

### **3 Organised Labour**

Organised labour interests, that is, the trade unions of the working class, are second in importance to business organisations as pressure groups. There are a large number of trade unions in the country but, on the whole, they have been less influential than employers' organisation in the formulation and implementation of the nation's economic and social policies, particularly labour policy. The organisational weakness of the trade unions and lack of proper leadership are, among others, important factors.)

It was under the British Raj that the workers started organising themselves into trade unions. The period between 1918 and 1920 was marked by two important events which developed the trade union consciousness on the one hand and national consciousness among workers on the other: (1) a series of strikes in a number of industrial centres including Calcutta, Bombay, Cawnpur, Jamshedpur, Madras and Ahmedabad for the fulfilment of workers' demands; (2) organising strikes by workers in Bombay and in a number of other industrial towns to protest against the Rowlatt Acts which marked the working class entry into the nationalist movement. A number of trade unions sprang up in different parts of the country. In 1920 the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was founded with Lala Lajpat Rai as

its president—a landmark in the history of Indian labour. Its declared aim was to coordinate the “activities of all organisations in all the provinces of India, and generally to further the interests of Indian labour” in matters economic, social and political.” The leadership of AITUC was for a decade in the hands of the liberal nationalists. “After 1927, a left-wing leadership developed within the trade union movement, mainly composed of left nationalists and socialists and communists, which steadily began to displace the earlier leadership.” The tussle for leadership led to several splits but in 1938 the unity among the splintered groups was achieved through the re-emergence of a strong All-India Trade Union Congress in the country. In 1944 Congress Party formed the Indian National Trade Union Congress as the AITUC became dominated by the Communists. Subsequently the organised labour fragmented into different trade union organisations.)

Thus in the post-Independence period the Indian labour is divided into several all-India Organisations : AITUC of the CPI, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) of the CPI(M), the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) of the Socialists, the United Trade Union Congress of the non-Communist Left in West Bengal, the Hind Mazdoor Parishad of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

All the trade unions are autonomous but not independent. All are closely linked to particular political parties and more often than not act as agents of the political parties to which they are attached. On problems of workers and economic interest they do influence their respective parties, but on larger political issues they are guided by their parties. Although each major party has its own sponsored and supported trade union, the union has relatively insignificant influence over the party. For example, the Congress sponsored INTUC have tended to support the Congress governments at the Centre and in the States on major issues, including the need for industrial peace and general political stability; which they think is conducive to economic development and welfare of the working class. The trade unions controlled by the opposition parties, particularly the Left, have been encouraged to paralyse the Congress administration through strikes to defeat its anti-working class policies. But the militancy of the CITU has now been mellowed under the Left Front regime as in West Bengal.) In other words, the trade union policies, depending on party affiliation, vary from militancy to conditional support, to moderation and accommodation. Trade unions in India often fail to act as pressure groups in their own right.

Nevertheless, the trade unions have been able to influence the government and private management to provide for : improvement

of workers' living conditions; adoption of social welfare benefits like employees' insurance, medical and housing facilities; periodic revision of wage structure to compensate for price increase; bonus in heavy industrial and public-service sectors; the recognition of the right to strike to press for their demands.

A major drawback of the trade union movement in India is the dominance of "outsiders" in leadership which has largely contributed to its fragmentation. Inter-union rivalries has been a major factor in a number of labour unrests and this became most evident in the activities of independent labour leader Dr. Dutta Samanta—a former Congress (I) politician—who in the mid-1970s through his aggressive tactics and early successes in winning wage increases appeared in the Bombay labour scene as the most militant labour leader. He organised the Bombay textile strike, the longest major strike in India's history, often marked by violence. The strike however failed against the combined opposition of industry and government and his influence thereafter declined.

Wages are the central issue in most labour disputes. Another recent issues is retrenchment as a result of modernisation. While in the former case organised labour, with varying degrees and in different regions of the country, have gained something, in the latter case the interests of the workers have been marginalised.