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OA No. 297 of 2



IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUDICATURE AT MADRAS

DATED: 16-06-2026

CORAM

THE HON'BLE DR.JUSTICE A.D.MARIA CLETE

OA No. 297 of 2026

AND

OA NO. 299 OF 2026, OA NO. 298 OF 2026

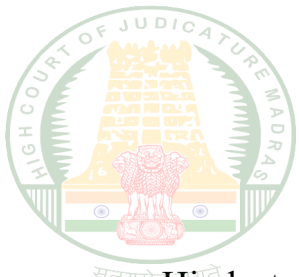
in CS NO. 77 OF 2026

Hindustan Unilever Limited
Ponds House,
No.101, Santhome High Road,
Chennai-600028
Represented by its Authorised Signatory,
Ms.Dhruthi Lunker

..Applicant(s)

Vs

1. All India Ponds Employees Nalasangam and 2 others
No.5/77, Munivel Street,
Kakkanji Nagar,
Vyasarpadi,
Chennai-600039
2. Ponds M Shriraman
President, All India Ponds Employees
Nalasangam,
No.5/77, Munivel Street,
Kakkanji Nagar,
Vyasarpadi,
Chennai-600039
3. B.Devanathan
General Secretary, All India Ponds Employees
Nalasanagam,
No.5/77, Munivel Street,
Kakkanji Nagar,
Vyasarpadi,
Chennai-600039



OA No. 297 of 2



..Respondent(s)

CS No. 77 of 2026

Hindustan Unilever Limited

Ponds House,

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Represented by its Authorised Signatory,

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General Secretary, All India Ponds Employees

Nalasanagam,

No.5/77, Munivel Street,

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Vyasarpadi,

Chennai-600039

..Respondent(s)

OA No. 299 of 2026

Hindustan Unilever Limited

Ponds House,

No.101, Santhome High Road,

Chennai-600028

Represented by its Authorised Signatory,

Ms.Dhruthi Lunker

..Applicant(s)



Vs

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Nalasanagam,
No.5/77, Munivel Street,
Kakkanji Nagar,
Vyasarpadi,
Chennai-600039

..Respondent(s)

OA No. 298 of 2026

Hindustan Unilever Limited
Ponds House,
No.101, Santhome High Road,
Chennai-600028
Represented by its Authorised Signatory,
Ms.Dhruthi Lunker

..Applicant(s)

Vs

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No.5/77, Munivel Street,
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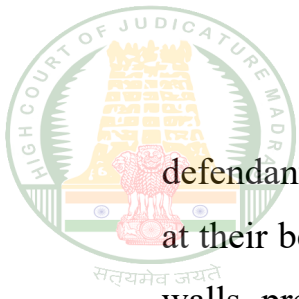
..Respondent(s)

OA Nos. 297, 298 & 299 of 2026

Common Prayer : Applications filed to to grant an order of interim injunctions restraining the Respondents, their officers, members, or any person acting for the respondents or at their behest from holding demonstrations, or dharnas or shouting slogans and/or obstructing or preventing ingress and egress to and from the Applicants establishment and/or entering the premises of the Applicants establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai 28, from affixing posters, hand bills, slogans and inscriptions on the walls/premises of the Applicant Establishment and from indulging in ghearoing or threatening intimidating the officers in any way of the Applicant Establishment.

CS No. 77 of 2026

Prayer : Suit filed seeking a) The defendants , their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from holding demonstrations or dharnas or shouting slogans and /or obstructing or preventing ingress and egress to and from the Plaintiffs establishment and /or entering the premises of the plaintiffs establishment No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai-28 b)The



defendants , their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from affixing posters, hand bills , slogans and inscriptions on the walls. premises of the plaintiff Establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai-28 c) The defendants , their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from indulging in ghearoing or threatening , intimidating the officers in any way of the plaintiff Establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai-28 d) For such further orders as this Honble court may deem fit and proper in the circumstances of the case and e) For the costs of the suit.

For Applicant(s): Mr.Krishna Srinivasan, Senior Counsel
for S. Ramasubramaniam And Associates

For Respondent(s): Mr.Gowrishankar

COMMON ORDER

These three Original Applications arise out of C.S.No.77 of 2026. O.A.No.297 of 2026 is filed for interim injunction restraining the respondents, their officers, members or persons acting at their behest from holding demonstrations or dharnas or shouting slogans and/or obstructing or preventing ingress and egress to and from the applicant's establishment and/or entering the premises of the applicant's establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai-600028. O.A.No.298 of 2026 is filed to restrain the respondents from indulging in gheraoing or threatening or intimidating the officers of the



applicant. O.A.No.299 of 2026 is filed to restrain the respondents from affixing posters, handbills, slogans and inscriptions on the walls/premises of the applicant's establishment.

