

Struggling for Relevance

DELIBERATELY OR NOT OPPORTUNISM IS A WAY OF LIFE FOR VAST majority of toiling masses. The over-use of this political jargon seems to have lost its relevance in communist culture. To blame it solely on middleclass babus for being fence-sitters in any radical movement just reveals the half truth as the wisdom of political parties, particularly left parties and the public is seldom mobilised to contribute to the formulation of correct policies. No doubt the middleclass people, otherwise wavering and reluctant to take risk in practical life, are eternal villains in the so-called progressive discourses, again conducted, ironically though, mostly by middleclass intellectuals. But how workers who are dubbed as saviours of society in marxian hypothesis, these days frequently indulge in opportunism to further their sectarian interests, literally negates the traditional myth about their liberating role. How trade unionism of all shades and political affiliations has degenerated into cesspool of rabid opportunism and escapism deserves serious attention because workers have lost much of their self-respect and self-confidence as well. That organised sector workers are more interested in promoting their very own interests, rather privileges, than supporting the cause of broader oppressed masses is a fact life. Maybe, they have de-classed themselves in reverse order. That's why solidarity movement is a rare thing even though the secure world of organised sector workers who are under the umbrella of different politically-affiliated central trade unions is shrinking and shrinking.

True, they sometimes resort to tokenism to show the world that they are alive and they are against neo-liberalism as the white collar bank employees went on a day's token strike on August 5 across the country to press their wage and social-security-related demands and there ended the matter. There are so many on-going agitations by tribals and small farmers against forcible land acquisition in almost every state and yet white collar employees don't even talk of their plight, not to speak of extending solidarity support to the marginalised, even in their limited scope of tokenism. Things are equally true for blue collar workers who are somehow protected by trade union laws, though archaic in many respects.

Despite so many years of labour organising by communists and socialists most organised sector workers are under the sway of rightist forces. If workers continue to support Congress and BJP-led unions it is because communists are no less opportunistic in their approach to trade union movement. In truth socialists at one stage emerged as the most vocal force in labour movement but socialism today is a dirty word to the so-called advanced workers, thanks to politics of opportunism. They think it is better to swim along the tide, not against it. Thus after every regime change workers don't hesitate to change union affiliation by identifying their well-being with the changed dispensation even if it is ultra-reactionary in nature. As for ideology, the less said the better—for all practical purposes it takes the back seat.

Trade unions are no longer schools for educating workers, rather they are shops for bargaining, without any long-term perspective to highlight. So after the regime change in Bengal—the historic fall of the communist left—there was a rush for workers who were only yesterday under the sway of the left, to change flag of their unions. So some red unions became green overnight. The reverse scenario was the order of the day when the left came to power more than three decades ago. This shifting allegiance has been a regular

phenomenon on labour front. Not that this change-over minimises labour-bashing by the management. Nor do they get better wage deals without taking any trouble of agitation. True, to some extent it may put check on police harassment at workplace. In other words it signifies total apolitical nature of Indian trade unions. In many ways it resembles British trade union legacy. During colonial days British trade unions never really raised the demand of decolonisation as in that event they would lose the share of colonial loot. Then occasionally they used to adopt 'pious and harmless' resolutions against British colonialism, only to keep it on record that they were against colonial exploitation. And it was their very own way to express solidarity with Indian working class.

The dominance of left unions is on the decline even in areas that are traditionally supposed to be left-centric, because when it is the question of strategy and tactics, there is no difference between 'left' unions and 'right' unions in their approach to redressing the wrongs. So switching over allegiance becomes as easy as anything else if there is promise for hassle-free bargaining and minimum police intervention. Left unions like their rightist counterparts have accumulated huge assets which can be easily verified from their annual returns filed every year to respective registrar of trade unions and after the demise of their political power, they are now busy, working overtime, to save those assets.

Gone are the days of ideological commitment. For all practical purposes left unions are struggling for relevance and workers find nothing wrong in indulging in blatant opportunism. Trade unions are at best grievance-monitoring cells and loyalty naturally goes to the best bargainer. □□□