations of different “isms”—communism, nationalism, pan-Islamism, communalism, etc.—in varying degrees of communion.

It is not that the much vaunted “fluidity” of the interwar political scene is not attested to by the individual trajectories of our protagonists and the course of their movements. However, I argue, it is not remarkable in itself to establish the flexibility of linguistic-ideological repertoires at a specific conjuncture and their creative appropriation-reworking by a person or group. After all, is that not true for all times? The celebration, or indeed fetishization, of fluidity and agency in these global(izing) narratives is made possible by turning a blind eye to the inflexibility and constraints imposed by a bogged down materiality (in the context of labor history, this could, for instance, take its most stark form in the labor process) on the sublime flight of ideas.³² The result of this choice is an approach that shifts jerkily between local and global frames for organizing experiences, ignoring the mediating role of historically and spatially grounded movements in the very constitution of

these perspectives. The metamorphoses of global discourses are traced in the thought of elite or non-elite individuals, never movements; labor is conspicuously absent in all these accounts or it is peripheralized. The organized labor movement, trade-unionism, appear to have nothing to say about the “expanding horizons” of the working classes. A strange sort of antipathy is demonstrated toward corporate activity and the modes of the social reproduction of the proletariat.

The axiom that movements and men make each other, the common-sense approach of labor historians, is to be flouted at heavy cost. Thus, for instance, no matter how much Miller might desire bringing both the *babus* and *mazdurs* under his banner (or merging, at the macro, ideological level, the Congress’ bourgeois nationalism and genuine trade-unionism), he cannot seem to do so because the political *and* productive order are continuously pitting them against each other. In the same way, no matter how antagonistic Bakhtiar’s relationship becomes with the communist camp, the rhetoric of his federation remains seeped in red; the yoke of history and circumstance cannot easily be shed. How are we to grasp the play of such tensions, and thereby not reduce these conflicts to individual battles, without an unbroken focus on the broader movements in question?

Would the focus then not just as fruitfully be directed at the *refusal* of men and movements at specific moments to be swept up in ideological currents or to take their challenge to a domain other than the explicitly discursive? To refuse to be placed on the ever-shifting scales of various “isms”—communism and communalism (and most recently, Islamism) being especially pertinent for Punjab—and instead judge themselves by other measures decided upon by their fellow men and their *movement*? These are precisely the points where the constant flux of ideological repertoires is gripped by the inertia of (political) will and the force of circumstance. “Labor history,” with its insistence on imbricating the social and the intellectual within the framework of working-class movements over significant timespans, captures these continuities along with the disruptions that have become the principal subject of recent histories of communism in the Punjab. On the other hand, even self-conscious efforts at “provincializing” internationalist ideologies ultimately appear to reinforce the general impression that there existed at this *fluid* juncture an amorphous body of free-floating ideas open to all manner of appropriation, intellectual *nodes* waiting to be plugged into for enabling a near endless array of *connections* between actors from anywhere and everywhere.³³ The testimonies of the worker militants I will turn to soon will be seen to emphasize instead, albeit from a position of defeat, the reification of social hierarchies within the formal domain of Left politics.

I conclude this critique with a representative example from the field, which happens to directly address the “labor” question. In a study of trade-unionism’s ambivalences in interwar India through this lens, drawing especially upon the debates during the Meerut Conspiracy Case, Carolien Stolte attempts to unravel the complex and sometimes entangled motivations of the “revolutionary” and “reformist” camps.³⁴ It is shown how the two parties contested and ultimately consolidated around shared positions within the broad internationalist discourses on trade-unionism; what *cannot* be shown, given the way this internationalist paradigm has come to operate, is how the trade-unionists were in fact deeply moved by the need to dislodge the very concepts of reform and revolution from their international(ist)

moorings. To consistently argue that theirs was the truly revolutionary path, irrespective of whether they were aligned with Moscow or Amsterdam, and when that failed, to claim a term beyond the value-laden binary of reform and revolution, that of genuine trade unionism. In setting up their problematic, the author presupposes precisely that which was most vigorously contested at Meerut amongst the trade-unionists—the power of those internationalist logics through which the meanings of the terms revolutionary and reformist were locked in place.³⁵ The movement in such new histories of the Left is a reversal of the worker-intellectual's refrain that the order of the world of things imposes, in ways we remain oblivious to, the order we see in the world of concepts; “the machine teaches the language of socialism to the worker” and not the other way around.³⁶

Section III

Let us return then to the story of Miller and the usurpation of his position by a rising star in the Communist Party of Punjab. Miller and Khan's union was finally recognized, roughly two decades after its formation, out of the tottering colonial order's sheer desperation. The First World War had provided the conditions for the birth of trade-unionism in Punjab and the second, for its acceptance. Beleaguered at home and abroad, the British *sarkar* at this point was finally willing to meet the genuine trade-unionists halfway, in order to appease labor, and thus ensure that the war effort chugged on full steam.³⁷ The railway workers of Mughalpura were especially crucial in this regard but the concessions offered were to all genuine trade-unionists of the province. For instance, Amritsar's local government pressed on employers to go into arbitration with Bakhtiar's Amritsar Labour federation.³⁸ Miller, Khan, and Bakhtiar collaborated in the newly formed Indian Federation of Labour, identifying as a “Royist” organization, which brought under its umbrella all the self-professed genuine trade-unionist forces in the province.³⁹ Thus were laid the foundations of a formal relationship between the state and the specific strain of militant and moderate, legalistic but also loud, workers-organized politics that had taken its distinct shape over the preceding decades. However, the workers of Mughalpura soon rebelled against their old leadership, aligning themselves with the Communist Party and against the company and the state. This coup occurred in the volatile phase between the end of the war and the departure of the British, and it was led by a firebrand worker militant from the Mughalpura workshops by the name of Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim. Ibrahim had joined Miller's union in the late 1930s but was soon turned over by the communists and inducted in a secret cell, whence he plotted and waited along with his comrades for an opportune moment to mount their bid for power.

