

# Independent Unions : Challenging Traditional Unions?

Ismail Chaudhury

It's about time, way back in the 1980's, trade union militancy was not yet a closed chapter in labour movement. All is over now. A docile and disorganised labour force is all that is required for higher growth. Ever since the advent of neo-liberalism in the 1990s Indian labour scenario has changed drastically, threatening even traditional trade union organising and permanent settlement of party-controlled central trade unions. As globalisation grinds on Indian labour's limited bargaining power is falling further and further into decay.

In a situation in which less than 8 percent workers are organised Central Trade Unions have over the years developed a kind of labour aristo-crazy that acts as a brake for further organising even in the organised sector. But labour aristocracy itself is facing the crisis of identity because of globalisation and massive farming out. De-unionisation is the order of the day, not unionisation. Even communists are accepting non-unionisation as a prime condition for investment in IT sector.

As for the unorganised sector less said the better. All shed tears for non-unionised workers in unorganised sector because they literally toil under medieval working conditions even in the 21st century. But central trade unions under the sway of different political parties never come forward to extend solidarity support to movements that develop under local initiatives in the unorganised sector.

Now too much centralisation, rather bureaucratisation of central trade unions is creating its opposite—decentralisation. A growing apathy among organised sector workers towards central trade unions is all too apparent. Independent unions at the local workplace level grew sharply in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to reportedly 30 percent of the organised workforce. This trend is gaining popularity and strength in most third world countries. It is visibly recognisable in Latin American hemisphere. With recognised central trade unions serving the interests of employers, in a manipulative way of course, independent unionism has been the ray of hope for thousands of Mexican workers for decades. 'Independent unions have historically taught to genuinely and primarily represent the unified interests of workers without deference to divisive affiliations'. In Brazil and South Africa independent unionism has been a major rallying point of broad social movements for long.

In India the prospects of independent trade unionism are not yet that bright because of traditional political orientation of trade union culture. But things are changing and changing rather sharply in recent years. It is increasingly gaining acceptance to vast majority of workers who feel ignored, neglected and betrayed and helpless as well. The late Shankar Guha Neyogi became a living legend during his life-time for independent trade unionism with multi-dimensional approach to society. He organised the mine workers of Dalli-Rajhara motivating them to work in unison with broad masses to liberate the most oppressed and disorganised of Chattisgarh—the tribals. The very workers who fought for better wages and working conditions, also raised their voice for the creation of

Chattisgarh state. The Saheed Hospital that the union of mine workers built without taking any government help is a shining example of how trade union could serve people rising above sectarian interests. But vested interests saw danger in Guha Niyogi's model of independent trade union initiative spreading in the region. And the industry did not waste much time to liquidate Guha Niyogi to cripple the growing consciousness of workers. Quite expectedly Niyogi's absence thwarted the independent trade union initiative that gained so much popularity within a short period. The captains of industry and pro-employer central trade unions were worried right from the beginning because Guha Niyogi refused to play politics for personal gains. Once a veteran trade unionist with life-long commitment to left politics told this writer that the media was unnecessarily inflating the image of Guha Niyogi. In reality his trade union despite its best efforts failed to win the hearts and minds of Dalli-Rajhara mine workers.

The Datta Samant phenomenon, not so radical as Guha Niyogi's, did not survive for long because the millowners of Bombay region were against allowing labour bargaining going out of control of their recognised unions. While Samant, a former INTUC leader, gained immense popularity by organising the historic 1982 Bombay Textile Workers' strike and breaking the monopoly of pro-employer Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh to launch his independent union—Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union—Guha Niyogi had his radical past in the naxalite movement.

In truth the Samant factor created a mood of defiance among Bombay working community against the established central trade unions. His victory as an independent candidate to the Lok Sabha in 1984 added a new dimension to labour power in the Bombay region. Just two days prior to the observance of 15th anniversary of the historic beginning of 1982 textile strike, he was assassinated by unidentified goons. And there ended the independent journey of Samant.

The jute workers of Kanoria Jute Mill located in the Howrah district of West Bengal, actually went a step further in independent trade union initiative by running the mill themselves for some time. This time too central trade unions operating in the field and leaders of industry did everything to kill this independent initiative. The movement finally fizzled out for more than one reason, but it unmistakably demonstrated the possibility of independent trade union initiative in the organised sector otherwise dominated by party-affiliated central trade unions. Whether they like it or not that independent trade union initiative can create new space for apparently docile labour is a fact of life.

