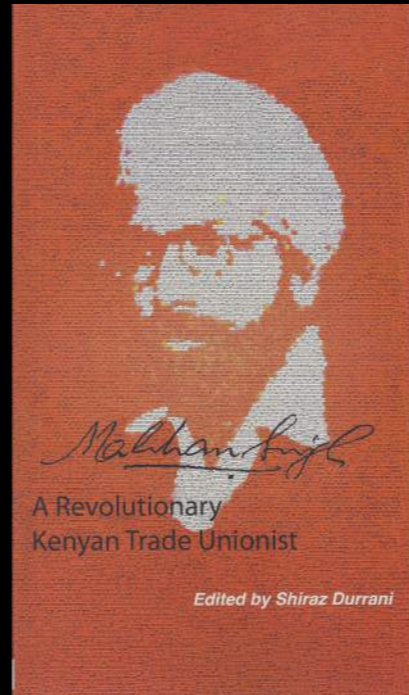


The Revolutionary Legacy of Makhan Singh in Kenya

Shiraz Durrani

Book Launch: SOAS, London. October 5, 2015



Life and Times of Makhan Singh

- Born 27-12-1913, India
- 1927: Came to Kenya
- 1931: Worked in printing press
- 1939: To India
- **1940-45: Detained in India**
- 1947: Returned to Kenya
- **1950-61: Imprisoned in Kenya** ⁽¹⁾

1. Patel, A. (1963): Struggle for release Jomo and his colleagues. Nairobi: New Kenya Publishers. p. 144.

The Context of Resistance

STRIKES

- 1900: Railway workers
- 1902: Police constables; Dock workers; rickshaw-pullers
- 1908: Govt. workers
- 1912: Boat workers; railway workers; farm workers
- 1922;1939;1947;1950: General Strikes

ORGANISATIONS

- 1922: Railway artisan Union
- 1931: TU Committee of Mombasa
- 1931: Workers Protective Society
- 1937: The Labour Trade Union of East Africa
- 1949: East African Trade Union Congress

A Radical Wing

With the return of Makhan Singh in Aug. 1947, the trade union movement acquired a radical wing. Having spent eight years in India participating in the trade union movement and the political struggle for independence, Makhan Singh was well-equipped to breathe new life into Kenya's labour and freedom campaign. The Labour Trade Union of East Africa formed in 1937 and later the larger East African Trade Union Congress formed in May 1949 became the nerve centres for activities of the more militant Asians. From 1947 until 1952, when all trade union activities were proscribed, Makhan Singh worked behind-the-scenes with prominent African trade unionists including Bildad Kaggia, Aggrey Minya and Tom Mboya.

- Seidenberg (1983)