The immediate aftermath of WWII witnessed unprecedented industrial unrest in the province, as in fact in all of India and much of the world. Worker militancy, as reflected in direct industrial action, resurfaced in all sorts of unexpected ways and shook up the existing order of relations between workers and their organizations.⁴⁰ In the case of Mughalpura, the communists were able to ride this wave and uproot the old union almost completely.⁴¹ Miller's departure from the scene appears as abrupt as his initial arrival—there is virtually no documentary trace of him for the

post-independence period. Not a single one of the many trade-union organizations formed in Pakistan appear to have had room for the acclaimed “father of trade unionism”; his banishment was sudden and absolute. There are murmurs in knowledgeable circles of how he was reduced to penury and condemned to wander the streets of Lahore, haranguing passersby with tales of his heroism. The sad reversal of this working-class hero’s fortunes is made all the more poignant by the knowledge that the same fate awaited his successor, Ibrahim. However, those present at the beginning of his journey could not envisage this end; to them Ibrahim was invincible—beyond the vagaries of mortal existence—as indeed Miller had been to his contemporaries, once upon a time.

The district-level organizers of the Communist Party admitted to the politburo with absolute candor that the railway labor movement had fallen in their lap.⁴² The undisputed leader of the workers was identified as worker comrade Ibrahim, whom the party, it was written, was “fortunate” to count as one of its members.⁴³ After partition this same Mirza Ibrahim was to lead his union’s merger with the communist All Pakistan Trade Union Federation (APTUF), much victimized by the state.⁴⁴ In hindsight, this marked the first step in the direction, once more, of isolating the movement from the broader field of legitimate, by which I simply mean legally circumscribed, trade-unionism and, crucially, the routine connections with state bureaucracy it involved. This labor movement over its subsequent history would only know the state as an adversary. The genuine trade-unionists, represented by individuals like M.A. Khan and Bashir Ahmad Bakhtiar, joined the All-Pakistan Confederation of Labour (APCOL), which affiliated with the ICFTU, signifying their assent to collaboration with the state.

Ibrahim and Bakhtiar embody what we have been conditioned to see as distinct dreams of labor; the “revolutionary” and the “reformist” (identified mostly with communism). Bakhtiar did not see any inherent contradictions between genuine trade-unionism and communism, only between genuine trade-unionists and communists, for the latter were not deemed sincere to the cause of the worker, even though they claimed it as their own. The path of genuine trade-unionism enabled the emancipation of the worker before the emancipation of the working-class. Bakhtiar saw himself as living proof of this revolutionary transformation. The communists, in his experience, seemed to not attach any significance to these personal revolutions; a stance also adopted by Ibrahim in the twilight of his career, thereby merging the two dreams.

I draw upon two fairly detailed video interviews of Ibrahim recorded in final years of his life; the first interview was recorded in 1998, and the second days before he passed away in August 1999.⁴⁵ These video recordings are held by the South Asia partnership, an NGO run by left-leaning progressives; much of the old Left in Pakistan was NGO-ized—in what remains a contentious process for the worker militants bypassed in this transition—beginning in the 1990s. The interviews can be seen as an attempt on Ibrahim’s part to reflect on his life and legacy, just like Bakhtiar’s written memoirs had tried to do thirty years earlier. Ibrahim’s extremely long career straddles the colonial and post-colonial period; his influence started diminishing from Zulfikar Bhutto’s time, which signified for him the crucial moment when “political leftists” got duped into betraying their working-class comrades.⁴⁶ Although relegated to the sidelines for all effective purposes at that point, symbolically he has remained a

towering figure till this day. Newspapers celebrate his death anniversary and union propaganda plastered on the walls of the Mughalpura workshops still carry his name. Initiates of Left students' movements and journeymen historians of radical movements learn to reduce the life of Ibrahim to an allegory for the rise and fall of labor radicalism in Pakistan.

The nonagenarian Ibrahim speaking through these fairly long video recordings is remarkably lucid and forceful. The stream-of-consciousness narrative style of the interviews takes nothing away from the originality or sharpness of Ibrahim's analyses; in fact, the open-ended, almost rambling nature of the conversation enables the reconstruction of the proletarian project from the proletarian's perspective for once, in ways that structured histories of the Left preclude. I want to focus especially on the ways in which the interviews throw light on the meanings given by the worker militant to his relationship with renegade bourgeois intellectuals of the party and through them, to the authoritative *histories* of their joint struggle.