2. Notice was ordered to the respondents. The respondents entered appearance and filed a common counter. The applications were heard finally at the interlocutory stage. Since the three applications arise from the same suit, the same factual background and the same alleged cause of action, they are disposed of by this common order.

3. The averments of the applicant in brief : The applicant is Hindustan Unilever Limited. After the merger in 1998 of Ponds India Limited, the factories and commercial activities of Pond's India Limited were taken over by the applicant and the employees of Pond's India Limited became employees of the applicant.

4. The applicant further states that, before the merger, Pond's India Limited had constituted three private welfare trusts, namely, Pond's Management Staff Welfare Trust, Pond's Employees Welfare Trust and Pond's Supervisory Staff Welfare Trust. According to the applicant, these trusts were constituted to provide education, housing, medical and other general benefits to present employees and, after merger, the applicant stepped into the shoes of the



management in relation to administration of those trusts.

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5. The grievance of the applicant is that the first respondent association and its office-bearers have, from about 2014/2015, been alleging discrimination in distribution of retirement and trust-related benefits. The applicant states that pamphlets and e-mails were circulated alleging that employees of Pond's India Limited were pressurised into accepting voluntary retirement. According to the applicant, demonstrations were held at various places where Pond's India Limited earlier had factories.

6. The applicant relies upon a pamphlet/communication of January 2016, by which the first respondent association proposed to hold a one-day fast on 28.01.2016 at Chepauk, Chennai. The applicant states that the demands included distribution of sale proceeds of factories situated at Chennai, Tindivanam, Puducherry and Ooty, revised retirement benefits and an CBI enquiry into contracts entered into between the applicant and other manufacturing units.

7. The applicant further relies upon a letter dated 22.01.2016 addressed to its Managing Director, alleging bias in respect of former Pond's India Limited employees and informing that a one-day fast would be held on 28.01.2016. The applicant says that, since the fast was to be held at Chepauk, it

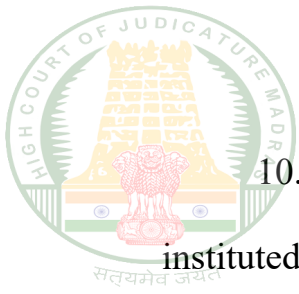


did not take action to prevent it.

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8. The applicant's immediate grievance in the earlier round arose from a subsequent notice dated 22.02.2016, by which, according to the applicant, the respondents threatened to demonstrate in front of the applicant's office premises at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai-600028, and to seek alms from the general public. On that basis, the applicant filed C.S.No.116 of 2016 before this Court seeking injunction against demonstrations, dharnas, obstruction of ingress and egress, gherao, intimidation and affixture of posters.

9. In C.S.No.116 of 2016, the applicant filed O.A.Nos.129 to 131 of 2016. An ex parte interim order was granted on 04.03.2016. After the respondents entered appearance and filed counter, the interim injunction was confirmed on 09.08.2017. The respondents carried the matter in O.S.A.No.333 of 2017. The Division Bench confirmed the order by judgment dated 11.06.2018. The applicant places emphasis on the Division Bench order and the undertaking recorded therein, particularly that the association and its members shall not hold demonstration in a manner which would hamper the day-to-day affairs of the company and shall not interfere with ingress and egress to the office premises.



10. The applicant also refers to another suit, C.S.No.497 of 2018, instituted by Agila Munnal Pond's Employee Nalasangam invoking Section 92 CPC in relation to the trusts. Leave was granted initially and later revoked. The appeal in O.S.A.No.303 of 2019 was dismissed by the Division Bench on 23.06.2022. Civil Appeal No.6559 of 2022 was thereafter dismissed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court on 04.02.2026, while granting liberty to avail such other remedy as may be available in law before any competent forum.

11. The applicant states that C.S.No.116 of 2016 was later transferred to the City Civil Court and renumbered as O.S.No.92 of 2023. According to the applicant, in view of the order passed in O.S.A.No.333 of 2017 and the undertaking of the association, it did not pursue the suit and the suit was dismissed on 12.08.2025 with liberty to file a fresh suit if need arose.