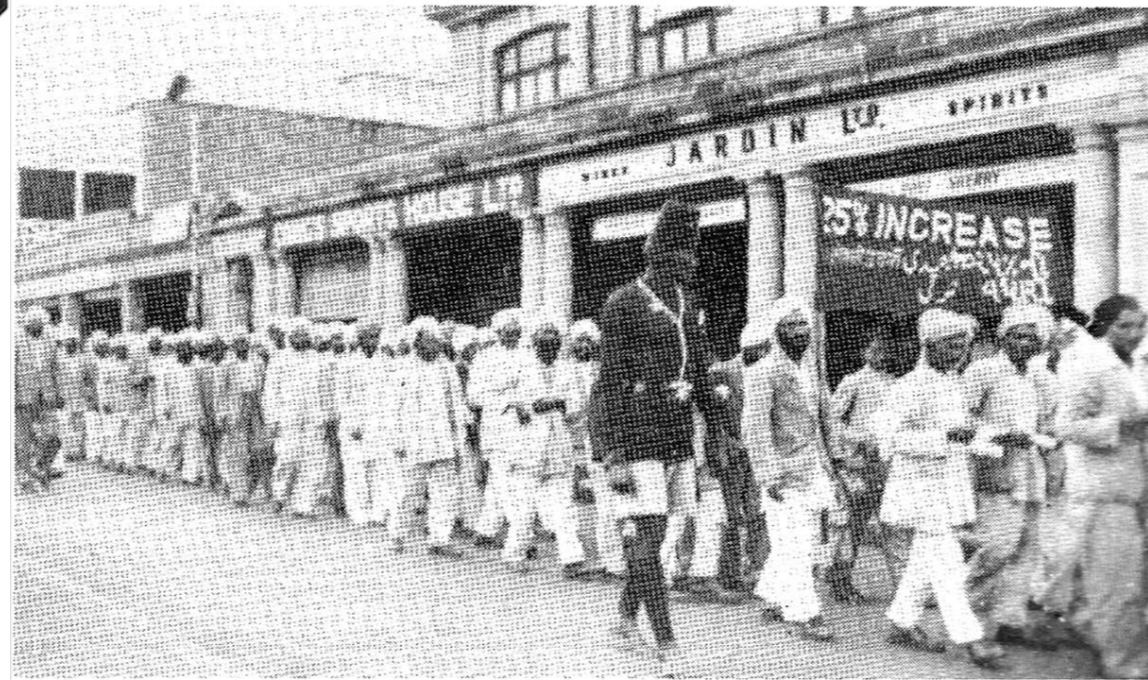
Radical Trade Unionist in Kenya

- 1931: MS began working in printing press
- 1935: elected Secretary of the Indian Trade Union; 1949: President
- Influenced ITU to change to Labour Trade Union of Kenya: open it to workers irrespective of race, religion, colour.
- 1937: LTUK changed to LTUEA
- 1937: The Union organised **62-day strike** for 8-hr day. Achieved wage increase of 15% -25%.⁽¹⁾

Effects of strike

- The Union's membership rose to 2,500 in Kenya and Uganda.
- The government had to accept that TU movement in Kenya was to stay.
- 1937: Trade Union Ordinance. The Union was registered.
- By 1948, 16 TUs affiliated to LTUEA, with a membership of 10,000 workers.

Workers' struggle, 1937



Another part of the workers' procession in 1937

“Struggle between capitalists and workers has started”

*Our worker comrades! Come forward! March ahead!
If you do not march ahead today, then remember
that you will be crushed under the heels of
capitalists tomorrow. Workers should have a united
stand and should stand up strongly against the
capitalists so that they should not ever have the
courage to attempt to exploit workers again, nor to
take away workers' rights from them.*

*Note: The workers of M/s Karsan Ladha have gone
on strike for higher wages. It has been reported that
the strike situation is becoming serious. This has
now become a question of life or death for workers*

- Makhan Singh (1)

The working class in Kenya's towns was small, and most workers were migrants who did not stay in one job for long. There was little money to pay full-time trade union organisers. And workers faced many attacks from the colonial government when they tried to organise.

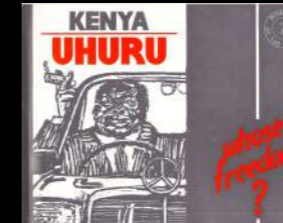
So it was not easy for Kenyan workers to form unions. But, as one unionist said to us: "We did not stay asleep for the flies to settle on us!"

It was the skilled Indian artisans, working mainly on the railways, who first began to form unions. Later, they began to use their organised strength to help unorganised African workers. In 1935, they formed a non-racial trade union federation called the Labour Trade Union of Kenya (LTUK). Makhan Singh was its General Secretary.

So we learnt how the fighting spirit of Kenyan workers grew stronger. But we were also reminded that in those days, their trade union movement was still young and faced many problems:

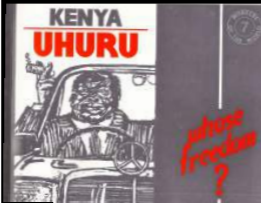
- The numbers of workers was still small and they had little experience of trade union organisation.
- Non-racial worker unity was only beginning to be built.
- The government tried to weaken this new unity with laws to divide the workers.
- The settlers were determined to do anything to stop workers from organising.

International Labour Research and Information Group (1989): Kenya Uhuru: Whose Freedom?
Salt River, South Africa: ILRIG.



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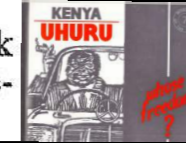


“In the space of five months between January and May 1950, Makhan Singh changed the direction of the political movements in Kenya, from seeking greater participation within colonial rule, to independence and the ending of colonial rule. His message to all East Africans was, “ The only solution is the complete independence of the East African Territories.” The foundation he laid made it possible for the trade unions to become the carriers of nationalism and demands for freedom throughout the period of the emergency, despite its numerous restrictions.”

- Nowrojee, Pheroze (2015).

The decision regarding the “Eight-Hour Day from 1st October” was the most popular of all. It was further popularised through handbills, meetings in residential areas, works-discussions and public announcements (preceded by ringing of a large bell) in the main thoroughfares of Nairobi. After about ten days of this campaign, daily mass meetings began to be held in Ramgarhia Plot, Campos Ribeiro Avenue, Nairobi. The campaign created a new spirit among workers. A union announcement issued during the campaign stated:

With effect from 1st October, 1936, no worker should work for more than eight hours a day and there should be no reduction in wages.