As mentioned earlier, Ibrahim's introduction to the world of labor politics had been through the offices of Miller and M.A. Khan's union, from where he was inducted into a communist cell by an MA student named Jai Gopal in the late-1930s.⁴⁷ This same Jai Gopal was apparently also conducting study circles for the Amritsar Labour Federation during this period. During WWII, Jai Gopal joined the "Royist" Indian Federation of Labour while Ibrahim continued with the official communists, to emerge as the leader of the North Western Railway Workers' Union in 1946. Ibrahim narrates the story of his *conversion* to communism in the following way.⁴⁸

One man, Jai Gopal, MA student [...] I was living at *Garhi Shahu* at this time, he came to my quarter and took me outside [...] referred to my involvement in the union and started an argument. I asked him who he was. He said he was a coolie at the Lahore yard but I had no idea about anything, about what would happen, I did not know how the entire system was flawed. The Englishman is unjust, the feudal lord is unjust, the officer is unjust, lives in a mansion, gets paid more, gets an official car, house in Mayo gardens, there is the General Manager with 26 servants' quarters. He left me speechless. I said: 'Tell me the truth. You are not a coolie. Who are you?' I said: 'You are CID and now I will beat you up.' He laughed and hugged me when I grabbed him. He said that 'I am an MA student, a communist, under the surveillance of CID, I wear these clothes and sneak out through my neighbour's rooftop and they keep watch on my house while I listen to your speeches every day.' Then from primitive communism to its final form, the Stone Age to the industrial revolution he taught me everything. *As a man* he was very nice, he could mingle with all classes of people, the poor, the villagers. He really loved me. I too considered him a friend. This is how I became a communist. After that we quarrelled as well though [...] he went with M. N. Roy. I was leading a demonstration against him [Ibrahim is likely referring to an Anti-Fascist League meeting chaired by Roy in Lahore in 1941].

In view of the relative autonomy of party cadres working directly with proletarians, focus needs to be directed to the level of these underground cells and the clandestine

study circles, or in other words at the moments when bourgeois intellectuals recruited their working-class acolytes, at the forgotten frontiers of theory and praxis. The key is in the relationships forged in this fuzzy frontier zone, within which lay the points of intersection, the precarious points of equilibrium where these two directly opposite but highly unequal trajectories of the bourgeois intellectuals' plunge into the realm of proletarian reality and the proletarian's ascent into the world of emancipatory formulae, momentarily achieved a fine balance.

To present the intercourse as free exchange between equals would be to rob the relationship of its radicalism and yet that is precisely what the bourgeoisie intellectual feels compelled to stress, despite the proletarian's insistence on pointing up, without malice it must be understood, the fact of social hierarchies. The comradeship between a member of the bourgeoisie and the working class is fundamentally distinct from solidarities that do not cross class boundaries. The former after all, is above allegations of egotism and self-interest; in always reaching *down* to the proletariat the bourgeoisie intellectual embodies the ideal of sacrifice motivated by "love." This is opposed to the natural duties of the worker apostle to reach *out*, once armed with the revelation that could only have come from bourgeois prophets of communism.⁴⁹

The necessary disillusionment coming from the betrayal of the bourgeoisie cannot stop the proletarian apostle from proselytizing; in fact it pushes him forward, now slightly more disenchanted, but therefore also more aware of the need to redouble his efforts. But how to fill the moral void that the isolated proletariat finds itself in? The deficit cannot be balanced by the *sacrifice* of the proletarian's body, for any sacrifice requires faith and the moral certitude of this cause has been shaken. The desertion of the bourgeoisie sets in motion the slide that leads to the true depths of despair, to that point when the proletarian preachers of revolution speak no longer of the sacrifice but the annihilation of proletarian bodies.⁵⁰ The sacrifices of the proletariat are rendered meaningless if the bourgeoisie withdraws its support, for there are certain things, Ibrahim reminds us, that only they can do.⁵¹

As we already witnessed for Miller, the colonial state's secret police played a crucial role in perpetuating the myth—fundamental to the naturalization of inequality—of the hierarchy of intelligences. The deliberate act of individual wills to set intelligences into movement, which necessarily flows from the decision of one to speak and another to listen, had been negated in that instance through presenting the exchange as the *harangue* of a demagogue addressed to the collective ignorance of discrete intelligences, aggregated, and thus infantilized. If the ideology of inegalitarianism, enshrined in this discourse of the advance guards of order, refused to allow "illiterate" workers the manifestation of intelligence the progressives—including the philanthropists, reformists, and communists—saw it as an inferior intelligence and sets its perfection as the goal for intellectual emancipation. Both reaffirmed the inequality of intelligences, neither could presuppose intellectual equality and hence *verify* its manifestations.

Ibrahim was set on the path of intellectual emancipation when Jai Gopal—as somebody who was not socially denied the status of an intelligent being—engaged his intelligence with Ibrahim's. However, the realization in that moment when he initially perceived that it was the same intelligence shared between him and Jai Gopal was lost before it could concretize into the belief that all intelligences are equal.

The sphere of Left politics appears from this perspective to have cemented, in practice, the hierarchies it had held out the promise of levelling in theory. Ibrahim argued that if not for upright judges and left-leaning lawyers like Mahmud Ali Kasuri and Abid Hasan Manto, he would “probably not have been able to spend a day out of jail.”⁵² What were, at best, conscionable acts of judges and lawyers, and which could reasonably be assumed to have been simply representative of attempts at self-preservation on the part of these ideologues of liberal law, emerged in the consciousness of working-class dissidents, always more susceptible to the arbitrary exercise of state power than their elite comrades, as acts of philanthropy. These working-class trade-unionists had no recourse but to rely on the largesse of comrades and fellow travelers in the legal fraternity; in this way a permanent inequality was inscribed onto this relationship. The separation of the work of revolution between mental and manual labor as suggested in Ibrahim’s testimony is partly a reflection of his experience of these unyielding distinctions. The language of socialism the machine taught the worker, Ibrahim had stated emphatically.⁵³ The Party as such was not meant to serve simply as a school where the theory of socialism would be explained to workers. It was meant to verify the principle of equality between intellectual and proletarian, blue-collar and white-collar, *mazdur* and *babu*; its purpose was not educative but rather demonstrative. In this, the party appears to have failed.

