

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE EMERGENCE OF TRADE UNION ORGANIZATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Trade unions are a global phenomenon. They are being reckoned as spokesmen of the working class. Trade unions, the product of large scale industrialization have achieved a legal status to represent the working class. It is the duty of the Trade unions whose membership involves workers and union leaders to protect and promote their common interests. The history of trade unionism in India is interspersed with economic and political events which moulded its growth and pattern. This paper attempts to provide an overview of the emergence of trade union organizations in India and also provides an insight to some theories pertaining to the origin and importance of trade unions.

**Key words:** Trade Unions, Organizations, Workers, Working class, Leaders.

Trade unions are believed to be an inseparable phenomenon of an industry. The formation of trade unions has been described in the following words. "The original organizer of the trade union movement is the shop, the factory, the mine and the industry..... . The union is the spontaneous grouping of industrial workders thrown together functionally" (Frank Tannenbaum, 1952, p. 60).

The trade union had arisen out of the consequences of the capitalist system. Because, the employers with the process of industrialization were basically concerned with the material achievements but ignored the deplorable conditions of the working class who provided the labour (Gaur, 2016).

Obviously, trade unionism is an outcome of the clustering off the employees at one place. Factories or mines are such places where the employees have to work together and come in contact with each other daily. Their daily meeting at one and the same place, their common problems and the opportunity of sharing the feelings of their

colleagues generate the consciousness among the workers to combine together and make an organization which could listen to their grievances and problems and more importantly which would prove helpful to them.

There are many theories pertaining to the origin and importance of trade unions.

According to Jha (1970), webb and webb have treated it as an organization which works for the reconstruction of society, but on the other hand they maintain that trade union is an association of wage earners who want to increase their wages. In fact, they want to depict the trade unions as organizations of workers which are determined to reconstruct society by improving the wages of employees. Through trade unions, workers try to demolish the capitalist structure of society and to establish a society based on socialism. "a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their

working lives" (Webb and Webb, 1950, quoted in Jha, 1970, p. 19).

Cole also shares the views of the webbs. His belief that trade unions carry on class struggle and the strike which is an outcome of class struggle finds expression in these words, "As long as social inequalities persist, industrial disputes will go along with it ..... Strikes happen because of inequality and injustice. Trade unionism exists today to carry on class struggle" (quoted in Jha, 1970, p. 23).

Frank (1952) emphasized that trade unionism is the outcome of the mode of production which is based on machines. He believes that machines have changed the whole structure of human life.

Marxist theory of trade unionism holds that it is the outcome of class struggle-the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie. According to him, although in the present industrial structure every worker is alienated due to the division of labour yet a common issue-the issue of the maintenance of wages unite and combine them to fight with their owners and hence the trade unions are established. In his early writings three salient arguments are given. First, that unions are the corollary of capitalist industries. Second, unions are economically powerful and they can check employers from reducing the price of labour power below a certain value but they could not get wages raised above this level. Third, the limited defensive economic action compelled the workers to unite firmly on a class basis, to raise political demand and finally to get engaged in revolutionary class struggle. Karl Marx discussing various facets of working class organization, has considered labour organizations as powerful instruments of struggle for working class against the oppression of capitalist class. According to him the emergence of the working class has led to the origin and development of trade unions. Workers organized themselves under trade unions to protect themselves from being subjected to capitalist injustices like unemployment, low wages and to ultimately abolish the system of wage slavery (Marx, 1952).

Lenin treats trade unions as concretization of the emergence of workers consciousness "The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary legislation etc." (Lenin, 1964, p. 375). But contrary to the classical view point which stressed capitalism to be the major driving force for the growth of unionism, a different interpretation has been offered by a group of neo-classical theorists. The central theme of the KDHM (Kerr, Dunlop, Harrison and Myers) model is the hypothesis that the unions were the outcome of the response to industrialization and not capitalism as envisaged by Marx or the Webbs (Kerr et al., 1960). For Marx, "The political movement' of the working class naturally has its final aim the conquest of 'political power' for it ..... For this a previous organization of the working class ..... is naturally necessary, which grows out of its economic force themselves" (Lozovsky, 1942).

But the belief that capitalism is responsible for generating trade union organization is debatable because industrialization has created a situation that not only workers but middle class employees are also engaged in trade union organizations. Middle class trade unionism is generally modelled on the trade unionism of workers. This political proletarianization has created trade union organizations almost everywhere. Although they differ widely in their structure, leadership and ideology from the workers' trade unions but they (organizations) are formed to oppose and take offensive against the management to demand and fight for their rights. This indicates that trade unionism is a part and parcel of classes (even white collars and middle class) and class struggle. This questions the classical model. Among Indian studies Sheth and Sharma (1969, 1971) suggested that workers' participation in union affairs is very low. Pandey (1967), Pandey and Vikram (1962) and Arya (1980) also arrive at the same conclusion. Crouch (1986) describes the Indian workers as 'status

conscious' possessing a mentality to obey and hence disinterested in union work.

The Emergence of trade unions, however, was not a sudden and automatic outcome of industrialization. Instead, it seems to be a general historic process, precipitated by clash of interests between employers and employees, enhanced atrocities by the employers and unbearable living and working conditions of the workers. This conflict seems to take shape initially in the forms of sporadic instances of protests and later in the form of organized and unorganized activities, i.e., in the form of trade unions. Trade Union Amendment Act, 1876, Sec. 16, defines the trade union in the following words. The term 'trade union' means any combination, whether temporary or permanent, for regulating the relations between workmen and masters, or between workmen and workmen, or between masters and masters, or for imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business, whether such combination would or would not, if the principal Act (1871) had not been passed, have been deemed to have been an unlawful combination by reason of some one or more of its purposes being in restraint of trade" (Quoted in Rao, 1965, p. 218).