“Makhan Singh throughout his political activity and writing emphasised key issues: strong national unity for the common cause of democratic advance in Kenya; a strong trade union consciousness and movement; and the necessity of forging a democratic nation. He thereby foresaw the areas that could go wrong in the years after independence.” - Nowrojee, Pheroze (2015)

The Kenya Worker - East African Kirti

Nov. 1936: the Union began publishing a monthly paper, *The Kenya Worker* edited by Makhan Singh. Three issues were published in Punjabi and one in Urdu. The Union's plans were to publish it in English, Gujarati and Swahili also. A few months later the paper was named *East African Kirti*. Its Editor was Mota Singh.

The paper stopped after three issues. This was due to the Government having prosecuted the editor for not having obtained registration for the paper.

The Return for Newspaper Registration Ordinance showed the circulation of *East African Kirti* was 1,000 copies per week. (1)

Workers' Mass Meeting

A workers' mass meeting will be held on Saturday, 16th January, at 5.00 p.m. in the Ramgharia Plot (Campos Ribero Street) to decide effective methods to achieve the demands of Railway artisans and the demand of 25 percent increase in wages from 1st April. Please do attend. Long Live Workers' Unity - Makhan Singh, Sec. Labour Trade Unions



1939-47: Action in India

1939: He left for India, to study working class conditions and the functioning of trade unionism.

- 1940: Addressed 30,000 Bombay workers.
- Immersed in the freedom struggle & working class movement. Arrested on May 5, '40. No charges.
- In detention, he strengthened links with communist, socialist and other revolutionary leaders.
- Released from detention in 1942. Restricted till '45.
- Under detention & restriction in India for 4.5+ years.

He then worked as a sub-editor of *Jang-i-Azadi*, the weekly organ of CPI until he left for Kenya in Aug '47.

1947: Back in Kenya

Sets task for S.Asians

- Unite & work with Africans for democratic advance.
- Establish democratic government with equal franchise and adult suffrage.
- Organise joint fronts of Indian Assn, African political unions, Pakistani organisations, TUs of all workers and Youth Leagues.
- Establish common high schools. Learn Kiswahili. Teach the best of your culture, learn the best from African culture ⁽¹⁾

1947-50: Call for Independence

- Organiser of the Kenya Youth Conference; elected Vice-President.
- Took part in E.A. Indian National Congress; a leading campaigner for 1948 local elections.
- 1949: Organised EA TUC. Pres: Fred Kubai; Gen. Sec.: Makhan Singh.
- 23-04-1950: Makhan Singh was the first person to call for complete independence for East Africa at mass meeting of Kenya African Union & East Africa Indian National Congress.

Makhan Singh Highlights the Class Issue

“There are two Nairobis – that of the rich and that of the poor. The status of the latter has not changed ... celebrations [to make status of City for Nairobi] will be justified on the day when this country’s Government becomes truly democratic, with the workers fully sharing the tasks of government”.

May Day 1950 arrest

- May Day speech: "Workers and the peoples of EA should further strengthen their unity, become more resolute and speed up the movement for freedom of all workers and peoples of E. A."
- 15th May: Makhan Singh and Fred Kubai arrested. Leads to 10 day strike.
- Demands: release arrested leaders, complete independence for EA, increase wages from 40/- to Shs.100/- p.m.

Restriction 1950-61

- Allegations against him were in connection with his TU activities as Gen. Sec. of EATUC, expression of political views in the course of national struggle for freedom and being a communist.
- 5th June, 1950: Restriction Order.
- Restricted for over 11 years. During restriction, pressure was brought upon him to leave Kenya or to change his attitude: Makhan Singh did neither.

1950 - 1962

- 1950s: Changes forced by Mau Mau.
- 22-10-61: Makhan Singh released unconditionally.
- Nov. 1961: Resumed political & TU activities.
- Resumed membership of the Printing and Kindred Trade Workers' Union (he was one of founders).
- 1962: Elected Chair of Legislative Committee of Kenya Fed. of Labour; a KFL rep. on Tripartite Committee, which drafted Industrial Relations.
- 21st October 1962: joined KANU, when membership opened to all.
- Died: May 18, 1973.