Conclusion

A similar tale of disillusionment is told by the worker comrade who replaced Ibrahim as the leader of the Mughalpura union in the early 1980s. Here too, the focus of the narrative returns unfailingly to the dark side of left historiography; we get, as a consequence, another proletarian’s perspective on the shadowy realm of dealings between the worker militant and the radical intellectual. Ibrahim’s influence had waned by the 1980’s but he still towered above all possible contenders to his throne. He had also lost the support of the communists (essentially a motley bunch of various left intellectuals and progressive elements of political parties by this point), who were fielding a young worker comrade (a fitter in the workshops) by the name of Saif-ur-Rehman against his group. The wheel of history completed its revolution with this underdog’s triumph; Rehman, recovering from the drubbing received at the hands of Ibrahim’s underlings on the eve of the election, claims to have been utterly shocked by this unlikeliest of victories.⁵⁴ However, as far as Ibrahim was concerned—and he communicated this message directly—Rehman had only confirmed his place as a genuine “minion” (he used the word “mouse” in fact) of the communists with this act. These words would come to haunt Rehman later.

The fall of the Soviet Union signaled a speedy and general exodus of “political left-ists,” as Ibrahim put it, from the field of organized labor. The same “professors” who were previously embroiled in the nitty gritty of union politics and in Rehman’s personal life now plainly told him to not bother calling on them if he meant to rally them to the lost cause of trade-unionism.⁵⁵ They had submitted completely to the neoliberal hegemony and their transition to the new order had been made possible in many instances on the basis of connections they had formed with plebeian groups through their Left activism. In hindsight, Rehman sees these two phases as essentially the

same; both as the self-proclaimed “vanguard” of the future revolution and as the clear-eyed social “entrepreneurs” of the present neoliberal reality, these “progressive” bourgeois comrades had sustained themselves on the labor of the worker militants. He had been nothing more than a *majaawar* (literally a caretaker of a shrine) to these prophets of socialism, but sadly it is a truth he recognized only when these teachers and mentors discarded him. Now if you ask him, he will say that he should not have judged Ibrahim so harshly under the influence of his bourgeois comrades, for “after all, everything said and done, he was a proletarian.” Seen through the eyes of these proletarians there are two opposed movements beneath the ostensibly unified façade of Lahore’s Labour movement over the long twentieth century—the bourgeois leftists in this version, on the back of this experience, catapult themselves forward and up in the world while the proletarian simply goes around in a circle to end exactly where he began. Any attempt to subsume these divergent tendencies under the rubric of a unified *history* of the Left can only be successful insofar as it incorporates these proletarian voices into polemics *over*, but never really about, working-class experience.

While on the theme of betrayal, Rehman caustically observes that the most telling sign of this enlightened bourgeoisie’s “hypocrisy” lay in their refusal to find amongst their own progeny a match for his girls, who had come of age and were “beautiful and chaste and in possession of all the attributes required to manage a household.” His only condition had been that the boy be a “comrade.” “Can you believe it? Nobody came forward,” he ruefully shared. Once again, for yet another worker militant, equality had not been verified within the domain of the party. Once more this potentially transgressive relationship had floundered at the stage of demonstration. The ideology and the “science” might be sound but, to paraphrase Ibrahim, how are you “as a man?” And in this test, the bourgeois comrades fell woefully short in the reckoning of these working-class labor leaders. In the final analysis, at the end of this experiment, their pride can only be seen as having fortified the workingman’s prejudice, and vice versa. Nothing was unlearned, and hence, nothing was learned.

Today, Saif-ur-Rehman is a small cog in the machinery of an international NGO, placed there through the largesse of erstwhile intellectual comrades from his days of labor politics. To be more precise, he oversees the day-to-day management of a curated community ostensibly for Lahore’s urban poor. This community is located at the outskirts of the city and is meant to be largely self-sufficient; it is a quaint little exhibition of the neoliberal philanthropic model for the *uplift* of the poor. Rehman throws himself completely into his work but one gets a clear sense from talking to him that in his eyes there remains a wide gulf separating *uplift* from *emancipation*—his faith (*emaan*) in the communist creed to lead to the latter remains unshaken beyond his break with his bourgeois comrades. Unfortunately, what also remains entrenched is the myth that bifurcates the tasks of mental and manual labor between the proletarian and the bourgeois intellectual; that lesson seems to have stuck despite the experience of their own power and ability to lead the labor movement.

Like Ibrahim, Rehman too believes in rebuilding this alliance, albeit on terms of equality. They both stop just short of the point where they can accept that there is no real reason to imagine the history of this alliance not repeating itself; of reinforcing, and in fact adding to, dependencies that eternally bind the proletarian to the subservience of the bourgeois radicals—academics, intellectuals and activists. The secret

to the intellectual emancipation of the proletariat, these narratives tell us (in stark contradiction to all progressive visions), lies in less education, not more.⁵⁶ Miller, Mirza Ibrahim, and Saif-ur-Rehman show through their examples the perfect, pre-formed ability of the proletariat, like all human beings of course, to combine in their person the directive and organizational capacities that are generally used to mark intellectual activity from manual work. The privileged role of the intellectuals (historically limited to a narrow pool of the absolute social and cultural elite in this context) in the Left activism of Lahore has historically obscured this emancipatory truth in the name of the uplift and progress of the working classes of Lahore.

This paper has argued that the new historians of this Left must guard against internalizing the whiggish narratives of the Left orthodoxy, which are by their very design incapable of admitting this stultifying aspect of the relationship between the intellectual and the worker in situations of extreme and constantly reaffirmed inequalities. The project to educate the working classes of Lahore has thus far failed to transcend its material and cultural context, and that is an important lesson in which the educators themselves must first be educated. Going forward, a sustained and defined focus could allow appreciation of the inner tensions within and across the various social layers meshed together in the course of this continuing pedagogical experiment. Such an approach would allow for the reconstruction of the organizational structures enabling this transgressive dialogue and force a reckoning with its actual substance; necessary first steps on the way to grasping the hierarchies normally obscured by the leveling rhetoric of committed “educationists.”