12. According to the applicant, after the said dismissal, the second respondent sent a letter dated 14.08.2025 to multiple recipients, including judicial authorities and officials of the applicant, alleging that the dismissal of O.S.No.92 of 2023 was unilateral and improper and demanding settlement. The applicant describes the letter as incoherent, vexatious and intended to bring pressure upon the company.

13. The immediate cause for the present suit is a letter dated 21.03.2026.



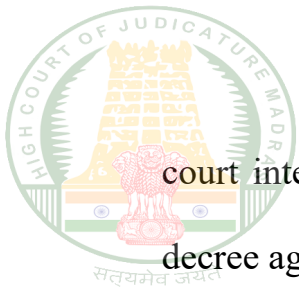
According to the applicant, the first respondent association, led by the second respondent, called upon the applicant to participate in an “amicable settlement”

meeting proposed to be held on 30.03.2026 at the applicant’s premises. The applicant states that the letter contemplated assembly of a large number of members, including persons allegedly terminated from different units, at the applicant’s premises between 2.00 p.m. and 4.00 p.m.

14. The applicant asserts that this proposed assembly was unilateral, coercive and intended to reopen closed issues. It further states that it is not aware whether the first respondent association is registered, whether the office-bearers are duly elected, or whether the persons proposed to assemble are identifiable members. The applicant apprehends obstruction, intimidation, interference with business operations, threat to safety and injury to reputation.

15. The applicant also relies upon the respondents’ communication dated 21.03.2026 to the Inspector of Police, Egmore, seeking police protection for the proposed gathering. According to the applicant, this shows a clear intention to congregate in large numbers at the applicant’s premises irrespective of its consent. The applicant states that it addressed the police authorities on 26.03.2026 requesting prevention of such demonstration.

16. Therefore, HUL claims a fresh cause of action has arisen requiring



court intervention. Thus the suit before this court praying for a judgment and decree against the Defendants that

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- (a) the Defendants, their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from holding demonstrations or dharnas or shouting slogans and/or obstructing or preventing ingress and egress to and from the Plaintiffs establishment and/or entering the premises of the Plaintiffs establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai -28.
- (b) the Defendants, their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from affixing posters, hand bills, slogans and inscriptions on the walls/premises of the Plaintiff Establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai -28.
- (c) the Defendants, their officers, members or any person acting for the Defendants or at their behest from indulging in ghearoing or threatening, intimidating the officers in any way of the Plaintiff Establishment at No.101, Santhome High Road, Chennai -28.
- (d) for such further or other orders as this Hon'ble Court may deem fit and proper in the circumstances of the case and
- (e) For the costs of the suit and thereby render justice.



17. The averments in the common Counter Affidavit filed by the Respondents are as follows: The 2nd respondent, who is the President of the 1st respondent Association, has filed the common counter affidavit on behalf of himself, the 1st respondent Association and the 3rd respondent. The respondents have denied the allegations made by the plaintiff and have contended that the applications are not maintainable either in law or on facts.

18. According to the respondents, the 1st respondent Association is a registered trade union under the Trade Unions Act, 1926, representing employees and retired workmen of the plaintiff establishment. It is their case that the Association is entitled to raise legitimate industrial and welfare-related grievances and that civil proceedings seeking to restrain such activities are barred in view of the protection available under Section 18 of the Trade Unions Act, 1926.

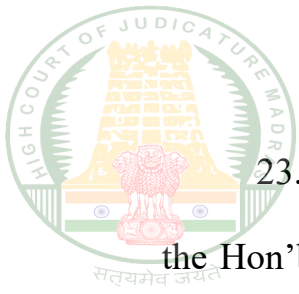
19. The respondents admit the existence of the Pond's Management, Employees and Supervisory Staff Welfare Trusts, but deny that the plaintiff has administered the trusts in the interest of the beneficiaries. Their grievance is that the plaintiff has illegally altered or modified the eligibility criteria, thereby excluding legitimate beneficiaries, particularly retired employees, from the benefits of the said trusts.



20. The respondents further state that the alleged agitations referred to by the plaintiff were only peaceful democratic protests. They submit that distribution of pamphlets, holding of a one-day fast at Chepauk, and demanding a CBI enquiry and fair distribution of the sale proceeds from the closed factories are legitimate industrial grievances. They contend that such activities are protected under Article 19(1)(a) and Article 19(1)(b) of the Constitution of India, namely the right to freedom of speech and the right to assemble peacefully without arms.