Right now nearly 40 percent of registered trade unions in the country are not affiliated to any of the central trade unions or federations, albeit many of them had affiliations at some stage or other of their trade union struggle. Against the backdrop of growing apathy among workers towards the established central trade unions, a new centre—New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI)—outside the ambit of any political party was launched through its founding conference in New Delhi in March 2006. NTUI is said to have affiliates in the formal and informal sectors covering about ten or eleven states. Whether NTUI can develop independently in line with Brazil's CUT or South Africa's COSATU remains to be seen.

Of late the debate over independent trade union organising is gaining currency, both nationally and internationally because in most cases traditional

trade unions have become part of the system, obeying the dictates of employers at the cost of employees. They always pretend to stick to hard bargain with a view to pacifying the aggrieved and dissenters in their own ranks to prevent the affiliates from vigorously opposing the anti-worker policies of management and political establishments that back the management.

As central trade unions have their own political agenda to follow, they are more interested in promoting vested interests of their parties. INTUC, being a Congress controlled outfit cannot support any strike sponsored by central trade unions controlled by opposition parties, mainly CPI and CPM at the national level. At the state level the left, being a ruling dispensation does not tolerate any strike even in establishments where Dickensonian industrial culture prevails, apprehending flight of capital. Independent trade union organising, having no compulsion to support any political party can bargain with employers more effectively, than party-controlled affiliates. But it is not that easy to break the stranglehold of traditional central trade unions.

One reason traditional central trade unions succeed in keeping their grip over large number of workers in the organised sector is a special constituency they have nursed over the years. It's protected labour. In other words a small segment of privileged workers enjoying good salary and other statutory benefits and well protected under Trade Union Act serve as their reliable tool to keep the under privileged in check whenever there is a flare-up. As for the privileged *working class* does not exist. What matters most is their sectoral interests. Once in the early 1970s this writer had a bitter experience of how permanent workers under different unions affiliated to different central trade unions in a premier electricity supply company stubbornly opposed a solidarity proposal to support striking contract labourers in their department, doing the same work with less pay, by withdrawing labour for a day though the latter supported them by abstaining from work when they were on strike for a fortnight to press their wage-revision demands. The stratification of working community in the same establishment for similar nature of job is no less troublesome to build up trade union solidarity and unified struggle against employers.

How to unionise the toilers of unorganised sector has been a burning issue since the 1960s when industrialists and government enterprises began to farm out regular jobs to middlemen and contractors in a big way. All concerned with labour, government authorities included, talk about the plight of unorganised sectors workers, day in and day out, without really doing anything concrete to improve the situation. There are laws in respect of minimum wages and other statutory rights for certain industrial activities and trades in the unorganised sector but employers do not bother about them because the government authorities are too reluctant to implement them. For one thing because of backward industrial culture compared to West Europe state intervention played an important role even in the post-independence period to spread trade union consciousness among workers. Given the onslaught of globalisation the state is withdrawing from active intervention, allowing market forces to indulge in unprecedented labour bashing.

Political parties are not interested in unionising the unorganised because they can ill-afford to depute so many whole-timers in an area where reasonable

returns in terms of money and vote is negligible. And without a good number of whole-timers it is next to impossible to make any dent among unorganised sector workers.

During the 1970s there was a conscious attempt from a section of professional revolutionaries to devote wholetime in trade union organising in non-unionised segments. With the decline of revolutionary swing and mounting ideological confusion this line suffered serious setback. The idea of boycotting trade unions to expedite insurrection or what was billed as people's war, destroyed initial enthusiasm which was so essential to mobilise the unorganised. These days the far left too is trying to expand their trade union base by organising their own central trade union much in the line of established central trade unions. Whether this can succeed is open to question.

As political parties will always try to keep their absolute control over trade union movement through their central trade unions or federations, independent trade union struggle will have to formulate a suitable strategy that could motivate workers beyond traditional trade unionism. Mere making appeals to some left central trade unions having somewhat common ideological orientation is unlikely to pave the way for political de-control of trade unions.

Meanwhile, the concept of independent trade unionism is getting wide support at the international level too. Most TU activists in third world countries, not excluding India, are not familiar with international trade unionism and, are not particularly interested in it. Trade Unions do hardly react to international issues. They do not even respond to sensitive national issues—gross violation of human and democratic rights and all that. Given the past experience co-operation at the international level does hardly cross the limit of passing some pious resolutions that have no practical application.

In view of massive onslaught of global capital in an era of *lessiez faire*, a new trade union international has emerged. The formation of International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) was announced at a conference in Vienna in early November 2006. The unification (or merger) of two West European-based international trade union centres of the social reformist tradition—the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions / Global Unions (ICFTU / GU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL)—in the shape of ITUC was hailed as a grand achievement by its sponsors, particularly in galvanising independent international trade unionism. But sceptics say this euro-centric enterprise is unlikely to usher in a new era for independent trade unionism at the international level. □□□