Studies of Left tendencies within the working-class movements of Pakistan have generally lamented their ephemeral nature, blaming it on external political pressures or the inability of worker militants to fully commit to the demands of a proletarian revolution. The seemingly abrupt abandonment of left politics by the working classes happens, in these frameworks, *despite* the drawn-out and intense educative initiatives from above. What is needed perhaps is research that aims to interrogate, on the contrary, the structures, logics and forms of the “education” project to ask how far its limits were in fact internal to it.

Notes

1. For a succinct background on the Mughalpura workshops and their usefulness for shedding light on various dimensions of railway labor in colonial India more broadly, see, Ian J. Kerr, “The Railway Workshops and Their Labour: Entering the Black Hole”, *27 Down: New Departures in Indian Railway Studies*, 2007, 231–75. For the first academic investigation of the workshops, which also marks an attempt to subsume this labor movement within nationalist historiography, see Lajpat Jagga, “Colonial Railwaymen and British Rule: A Probe into Railway Labour Agitation in India 1919–1922,” *Studies in History* 3 (1981). For a recent reappraisal, see Ahmad Azhar, *Revolution in Reform: Trade-Unionism in Lahore, c. 1920–70*, *New Perspectives in South Asian History* (Hyderabad, 2019).

2. The metaphor of the dream directly invokes the writings of Jacques Ranciere in the context of labor history. Ranciere is frequently cited in writings on South Asian labor and Left traditions. However, his argument is never taken to its most radical conclusions, as it is here. Ranciere’s body of work constitutes a relentless (auto) critique of labor history by pointing to its imbrication with discourses that perpetuate the very distinction between worker and intellectual. See Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (London and New York, 2012). Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA, 1991).

3. The idea of the formal sector as a “labor aristocracy” of South Asia is most comprehensively worked out in the writings of historian-anthropologist Jan Breman. See, especially, Jan Breman, “The Study of Industrial Labour in Post-Colonial India—The Formal Sector: An Introductory Review,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33, 1–2 (1999): 1–41. Jan Breman, “The Study of Industrial Labour in Post-Colonial India—The Informal Sector: A Concluding Review,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33, 1–2 (1999): 407–31. Anthropologists have also given us dense and empathetic depictions of the inner lives of “informal” workers. For two excellent examples, which complement each other by focusing respectively on the experiences of men and women of the informal sector, see Jonathan P. Parry, “Ankalu’s Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh,” *Modern Asian Studies* 35, 4 (2001): 783–820. Rukmini Barua, “Matters of the Heart: Romance, Courtship, and Conjugalities in Contemporary Delhi,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 97 (2020): 109–33.
4. Chitra Joshi, “On ‘de-Industrialization’ and the Crisis of Male Identities,” *International Review of Social History* 47, S10 (2002): 159–75.
5. See the introduction to Razā ‘Ali, Franziska Roy, and Benjamin Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views, 1917-1939* / Edited by Ali Raza, Franziska Roy, and Benjamin Zachariah. (Los Angeles, 2015), xxix. This volume served as a clarion call of sorts, unleashing a flood of articles and monographs on the intellectual and social histories of the Punjabi Left (revolutionaries get the bulk of attention) with an explicit focus on drawing out their “internationalist” tendencies. These writings, referred to later, constitute a self-conscious effort at reorienting what is presented as a Left historiography that was insular, rigid, and uncomplicated by one that valorizes openness, fluidity, and nuance. For a slightly earlier example of this scholarship, and one that anticipated many of the debates subsequently taken up, see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2011). My disagreements with this new historiography, which for the most part touches upon similar biographical materials and has the same avowed goal of writing grass-roots histories of the Left, will be explicitly stated at the opportune moment in the following narrative.
6. Recent scholarship on the Left in Pakistan has demonstrated a distinct aversion to using this vocabulary of success and defeat. This is a choice made in order to move beyond the narrow confines of the framework initially put in place by the colonial state, interested as it was in ultimately defeating the movement. As some of the recent works on the Pakistani Left demonstrate, this strategy allows for appreciating the unrealized possibilities of specific moments. Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “monad” is deployed in both of the following references, for example. Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*. (Cambridge, 2020), 6. See, also, Kamran Asdar Ali, *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism in 1947-72* (London, 2015).
7. Miller’s entrance on the scene is first noted by the intelligence department as follows: “J.B. Miller was born in 1880 in Ceylon. He started his career on the EIR [East India Railway] but was dismissed from service during the EIR European loco men’s strike of 1907. Then he served for a while in the canal factory at Rurki and also served in the army before he rejoined the ORR [Oudh and Rohilkhand Railway] as a guard in Saharanpur. He was again dismissed from service during the ORR loco strike in 1920 . . .” quoted in Jagga, “Colonial Railwaymen and British Rule,” 120.
8. As mentioned at the outset, the Mughalpura workshops were the largest single employer of industrial labor in Punjab during the late colonial and post-independence decades, employing between ten and twenty thousand workers during the interwar period. This number shot up during World War II and hovered around the figure of thirty thousand at the time of partition. For more detailed quantitative data on the workshops for the late colonial period, see Lajpat Jagga’s unpublished PhD thesis, Jagga Lajpat, “Formation of an Industrial Labour Force and Forms of Labour Protest in India: A Study of the Railways, 1919-1937” (New Delhi, 1983). See, also, appendices, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*. These numbers declined beginning in the 1990s and today the workshops employ a *maximum* of ten thousand workers, lending these cavernous structures a deserted look on slack days.
9. The writings of some of the most empathetic and sophisticated theorist-practitioners of revolutionary workers’ organization have historically reflected the tension between a desire to celebrate the workers’ self-activity while simultaneously bemoaning their spontaneity, between the obsessive pursuit of discipline and control over democratic workers’ movements by a vanguard of intellectuals and the stark recognition that no work, however manual, is devoid of an intellectual component. For a classic formulation of these ideas, see David Forgacs, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (New York, 2000), esp. the chapters on working-class education and culture.