21. The respondents deny any intention to embarrass, harass, threaten or intimidate the plaintiff or its officers. They state that the act of “begging” or “seeking alms” was only a symbolic form of protest to highlight the financial distress of retired employees who, according to them, have been denied their rightful dues from the welfare trusts.

22. The respondents also contend that the earlier orders passed in O.A.Nos.129 to 131 of 2016 and O.S.A.No.333 of 2017 cannot operate as a permanent bar against all future protests. According to them, those orders were passed in a different factual context and cannot be used to prohibit lawful demonstrations forever. They further state that they are ready to respect ingress and egress and do not intend to block the gates or enter the plaintiff's premises.



23. The respondents rely upon the liberty said to have been granted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court on 04.02.2026 to avail other remedies available in law. According to them, the present protest is a consequence of the plaintiff's failure to address their grievances despite such liberty.

24. The respondents deny that the earlier suit in O.S.No.92 of 2023 was withdrawn by the plaintiff. According to them, the said suit was dismissed for default with the endorsement that the plaintiff was absent and there was no representation. They therefore contend that the present proceedings amount to re-litigation and forum shopping.

25. The respondents also deny that the letters dated 14.08.2025 and 21.03.2026 contain any threat or extortion. They describe the said communications as bona fide attempts to seek dialogue and amicable settlement of the grievances of retired employees. They also state that their communication to the Inspector of Police, Egmore, seeking police protection, shows their intention to conduct only a peaceful and orderly assembly.

26. The respondents specifically deny that they assembled at the plaintiff's premises on 30.03.2026 or that there was any threat to the safety, security or reputation of the plaintiff. They submit that most of the members are



retired employees and senior citizens and that no material has been produced by the plaintiff to show any past act of violence or damage to property.

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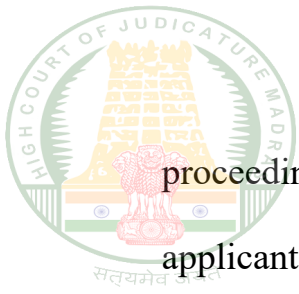
27. It is the further case of the respondents that the prayers sought by the plaintiff are vague, broad and legally unsustainable. According to them, a blanket injunction restraining demonstrations, shouting of slogans or peaceful assembly would amount to curtailing their constitutional rights. They submit that they have no intention of entering the plaintiff's premises, gheraoing staff or blocking ingress and egress, and that they are willing to abide by any reasonable distance restriction, such as 50 or 100 metres from the entrance.

28. On the above grounds, the respondents pray for dismissal of O.A.Nos.297, 298 and 299 of 2026.

29. Point for consideration

(i) Whether the applicant has established a prima facie case for grant of the interim injunctions sought in O.A.Nos.297, 298 and 299 of 2026;

30. The applicant's case rests on three circumstances. First, there were earlier proceedings in C.S.No.116 of 2016 and O.S.A.No.333 of 2017. In those



proceedings, orders were passed restraining demonstrations in front of the applicant's premises and interference with ingress and egress. Secondly, the trust-related proceedings initiated by Agila Munnal Pond's Employee Nalasangam ended against that association, including before the Hon'ble Supreme Court in Civil Appeal No.6559 of 2022. Thirdly, after the order of the Hon'ble Supreme Court, the respondents issued the letter dated 21.03.2026 calling upon the applicant to participate in an "amicable settlement" meeting allegedly at the applicant's premises. According to the applicant, this is an attempt to reopen a closed matter and to put pressure on the company by bringing a large number of persons to its office.

31. These circumstances may explain why the applicant has approached this Court. But they do not, by themselves, establish a prima facie case for the broad injunctions sought. The earlier order in O.S.A.No.333 of 2017 was passed in the factual setting of the 2016 dispute. It cannot operate as a permanent ban on every future act of collective representation. The applicant must show a present or imminent legal injury.

32. The reliance placed on the trust-related proceedings also has to be seen in its proper limits. The applicant says that the trust issue has reached



finality and that the respondents are trying to reagitate the same issue through agitation. But these applications are not contempt proceedings. The applicant has not shown any specific direction of the Hon'ble Supreme Court prohibiting the respondents from making a representation, seeking negotiation, or pursuing any remedy still available in law. On the contrary, the applicant's own pleading records that the Hon'ble Supreme Court, while dismissing Civil Appeal No.6559 of 2022, granted liberty to Agila Munnal Pond's Employee Nalasangam to avail such other remedy as may be available in law before any competent forum.

