

O F L A B O U R A N D A R I S T O C R A C Y

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Workers in India could find a more humane way to deal with neo-liberal onslaught if they only lived in a normal democracy. From labour's point of view this 'people's democracy' is not for ordinary people. Given the state's non-interventionist policy in favour of labour, to talk about labour rights as they prevail in a democracy, is meaningless. Despite what the unionists say today, workers even in the organised sector look sceptical about the possibility of labour organising succeeding in the coming days. In the theme song of so-called 'industrial revolution' only revolutionaries—workers—remain unsung. Trade unionists seem to have accepted, somewhat tactily, the media-propelled myth that labour in the world's biggest show-case of democracy enjoys too much democracy. So it is not that alarming to lose some hard-earned rights. In truth labour aristocracy has its own dynamism to arrest the growth of labour movement. And most central unions, notwithstanding their political affiliation, represent this labour aristocracy that works in tandem with the establishment to thwart the development of labour democracy.

While labour departments and tripartite labour bodies as they exist in India's formal democracy today, have virtually lost their relevance because in most cases they rationalise the employer's point of view while refusing to exercise their mandatory and non-mandatory powers to help labour tide over the crisis. The utility of labour tribunal is open to question. Even if tribunal award goes in favour labour, it does get hardly implemented. It makes mockery of democratic justice. The original idea of improving labour's bargaining power and consciousness through this kind of state intervention has been defeated. It is no longer on the agenda of any ruling party. In India's on-going industrial revolution, rather counter-revolution, labour aristocracy has a positive role to create a sense of hopelessness. If today central trade unions are making overtures to unorganised sector workers, it is because the privileged sections of working community, are threatened in neo-liberal culture. Nobody is safe in neo-liberal boat. In the yester years they never paid any heed to the plight of unorganised toilers because organising the unorganised, mostly in low-wage sector was not that lucrative in terms of funds and budgetary provisions for unions. A deliberate policy of dual work norms for regular and casual workers in the same establishment—has been in force for long, much before the neo-liberal onslaught of the 1980s began. But central trade unions failed to address the problem of anomaly without really pressing for de-casualisation for similar work in a unit or in the industry in general because of pressure from labour aristocrats. The British evolved the tripartite mechanism to lessen the burden on employers and perpetuate casual labour system in perennial nature of job. And central trade unions never challenged 'casual labour system' (or contractual practice, rather

unfair labour practice) despite the passing of contract labour (abolition and regulation) act in the early 1970s. Right to union was not opposed even by small establishments like nursing homes, eating houses etc. before the terms 'reforms', 'structural' adjustment programmes' etc. got currency in the 1980s. But central trade unions never took any serious interest in championing the concept of 'right to union' among the unorganised millions because their constituency among the privileged segment of workforce did not find any trouble in their paradise of social security at the expense of their casual counterparts. And yet they felt no moral obligation to extend their support to the underprivileged apprehending curtailment in their own privilege.

Also this labour aristocracy stands in the way of challenging statusquo-ism which in turn affects labour aristocrats' own status-quoist position as they fail to offer any alternative. On the contrary, they oppose any move that seems to explore the possibilities of alternative way out. Thus workers' cooperatives were never encouraged by central trade unions. In reality they do everything, in subtle way of course, to defeat such initiatives. They pretend to be orthodox in this regard, as if workers have no right to go beyond the traditional framework of capital-labour conflict resolution, albeit some labour cooperatives ran successfully for years. And many are still running.

During the Soviet era nationalisation [in effect bureaucratisation of capital] was viewed as a short-cut and painless way to achieve 'socialism' which it was not. But nationalisation, however, further strengthened labour aristocracy benefiting all central trade unions controlled by ruling as also opposition parties.

Labour aristocracy means opportunism and nepotism as well. The way workers used to change their allegiance with the change in government in the 1960s and 1970s mocked at the very idea of working class solidarity. It was the direct result of labour aristocracy. Red flag became tri-colour overnight and vice-versa. In the era of de-nationalisation and privatisation, labour aristocracy is searching for new pastures to flourish without any success. And it sometimes causes irritational conflict with the establishment.

De-unionisation, not unionisation, is the principal trend today. If labour aristocrats sometimes threaten to withdraw labour, it is because they are too impotent to get back what they have lost—security and privilege. They cannot expect support from the unorganised, not to speak of peasants. In reality they are no less responsible in allowing peasant bashing by refusing to go beyond their sectarian interests. They are not opposing government policies that displace thousands of poor and marginal peasants, killing old jobs without creating new ones. Not that aristocrats will gain much in the end because of preponderance of capital-intensive industries. But they still do not find any reason in making a common cause with the unorganised and displaced peasants.

Indian trade union movement at the initial stage evolved by imitating in the main the British model of Labour Party-oriented trade unionism. And Britain's Trade Union Congress never opposed colonial exploitation of Indian toilers because British Workers developed a kind of vested interest in perpetuating super exploitation of colony. They too shared the booty. Indian trade union delegates who used to attend British Trade Union conferences in those days never addressed the problem of super-exploitation and the role, may be the passive

role, of British Workers in not enhancing Indian Labour's bargaining power. Solidarity never crossed the border of oral sympathy. Indian Labour Laws could have been progressive even by western standards, had British Trade Union Congress extended its support to Indian Workers in strengthening labour movement by offering practical solidarity at crucial junctures which it did not. British TUC is itself in crisis to defend its old position—Labour Party-oriented labour aristocracy is devouring its vitals.

The future of labour organising lies in organising the unorganised in low-wage sector and a sustained exposure of labour aristocracy as well.

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