10. Weekly Report of the Director of Central Intelligence, March 1, 1920, Home Political, Deposit, Proceedings, OIOC (Oriental and India Office Collection), BL (British Library) [emphases mine]: “The dismissed railway guard Miller has, for some time past, been *haranguing* large crowds in Lahore and inducing men to join the railway labour union which he has brought into being . . . the meetings that he arranges and the speeches that are delivered thereat by himself and his intimate co-workers are looked upon as a *sort of amusement and relaxation* by the *riffraff* of Lahore bazaar who muster strong at these gatherings.”

11. “O. M’s All-India Letter Dated 15th March 1920-with Letters from the Provinces,” Prog. no. 57, Home Political, Deposit, March 1920, OIOC, BL., “Mr. Miller’s activities are the talk of the town of Lahore. His interesting methods of persuading the people to join him are described by the people with delight. ‘Are you a man or a woman?’ asked he of a booking clerk. ‘I am a man’ replied the latter. ‘Come and sign this paper and join the railway labourer’s union’ and the man joined. This is his method and he is said to have enlisted five thousand men up to now.” And, “This is the grain I live upon and shall continue to live upon it till I get you promotions.” He shows the parched grain and eats it up before the audience and thus he wins the applause of the people.

12. “NWR Railway Strike,” *Civil and Military Gazette*, April 27, 1920: “On Saturday afternoon as the men were about to enter their special [train] to return to the city, they were stopped from doing so by the leaders of the railway union who came in to Mughalpura on horseback with a band and the ‘Union Jack’. They ordered the men to fall in, four abreast, and marched them to the city.”

13. See chapter 2, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*, for details on these overlaps.

14. The communist contenders to the leadership of the railway workers were most critical of M.A. Khan’s bourgeois roots. Defence Statement of K.N. Joglekar, Meerut Conspiracy Case (MCC) Proceedings, Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin, “It may be stated here that M.A. Khan was an ex-railway servant. He went to England to qualify himself for some nice job carrying fat salary but to his dismay he found himself on his return being treated rather with indifference. He expected some high post of an A.T.S. or something of the like, but instead he was placed as a subordinate of some ordinary second-class station. This injured his vanity and thus was the motive with which he interested himself in the union work.”

15. Report on publications registered in Punjab during the year 1920, Punjab Home Proceedings, July 1921, Part A, OIOC, BL, 10., “The praises of Mr Miller, the leader of the railway strikers, have been sung by some street “poetasters” in their popular poems having little poetic merit but plenty of fun.”

16. For several translated excerpts from these Urdu newspapers published from Lahore, see chapter 2, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

17. Secret Punjab Police Abstracts of Intelligence [henceforth, SPPAI], National Documentation Centre [henceforth, NDC], Islamabad., 1920, para. 493. “[H]e [Miller] was not an agitator and did not mean to fight government . . . the Afghans and the Bolsheviks . . . are coming shortly and the empty stomached persons would be obliged to join hands with them . . . they were hungry and demanded food. They were naked and demanded clothes, and were not in need of anything else.”

18. See the following piece, “Theory and Practice,” *Civil and Military Gazette*, Colindale Newspaper Archive, London, May 12, 1920: “Here is a fair sample of the argument of the strike organisers who are seeking a dubious notoriety as the champions of the ‘hungry army.’”

19. Memorandum titled “What Workers Want,” submitted by the Punjab Labour Board, Lahore, on February 24, 1932, in Report of Indian Delimitation Committee, Punjab, IOR/Q/IFC/27, OIOC, BL. “Labour . . . has never taken part in the anti-Government movements. The cry of Swaraj, we believe, is a capitalistic cry and we condemn it as such. . . . A few capitalists whom the government . . . mistakenly favoured in the past have now so ungratefully taken up cudgels against it in a true capitalistic spirit. . . . Labour is humble. Labour is weak. Labour is grateful . . . kindly for the sake of dumb millions whom God has entrusted to Your Excellency’s care for whom we speak and implore, suppress it [Congress] and thus save us from hoisting a ‘Red Flag.’”

20. Memorandum submitted by the General Workers’ Union, NWR, Lahore, to the Royal Commission on Labour in India in the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Evidence (henceforth, RCL), Vol. VIII, pt. I (Railways), 398.

21. For a detailed discussion on the strike and its context, see chapter 2, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

22. “Karachi Recognised Union wants Arbitration,” *The Tribune*, May 27, 1925, “*literate* sections of the staff have taken no part whatever in the strike and in many places are totally against it.”

23. Oral Evidence of M. A. Khan (President and General Secretary, General Workers’ Union), RCL, Evidence, Vol. VIII, pt. II (Railways), 16.