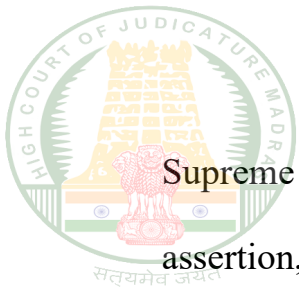
33. The letter dated 21.03.2026 is the immediate basis for these applications. The applicant reads it as a threat. The respondents read it as a request for discussion. The applicant says that the respondents intended to bring a large number of persons to the applicant's premises and thereby create pressure, obstruction and risk to safety. The respondents deny this. They state that the participants are retired and elderly workmen seeking discussion regarding welfare benefits. They also state that they are willing to provide the details of participants. At this stage, this Court is not deciding whether the respondents' claim regarding the trusts or retirement benefits is correct. The only issue is whether the materials placed in these applications justify a preventive injunction.



34. O.A.No.297 of 2026 seeks to restrain demonstrations, dharnas, shouting of slogans, obstruction of ingress and egress, and entry into the applicant's premises. O.A.No.298 of 2026 seeks to restrain gherao and intimidation. O.A.No.299 of 2026 seeks to restrain affixing posters, handbills, slogans and inscriptions on the applicant's walls and premises. The prayers are wide. They do not merely seek protection against a specific proved act. They seek prior restraint against a range of collective labour activity.

35. In considering such relief, the Court cannot treat the dispute as a simple dispute between a property owner and a stranger. Labour law is informed by constitutional values. Article 19(1)(a) protects speech and expression. Article 19(1)(b) protects peaceful assembly. Article 19(1)(c) protects the right to form associations and unions. These rights are subject to law and reasonable restrictions. Peaceful collective expression cannot be restrained merely because it causes discomfort or pressure to the employer.

36. In **All India Bank Employees' Association v. National Industrial Tribunal**, AIR 1962 SC 171, the Supreme Court held that the right to form unions is protected, though every method adopted by a union is not automatically protected. In **Kameshwar Prasad v. State of Bihar**, AIR 1962 SC 1166, the Supreme Court held that peaceful demonstration is a form of speech and assembly. In **B.R. Singh v. Union of India**, (1989) 4 SCC 710, the

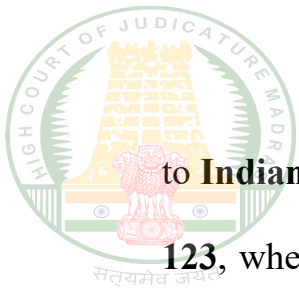


Supreme Court recognised collective protest as a historical instrument of labour assertion, though not an unlimited right. These authorities require the Court to distinguish between peaceful labour expression and unlawful conduct.

37. The applicant relied on the fact that the proposed meeting was at its premises. There is no material placed on record for the same. There can be no blanket restraint against all peaceful expression outside the premises or at a lawful place.

38. In **S.D. Sharma v. Trade Fair Authority of India, ILR 1986 Delhi 430**, the Delhi High Court held that participation in a peaceful meeting or demonstration cannot, by itself, be treated as misconduct. The Court on facts held that peaceful demonstration is protected, unless it is shown to disturb public tranquillity or violate a valid restriction.

39. The Madras High Court applied the same approach in **D. Thomas Franco Rajendra Dev v. The Disciplinary Authority and Circle Development Officer, decided on 04.07.2013 in W.A.nos.431 and 432 of 2013 & W.P.No.16746 of 2013**. In that case, bank officers participated in a lunch-hour demonstration. The Division Bench held that holding a demonstration, if peaceful and not disturbing public tranquillity or the working of the bank, could not by itself be treated as misconduct. The Court also referred

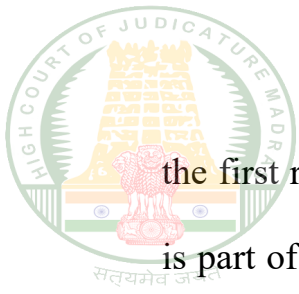


to **Indian Bank v. Federation of Indian Bank Employees Union, 1982-1-LLJ**

123, where this Court rejected a similar attempt to obtain an injunction against union demonstrations and recognised peaceful demonstrations and meetings as part of trade union activity.