Strategy

VISION

- Anti-colonialism
- Anti-imperialism
- Political independence
- Worker rights
- Political, economic and racial equality

MEANS

- Strong organisations
- Link economic and political struggles
- Link TUs with liberation movement
- Class & race unity
- Communications
- Mass Action: strikes, demos, politicisation
- Activism, sacrifice

MS on the heroic resistance of our people

- “The heroic resistance of our people of the onslaughts of the imperialists has ultimately defeated one of the biggest imperialist powers in the world and has won our complete independence”.
- “In course of my restriction for 11.5 years (May 1950 to October 1961) I continued my resistance all the time. In course of this struggle, I went on three hunger strikes.
 - Lokitaung: Jan-Feb, 1952 for 10 days
 - Maralal: October 1959, for 12 days
 - Maralal: Started on 13-03-1961 and ended in Dol Dol on 03-04-1961 after 21 days” (1)

Colonial Accusation

“Makhan Singh published articles in the press, disseminated pamphlets and repeatedly addressed African audiences. He told them the HM Govt. was ‘a foreign power who had no right to rule in Kenya, that Kenya Govt. had introduced slavery, that secret plans were being hatched to take more African land”

- Quoted in Throup (1990)

Still a Communist

On the day of his release, he openly declared that he was still a communist and would continue his political and trade union activities.

- Singh, Makhan (1963) Autobiography

This aspect of Makhan Singh's life and work needs further research and documenting.

TU and National Struggles Linked

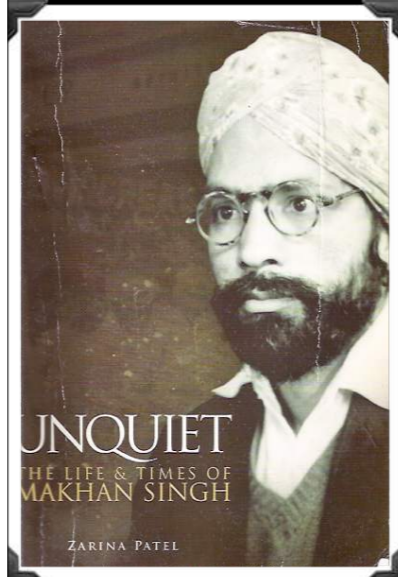
“Kenya’s trade union movement has always been a part of her national struggle for resisting British imperialist colonial rule, for winning national independence, for consolidating the independence after winning it, and for bringing prosperity to the workers & peoples of Kenya” ⁽¹⁾

Industrial and Political Struggles

- “[Some] believe that trade unions in those days were not trade unions at all because they were politically formed and not confined to industrial collective bargaining.
- MS [explains in the book,¹] why it was necessary for trade unions to conduct their struggles not only industrially but also politically and to take an active part in the national struggle for independence”

- Fred Kubai (1969)

Makhan Singh Remembered



Autograph of the well-known Trade Unionist leader.

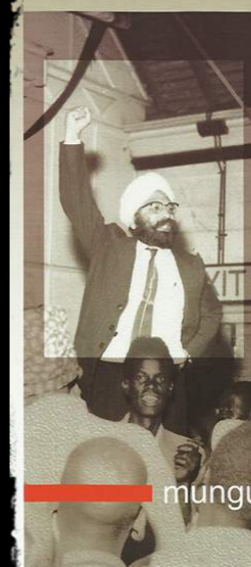
Read in these pages the story of the beginnings and growth of the T.U.C. Movement in Kenya.

COMRADE MAKHAN SINGH

MAKHAN SINGH was born on the 27th December 1913, at Gharjakh, a small village in India (now in West Pakistan) in a poor but deeply religious carpenter family. His father Mr. Sudh Singh came to Kenya in July, 1920 to work for the Railway while Makhan Singh remained in his village with his mother, Isher Kaur, for education. During his school-days in India Makhan Singh's mind was influenced by teachings of Sikhism and Sikh history and also by the Congress struggle for freedom of India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

With his mother and sister, Makhan Singh came to Kenya in May, 1927, and continued his education in Nairobi passing the London Matric. Exam. in 1931. He had a burning desire to go abroad for further studies, but his father's financial condition did not allow this.

During the period of his schooling in Nairobi Makhan Singh continued taking interest in world events and was influenced by the workers' and peasants' movement (both communist and socialist) and trade union struggles. At this time he also commenced composing and reciting poems



A Recitation of a play in Hindi

"MUNGU COMRADE"