24. *Mazdur* generally means unskilled worker but in this context, it was meant to encompass both skilled and unskilled proletarians. The term *babu* is open to various interpretations. Technically, it denoted white-collar, “educated” (in the Western tradition, of course) Indians. When used by anti-colonial radicals, it becomes a charge of Anglophilia, pathetic mimicry, collaboration, and importantly, self-deception. Used by the *mazdurs* of Mughalpuria it conveyed proletarian anxieties toward certain white-collar comrades. Fueling these antagonisms were various changes made to workplace hierarchies, in the name of efficiency and to appease the nationalist demand for “Indianisation.” The combined effect of both was the intrusion of “literate” Indians (*babus*) in workshop operations that had previously been the domain of “illiterate” but skilled workers (*mazdurs*). For details on these changes in the labor process and how they were resented by the workmen, see chapter 3, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

25. The railway management had also in this period introduced “staff committees” (comprised overwhelmingly of skilled workers who were classified as illiterate; *mazdurs*) with the stated goal of facilitating direct communication between the “illiterate” *mazdur* and the management, eliminating the need, it was hoped, of the mediation of *babus*. Wrapped up in this language of paternalism, the workers discerned a trap. As far as they could tell, the management’s goal was not to shield them from “outside” currents but to isolate them from the broader sphere of popular politics and to cut off vital sources of support from bourgeois quarters. *Ibid.*, 65. The phenomenon of the “outsider” has provoked much debate in the historiography of labor in India. The polemic was sparked by Dipesh Chakrabarty’s provocative suggestion that South Asian workers remained entrapped in pre-modern/pre-capitalist social relations, as exemplified by the *bhadralok* leadership of the working classes of colonial Bengal. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989). Chakrabarty’s conception of the nature of “outside” intervention has been contested from various angles in subsequent writings on labor. See, for instance, the introduction to Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi, 2003). For another polemic against Chakrabarty, see the introduction to and Dasgupta, especially, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-40* (Cambridge, 1994). Dilip Simeon, “Outer Space and Inner Agency: Reflections on the Realm of the Outside in the Labour Movement,” *South Asia Citizens Web* (blog), May 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.sacw.net/article8705.html>. Simeon’s is an interesting and original intervention that suggests a new approach to understanding the very notion of the domains of the “inside” and “outside” and their production.

26. Memorandum submitted by the General Workers’ Union, NWR, Lahore, to the Royal Commission on Labour in India in RCL, Evidence, Vol. VIII, pt. I (Railways).

27. For a description of the complicated interwar labor situation in Amritsar, see Ahmad Azhar, “The Making of a ‘Genuine Trade Unionist’: An Introduction to Bashir Ahmed Bakhtiar’s Memoirs,” in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Ravi Ahuja, ed. (New Delhi, 2013). For an excellent recent article on *Dadas*, Rukmini Barua, “The Textile Labour Association and Dadagiri: Power and Politics in the Working-Class Neighborhoods of Ahmedabad,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 87 (2015): 63.

28. For Bakhtiar’s memoirs, translated in English, see Bashir Ahmad Bakhtiar, “The Labour Movement and Me,” in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Ravi Ahuja, ed. (New Delhi, 2013). Bakhtiar is discussed also at great length in, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

29. Bakhtiar, not unlike the genuine trade unionists of Lahore, had a distinct penchant for socialist rhetoric and symbolism in rallying workers. In fact, socialist rhetoric permeated the speech of these genuine trade unionists prior to the formation of the Communist Party and was deployed freely in the long phases of outright competition in the interwar period. The “reformist” trade-unionists on trial in Meerut proclaimed this truth when they insisted in their depositions that the “ideology of socialism” was “not the patrimony of any political party” and that the essence of genuine trade unionism was obscured by labelling it “reformist.” For, they argued, theirs was a true revolutionary path, leading to the workers’ escape from the proletarian condition. Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*. 101–23. For recent reappraisals of Meerut see also, Carolien Stolte, “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929–32,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, 3 (December 2013): 345–59. And Michele L. Louro, “Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins’: The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, 3 (December 2013): 331–44.

30. See the aforementioned, Razā ’Alī, Franziska Roy, and Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment*. One of the editors to this volume has since made quite a few contributions to this genre. See, Raza, *Revolutionary*

Pasts. Ali Raza, "Provincializing the International: Communist Print Worlds in Colonial India," *History Workshop Journal* 89 (February 2020): 140–53. Other recent monographs dealing with the revolutionary politics of Punjab in the period include, Chris Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge, 2019). Kama MacLean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (New York, 2015).

31. For instance, the revolutionary Ghadr Party headquartered in San Francisco supervised the Kirti Kisan Party in Punjab, which in turn provided many of the cadres of the labor wing of the provincial Communist Party during the inter-war years. The definitive work on Ghadr, from an internationalist perspective, remains, Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

32. Ravi Ahuja, "Capital at Sea, Shaitan Below Decks? A Note on Global Narratives, Narrow Spaces, and the Limits of Experience," *History of the Present* 2, 1 (April 2012): 78–85. Ahuja offers a trenchant critique of the trend toward "experiential reductionism in social and cultural history, i.e., the propensity of abstracting the experiences of (individual or collective) historical actors from larger, very concrete, but in the eyes of contemporaries, often opaque historical processes in an attempt to avoid grand narratives." Ahuja, in his later writings, builds on and refines this argument for re-embedding historical actors in the web of quotidian structures and hierarchies which always colored their experience of freedom and mobility, Ravi Ahuja, "A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly 'Lascars' of the SS City of Manila or, a Micro-History of the 'Free Labour' Problem," in *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India* (2013), 97–133. For a general critique of "globalization" as an analytical category see Frederick Cooper, "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective," *African Affairs* 100, 399 (2001): 189–213. I share his unease with what he euphemistically refers to as the "Dance of flows and fragments" perspective.