The formal basis for union organization is provided by the Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926. The relevant article reads as follows "Any seven or more members of a trade union may, by subscribing their names to the rules of the Trade Union and by otherwise complying with the provisions of this Act with respect to registration, apply for registration of the Trade Unions under this Act."

The Trade Unions Act was passed in 1926 under the title of the Indian Trade Unions Act and was brought into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1927 by a government. The act was amended in 1947, 1960 and 1962. Subsequently, the word 'Indian' was deleted from the amended Act of 1964, which came into force from 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1965.

The history of trade unionism in India is mingled with many political and economic events which moulded its growth and patterns of its

development, and contributed to its present strengths and weaknesses, as has happened in other parts of the world.

The advent of trade unionism in India can be traced to the early days of industrialization, i.e., the beginning of 1850s with the establishment of cotton and jute mills in Bombay and Calcutta (Singh, 1965).

Although these industries provided job opportunities for the workers but instead of bringing prosperity they proved to be detrimental to them. The setting up of modern they proved to be detrimental to them. The setting up of modern industries meant enormous stress and strain for the workers. The widespread discontent among the workers was a major impetus for trade unionism to take roots.

Workers economic struggle derived strength from the nationalist movement. The early leaders of trade unions were also highly active in the country's freedom struggle and they received full support from the workers and consolidated their strength. Industrial workers were also supported by social workers and other reformers in the early stages of the trade union movement. The continuous effort of these leaders led to the appointments of various committees and commissions to probe into the workers' plight.

Indian trade unionism, in its early phase, was in a loose and amorphous state. Describing the situation an observer has noted, "..... They were, for the most part, temporary organisations which existed so long as the grievances of their members were not remedied upon the achievement of their object, viz., the increase of wages, and frequently, other demands, the interests of members and even of promoters diminished and in a short span of time the 'unions' ceased to exist" (Karnik, 1966).

This state continued till 1918 when the Madras Labour Union was formed under the leadership of B.P. Wadia. The Madras Labour Union has been accepted as the first genuine properly organized 'trade union' in India (Verma & Mukherjee, 1982).

But in the beginning of 1920s the whole country witnessed sporadic instances of strikes. A brief account of the prevailing situation was reported by the Royal Commission on Labour. As obvious in the report, the sudden rise in strikes and protests was an effect of worldwide expansion of proletarian consciousness attributed to the Great October Revolution. "The two or three years following the close of the war saw the formation of a large number of organizations, owing their origin mainly to the grave economic difficulties of industrial labour. The leading industries were yielding phenomenal profits but wages lagged behind prices and labourer far from participating in the unprecedented prosperity often found the conditions harder than before. The world-wide uprising of labour consciousness extended to India and for the first time the mass of industrial workers awoke to their disabilities particularly in the matter of wages and hours and to the possibility of combination....." (Report of the Royal Commission on Labour as quoted in Singh, 1965).

Trade unionism at the national level is characterized by the presence of six central organizations and it is yet unknown and undecided that whether their number would increase in future. The existing trade union organizations though possessing some common viewpoints differ from each other in some of their aims and objectives.

The first national trade union of India, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920. It was the result of a resolution passed by the organized workers of Bombay and the delegates which met in a conference on 31<sup>st</sup> Oct., 1920. It was attended by such first rank political leaders as Motilal Nehru, M.A. Jinnah, Mrs. Annie Besant and Vallabhai Patel and Col. Wedgewood on behalf of the British Trade Union Congress. The first president was Lala Lajpat Rai.

The second one viz, Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) came into existence 4<sup>th</sup> May 1948, as result of the resolution passed on 17<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1947, by the Union Board of the Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh, which was a labour organization

working under the direction of National Congress-minded labour leaders the Gandhian philosophy of Sarvodaya.

When the Socialists separated from the Congress, those who were dissatisfied with the pro-Communist policies of the INTUC, formed a new organization, the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, which was merged with the Indian Federation of Labour in 1948 under the name of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. It is an organ of the Praja Socialist Party.

Some trade union leaders of the socialist bent met together in December, 1948 to form a new central organization of labour, called Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Some of the leaders did not agree with the principles and objectives of the Sabha and they therefore, again met at Calcutta on December 27, 1948, and decided to call upon a conference of trade union leaders to form a united Trade Union committee. This Committee called for a meeting of the various leaders at Calcutta on April 30, 1949, and formed a new union under the name of United Trade Union Congress.

Bhartiya Mazdoor Sabha has been the outcome of the decision taken by the Jana Sangh to its convention at Bhopal on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1954.

The youngest central organization is the Centre of India Trade Union (CITU) which was formed in 1970 and is affiliated to the communist party of India (Marxist).

Thus in India the emergence of trade union organizations were considered as a means of collective action to strengthen industrial labourers. The First four decades in the post-independence pre liberalization period were marked by a social cohesion between the state and trade unions. These organizations were working with different objectives in different spheres.

But the present phase of globalization is marked by the introduction of the new economic policy in India in July 1991. The ongoing economic reforms and proposed labour law reforms in this new economic environment threaten to violate a

number of human rights viz., right to work, right to social security etc.

Under these circumstances trade union organizations are supposed to protect the human rights of workers. They may safeguard the economic and social life of industrial workers.

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