Written and recited by

Atamjit

*(An Amritsar of the National
Academy of India for play-writing)*

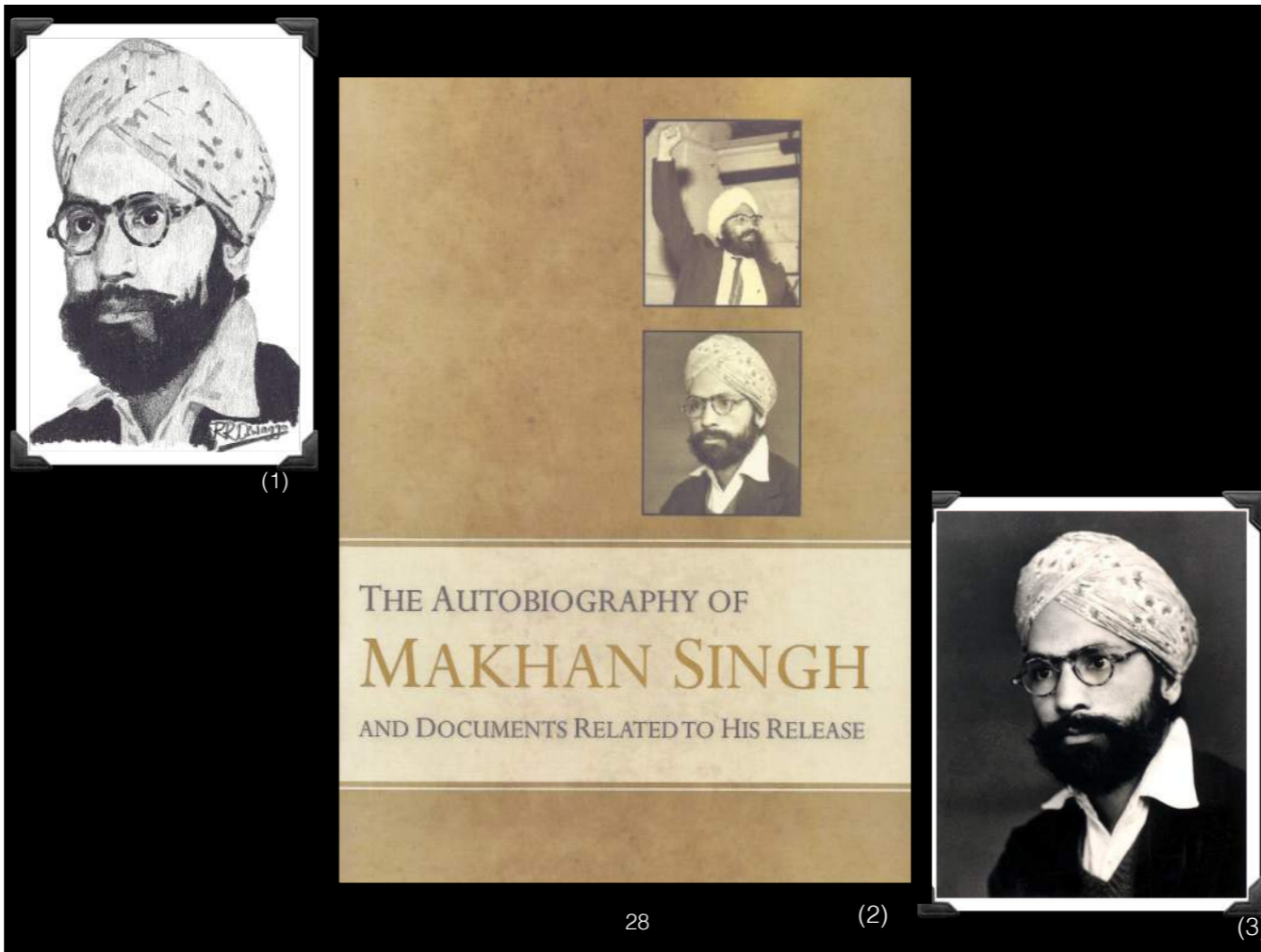
Guest of Honour,
Chief Justice Dr. Willy Mutunga

Date: Sun 18th May, 2014

Time: 3:00 PM

Venue: Visa Oshwal
Auditorium, Nairobi

Atamjit's
mungu comrade



1. Drawing by R. Oswego, Kabete, Kenya. 1984.
2. Nowrojee, Viloo (2015): The Autobiography of Makhan Singh and Documents Related to his Release. Nairobi: Asian African Heritage Trust.
3. Makhan Singh, Nairobi, 1947. Photo by Gopal Singh Chandan.



MAHAN SINGH, General Secretary of the Indian Trade Union of East Africa and East General Secretary of the East African Trade Union Congress.

મખન સિંઘનો જન્મ પંજાબના ધરજખ નામનું ગામડામાં ૨૭ ડી સેપ્ટેમ્બર ૧૯૧૩માં થયો હતો. તેઓના પિતા સુધ સિંઘે સુધાર કર્યા. ૧૯૨૦ માં સુધ સિંઘે કન્યા આલ્યા અને રેલ્વેની નોકરી કરી. ૧૯૨૭માં મખન સિંઘે અને તેઓના માતા ઉદાર કોર કન્યા આલ્યા.

સુધ સિંઘે રેલ્વેના મજૂર સંઘમાં મજૂરોના કક્ક માટે જોરદાર લડત ઉપાડેલ. આ કારણ સર તેઓને કામમાંથી રજા આપી દેવામાં આવ્યાં. પણ તેઓએ પંજાબ પ્રોટેક્ટોરિયમ પ્રેસ ખોલ્યું.