33. Raza, "Provincializing the International: Communist Print Worlds in Colonial India." Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

34. Stolte, "Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929–32."

35. Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

36. Video recording of interview with Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim, February 6, 1998, conducted by Chaudhry Mohammad Anwar, South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP), Lahore office, (Henceforth, Ibrahim Interview 1).

37. Sumit Sarkar and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, eds., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1946*, vol. 1 (New Delhi, 2007). Ravi Ahuja, "'Produce or Perish.' The Crisis of the Late 1940s and the Place of Labour in Post-Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 54, 4 (July 2020): 1041–112. Indivar Kamtekar, "The Shiver of 1942," *Studies in History* 18, 1 (2002): 81–102.

38. See Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*. Bakhtiar, "The Labour Movement and Me."

39. M.N. Roy had an eventful career in the interwar decades, starting out as the representative of international communism in India in the 1920s to one of its most despised opponents by the 1940s. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to chart his tortuous trajectory. Unfortunately, even his biographers have been cursory in their exploration of his concrete involvement in labor politics. Still, for a political biography (again from a "transnational" perspective), see Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi, 2010).

40. Ahuja, "'Produce or Perish.' The Crisis of the Late 1940s and the Place of Labour in Post-Colonial India."

41. For a sense of the broader context of West Pakistan's labor politics in the decades following independence, see Anushay Malik, "Alternative Politics and Dominant Narratives: Communists and the Pakistani State in the Early 1950s," *South Asian History and Culture* 4, 4 (2013): 520–37. Anushay Malik, "Public Authority and Local Resistance: Abdur Rehman and the Industrial Workers of Lahore, 1969–1974," *Modern Asian Studies* 52, 3 (2018): 815–48. Kamran Asdar Ali, "Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan's Early Years," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, 3 (2011): 501–34. Zafar Shaheed, *The Labour Movement in Pakistan. Organization and Leadership in Karachi in the 1970s* (Oxford, 2007).

42. Report of District Committee Lahore, June 1946 (Translated from Urdu by me), Gurharpal Singh Collection, Modern Records Centre Warwick University (MRC). Documents from this archive are explored in chapter 7, Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*.

43. Ibid.

44. Khālid Maḥmūd, Gerard M. Friters, and Muneer Ahmad, *Trade Unionism in Pakistan* (Department of Political Science, University of the Panjab, 1958).

45. Ibrahim Interview 1 and Video Recording of interview with Mirza Muhammad Ibrahim, August 11, 1999, conducted by Mohammad Tahseen, (SAP) (Henceforth, Ibrahim Interview 2). Excerpts translated into English with permission of SAP.
46. Ibrahim Interview 1. “There was less direct repression [under Bhutto]. He corrupted the workers. I told the political leftists that I do not disapprove, just be clear that he is not a communist, he is not opposed to feudalism, he is not opposed to capitalism. He would lie and bluff, he caused a lot of damage, created anarchy . . .” Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*, 180–81.
47. Ibrahim Interview 1. It is of course deeply insightful that Ibrahim introduces him in terms of his educational qualification; clearly for Ibrahim this fact is the most useful one for socially situating Jai Gopal.
48. Such religious metaphors are perfectly in line with Ibrahim’s own repeated assertion that communism was his faith [emaan].
49. “These people like Mazhar [Ali Azhar], Tahira [Mazhar], Abid Manto, make a great sacrifice in betraying their class and allying with us. It should not go to waste. It should not be ignored. But they also carry over countless things from their *khaandani* [aristocratic] background. That should be criticised as well.” Ibrahim Interview 2.
50. Forget what Lenin did or what Stalin did, the world has moved on [...] this system cannot continue. It will have to be completely overhauled. How will this change happen? It won’t happen through Faiz’s poetry, Manto’s eloquent English and legal victories will not bring about this change. This neck will have to be guillotined; this head smashed [...]. Ibid.
51. “Thinkers, researchers, intellectuals, after studying the imperial system of the world and line of action and formulas and an exhaustive study of Marxism, can build a communist party. I cannot do it. However, I can change the face of the universe. I can grow wheat and fruits. I can create the air-conditioning that you enjoy. All these needs of yours only I can satisfy, you cannot. But you are the researchers.” Ibid.
52. Ibrahim Interview 1.
53. Ibrahim Interview 1.
54. Interview with Saif-ur-Rehman, April 8, 2016, Lahore. All subsequent references are from this interview.
55. The late 1960s witnessed the beginnings of a long-lasting alliance between left academics, students and workers in Lahore. The nucleus of this self-styled “Professors’ Group” was the Punjab University (the largest public sector university of Punjab); two of the original group of “professors” were my colleagues (one of whom is a relative also) for several years at a private university of Lahore that they joined after retiring from Punjab University. Another somewhat younger colleague that shared their experiences with me was a mentee/devotee of the professors, involved in student politics at Punjab University and in conducting study circles amongst the worker militants of Mughalpura during the mid to late-1980s. Yet another member, the de facto, founder of the “Professors’ Group” is a friend of the family—such close associations of course only lend further credence to the charge that the renegade bourgeoisie of Lahore has traditionally been drawn from a close-knit social group; almost like a caste. For further evidence of this, see caste-like cohesion of the left intellectuals of Punjab, preface to Ali, *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism in 1947-72*. The professors all are reluctant to speak publicly of their political past and there are no authorized histories of their group. However, there are mentions in a few recent histories. See Anushay Malik, “Public Authority and Local Resistance: Abdur Rehman and the Industrial Workers of Lahore, 1969–1974,” 828. And Azhar, *Revolution in Reform*, chapter 7 and epilogue.
56. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*.