40. The statutory position also points in the same direction. Section 16 of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 gives protection to a registered trade union, its office-bearers and members from civil proceedings in certain cases. It provides that no suit or other legal proceeding shall be maintainable in any civil court against any registered Trade Union or any office-bearer or member thereof in respect of any act done in contemplation or furtherance of an industrial dispute to which a member of the Trade Union is a party on the ground only that such act induces some other person to break a contract of employment or that it is an interference with the trade, business, or employment of some other person or with the right of some other person to dispose of his capital or of his labour as he wills. Sub-section (2) gives further protection to a registered trade union in respect of certain tortious acts done by its agent in contemplation or furtherance of an industrial dispute, if the act was done without the knowledge of, or contrary to express instructions given by, the executive of the trade union.

41. It is not necessary in these applications to finally decide the full extent of the protection claimed under Section 16. The respondents claim that



the first respondent is a registered union and that the impugned communication is part of collective labour representation. The applicant disputes the bona fides of the respondents and apprehends unlawful conduct. The narrower and sufficient point is that civil law cannot be used merely because trade union activity causes pressure or inconvenience to the employer. For a preventive injunction, the applicant must still show facts establishing a present or imminent legal injury.

42. The materials placed by the applicant do not satisfy that test. The applicant has not placed any material showing any actual incident on or after 21.03.2026. No officer of the applicant has filed an affidavit stating that he or she was personally threatened. No specific act of obstruction of ingress or egress is shown. No material is placed to show that the respondents entered the applicant's premises, blocked the gate, damaged property, pasted posters, or attempted to gherao any officer after the letter dated 21.03.2026. No police report has been produced to show imminent breach of peace. The applicant has also filed only an incomplete document relating to the respondents' communication to the police seeking permission/protection, and that document does not establish any unlawful act.

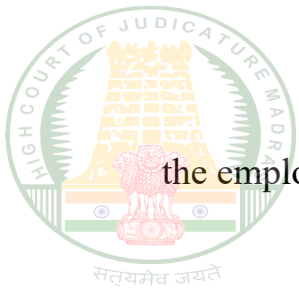
43. The respondents' communication to the police cannot, by itself, be treated as proof of unlawful intention. The applicant says it shows that the



respondents intended to assemble at the premises irrespective of consent. The respondents say it shows that they wanted the proposed gathering to remain peaceful and orderly. In the absence of independent material showing imminent disorder, the Court cannot draw an adverse inference merely from the fact that police protection was sought.

44. In **Dow Chemical International Pvt. Ltd. v. Nithyanandam**, **O.A.Nos.395 to 397 of 2009 in C.S.No.356 of 2009, decided on 09.07.2009**, this Court dealt with a similar prayer. The company sought injunction against demonstrations, slogans, placards, pamphleteering, obstruction of ingress and egress, and also sought a restraint against protest within 100 metres from its office. This Court refused to continue the injunction because the company relied substantially on an earlier protest and failed to show continuing obstruction or imminent disruption. The Court held that before imposing prior restraint on speech or peaceful assembly, there must be a clear case of infringement of the applicant's legal rights.

45. That principle applies here. The applicant has shown past litigation, the Supreme Court order, and the letter dated 21.03.2026. These materials may create an apprehension. They do not establish a present act or imminent threat sufficient to justify the broad injunctions sought. A civil court cannot restrain protest in advance merely because the proposed collective action may embarrass



the employer or place pressure on it.

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46. The Court must also be conscious of the practical effect of civil injunctions in labour disputes. In **D. Pugazhendhi v. District Collector, Chennai, W.P.No.10471 of 2012, decided on 23.04.2012**, this Court recalled the early history of the Madras Labour Union and the use of civil actions for damages and injunctions against trade union leaders. That historical reference is relevant here only to remind the Court that broad civil remedies, if granted without a strict factual foundation, may weaken collective labour activity. A preventive order must therefore be based on facts, not on general apprehension.

47. The applicant has not established a prima facie case. The balance of convenience also does not support a blanket restraint on demonstrations, slogans, assembly or collective representation. The alleged injury is based on apprehension and not on proved present or imminent unlawful conduct. On the other hand, granting the injunctions in the form sought would directly affect collective labour expression.

48. The only finding recorded here is that the materials placed in these applications do not justify prior restraint in the broad terms prayed for.



Result

49. In the result, O.A.Nos.297, 298 and 299 of 2026 are dismissed. No costs.

16-06-2026

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OA No. 297 of 2



DR.A.D.MARIA CLETE J.

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