મખન સિંઘે નાઈરોબીનો ગવર્નમેન્ટ ઈન્ડસ્ટ્રી કાલ સ્કૂલ (કમ્પાની જમકુરો કાલ સ્કૂલમાં) ભણ્યા અને ૩૬ ૩૧ માં લંડન મેટ્રીક્યુલેશનની પરિણામી સફળ થયા. તેઓને આગળ લખતરનો બહુ શોખ હતો. પરંતુ પિતાનો આર્થિક ક્ષેત્રો સારો ન કોવાયો વધારે ભણી ન શક્યા. તેઓ પંજાબ પ્રોટેક્ટોરિયમ પ્રેસમાં કામે લાગી ગયા. ૧૯૩૪ માં તેઓ ભા રત ગયા અને સત્તર્કા કોર સાથે ભજ્ન કરી ફરી કન્યા આવી ગયા.

મખન સિંઘે નાની ઉંમરથી જ દુનિયવો -

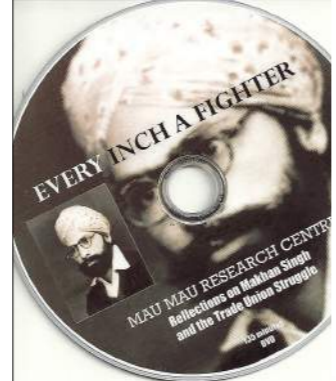
રાજનીતિ અને મજૂર-ડિસન આંદોલનમાં બહુ રસ હતો. તેઓ આવા વિષયો તેમજ કન્યા અને ભારતની સામ્રાજ્યશાહી સામેની આગ્રહોની લડત ઉપર પણ પંજાબી માં કવિતાઓ લખી જાહેર સભાઓમાં જનતાને સંબોધતા.

માર્ચ ૧૯૩૫માં મખન સિંઘે કન્યા ભરતો ય મજૂર સંઘ (કન્યા ઈન્ડસ્ટ્રી ટ્રેડ યુનિયન)ના મંદ્રી તરફે ચુટાયા. તેઓ અને તેઓના બીજા સાથી નેનાઓએ જાંયુ કં મજૂરોને પૂતાના કિલ્નો રહા માટે એકતાની બહુ જટુર છે. ત્યારે સામ્રાજ્ય સરકારનો પ્રવચન હતો કે ભારતીય અને આફ્રિકી મજૂરો વચ્ચે ખટપટ રહ્યા કરે. જાતિય ભેદભાવ દૂર કરવા ભારતીય મજૂર સંઘ તેનું નામ બદલાવો કન્યા મજૂર સંઘ (લેબર ટ્રેડ યુનિયન ઓફ કન્યા) રાખ્યું અને તેનું સભ્યસદસ્યુ સર્વે જાતિના મજૂરો માટે ખુલ્લું કર્યું. મખન સિંઘે આ નવા સંઘના પણ મંદ્રી ચુટાયા.

મખન સિંઘેની આગેવાની હેઠળ આ મજૂર સંઘને ઘણી સફળતા પ્રાપ્ત થઈ. ૧૯૩૫માં રેલ્વે સામેની ચૂંટણીમાં તેઓ ફતેહમંદ થતાં રેલ્વેમાં કારીગરો કે જેઓ ઘણાં વર્ષોથી અનિયમિત મજૂરો તરીકે રાખેલ તેઓને કાલમાં રોતે રાખવા રેલ્વેને કબૂલ કરવું પડ્યું.

એપ્રિલ-મે ૧૯૩૭માં મજૂર સંઘે નાઈરોબીના કારખાનાઓના કામદારોના પગારમાં વધારાની માંગ માટે એક હડતાલ ઘોલાવી. તેમાં પણ સફળતા મળતા મજૂરોના પગારમાં કારખાનાઓના માલિકોને ૧૫-૨૫%નો વધારો કરવાનો ફરજ પાડી.

આ મજૂર સંઘ પૂરજાંશમાં કામ ચલાવો રહ્યા હોવા છતાં પણ અહીંજ સામ્રાજ્યશાહી હકુમતે તેને સરકારી રોતે નોંધવાનો મના કરેલું. સંઘને તોડવાનાં પણ ઘણાં પ્રવચન કરવામાં આવ્યાં. પરંતુ



Labour and Capital

- MS's political work in TU was a response to the repressive colonial state, and the labor law in particular.
- Under the colonial state - and its post-colonial successor - Kenya was imprisoned in labour laws designed to cheapen and exploit "native labor".
- Workers have been at the forefront of the human rights struggle over centuries. MS created the building blocks & pillars of trade union movement in Kenya.

- Ouma & Mutua (2006)

Trade Unions and Mau Mau

- Most accounts of Mau Mau ignore or play down the role of TUs in struggle.
- Without their participation a sustained revolt would not have been possible.
- Militants of TU threw themselves into the revolutionary movement and established themselves as a new radical leadership committed to overthrowing colonial rule by mass action, strikes, demonstrations and armed struggle”

- Newsinger, John (2006)

Militant Leadership

- Mau Mau was “one of the most important revolutionary movements in the history of modern Africa and one of the most important revolutionary movement to confront British Empire”.
- “The movement was radicalised by a militant leadership that emerged from the trade union movement in Nairobi”.

- Newsinger (2006)

Makhan Singh's legacy

- “The legacy of Makhan Singh points to the centrality of TU as one of the major epicentres of democracy.
- Singh wanted workers to get organised on both practical and strategic issues. The practical issues varied from housing, wages, working conditions, health, and safety.
- Strategically, he was conscious that colonialism and crude capitalism were the key foundations for the privation of workers.
- That is why in 1950, Singh proposed complete independence and sovereignty of EA as the only viable solution to suffering of the people.”

- Ouma & Mutua (2006)

He had the Fire



Mwakenya celebrates Kenyan heroes in its Draft Minimum Programme, 1987

“I turned next to the trade unions after hearing Makhan Singh address the EATUC. But only Makhan agreed with my ideas. He had the fire I admired and was a real revolutionary ... our Union became part of Makhan Singh’s LTUEA. Later I became the president of LTUEA”

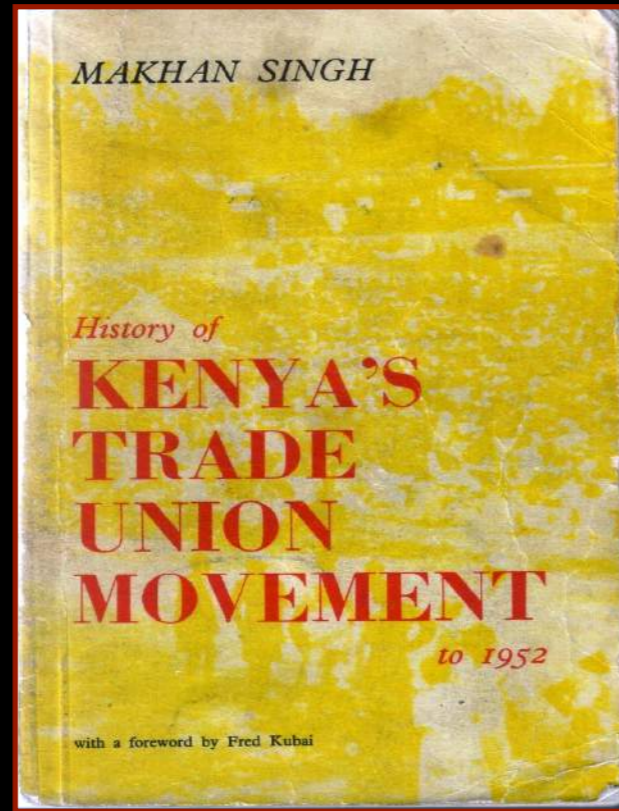
- Bildad Kaggia (1975)

Parallel Paths: South Africa and Kenya

- “Back then, our hopes were high for our country: modern industrial economy, strategic mineral resources, a working class and organised TU movement with a rich tradition of struggle.
- But that optimism overlooked the tenacity of the international capitalist system. From 1991 to 1996 the battle for the ANC's soul was eventually lost to corporate power: we were entrapped by the neoliberal economy – we "sold our people down the river”

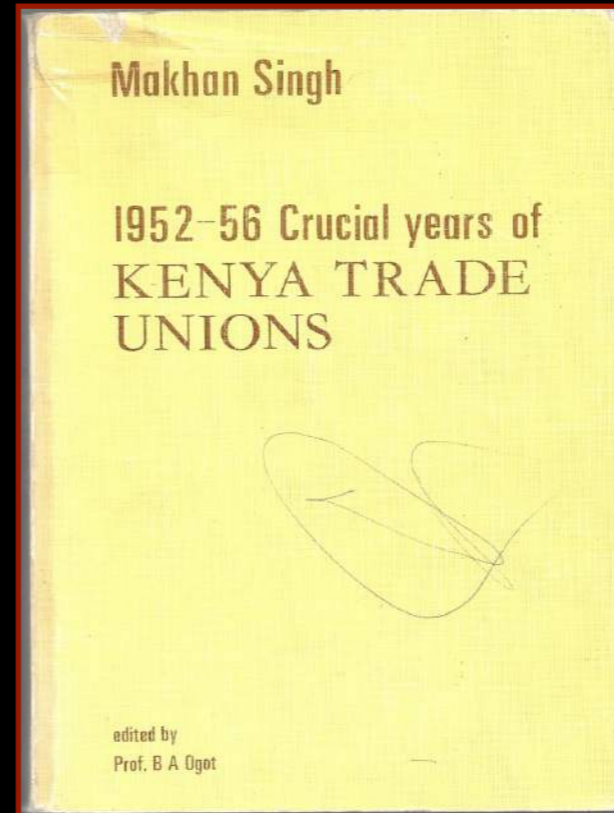
- Kasrils, Ronnie (2013)

Makhan Singh, the Historian



(1)

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(2)

1. Singh, Makhan (1969): History of Kenya's trade union movement to 1952. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
2. Singh, Makhan ((1980): Kenya's Trade Unions, 1952-1956. Edited by Bethwell A. Ogot. Nairobi: Uzima Press.

Makhan Singh Archives. IAS, University of Nairobi (1)

A LIST OF THE PAPERS OF MAKHAN SINGH'S, 1923 - 1973

- A. General Correspondence and Papers
- B. Subject Files
 1. Trade Union Matters
 2. Detention Proceedings
 3. Bills and Emanaal papers during Detention.
 4. Miscellaneous Subject Files
- C. Makhan Sing's own Drafts and Writings.
- D. Makhan Singh's Notes on his Reading.
 1. Note books kept during Detention.
 2. Notes taken from Archives of various Labour Organizations.
 3. Notes on the contents of the East African Standard, 1940-50.
 4. Notes taken from material in the Ministry of Labour.
 5. Notes on General Reading.
- E. Copies of papers presented to the Historical Association of Kenya Annual Conferences, 1969-72
- F. Press Cuttings
 1. Cuttings on Local Subjects
 2. Cuttings on other areas of Africa

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A. GENERAL CORRESPONDENCE AND PAPERS

Reference: MAK/A

These files include letters to and from, printed material, press cuttings, and notes added by Makhan Singh at a later date.

MAK/A/1

1923, 1926-33. Personal papers, many items in Punjabi, both print and MS. At fol. 109 is a list of Makhan Singh's schools, 1920-31. At fol. 226 is a draft of a paper "The Indian Youth in East Africa" c. 1933. From fols. 227-37 are pamphlets for the Legislative Council bye-election, 1933. 295 leaves (2 files).

MAK/A/2

1934-5. Many items, printed and MS. are in Punjabi. At fol. 8-10 is a draft speech on East African Union. At fols. 13-27 are papers about the Kenyan Indian elections of 1934. From fols. 56-65 are papers on Hindu customs. fol. 145 passim are papers about the formation of the Indian Workmen's Trade Union in 1934-5. At fols 162-7 are resolutions of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry in East Africa, 1935. At fol. 186-9 is a copy of a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies concerning the removal of the Kikuyu from Tigon, signed by Luka Wangangu and John Mlugwa and including names of Corobwa, Bitau and Staley Kinyanjui, 27 May, 1935. The constitution of the Labour Trade Union is at fols. 193-5, with a Punjabi translation at fols. 196-203. From fols. 248-58 are papers of the East African Indian National Congress, 1935. 261 leaves (2 files).

MAK/A/3

1936-September 1937. Many items printed and MS. are in Punjabi. From fol. 2 are speeches by A.C.L. De Souza to the Legislative Council, 1936. At fol. 17-24 is a political pamphlet "The Soul of India," by S.D. Das, 1936. At fol. 28 is "Jheeri's Weekly" duplicated in Nairobi, 24 May 1936. At fols. 36-9 is a copy of a bill to regulate Hindu marriage, 1936. At fol. 42 is the constitution of the East African Indian National Congress, 1936. Throughout are copies of printed material for the Labour Trade Union, many in Punjabi, Gujarati and Urdu, and press cuttings. The Kenya Worker December 1936 and January 1937, a newsheet in Punjabi is at fol. 87-102. At fol. 117 ff. is material about the Dar-es-Salaam Asian Workers strike of 1937 and from fol. 122 ff. material about the Nairobi strike of April-June, 1937. From fol. 206 ff.,

Big hand in the struggle for independence

“Makhan Singh was a prominent political figure and had a big hand in the struggle for independence. He joined VOK in 1961 as a translator and prepared news bulletins in Urdu. On his first day at work, Jomo Kenyatta was there in the Broadcasting House.”

- Voice of Kenya Souvenir Book - Bharit (1)

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Farewell, Comrade