

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

BAGARAM TULPULE

Although three quarters of a century old, the trade union movement in India is still largely confined to organised industries and services in the country. Efforts to unionise workers in the unorganised or informal sector are no doubt, being made in some segments and some parts of the country. Such efforts, however, are still few and far between and not conspicuously successful. This neglect of the informal sector by the trade union movement has attracted a great deal of adverse criticism. There are, no doubt, formidable obstacles in the way of organising the workers in the informal sector. Nor do these who criticise the trade union movement on this account have much sympathy for working people anyway. Yet, the point of the criticism cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The restricted spread of the Trade Union Movement has had certain consequences which have become clearer and more serious over the years. The vast expansion of the country's labour force from about 18 crores in 1971 to over 30 crores in 1991 and the relative stagnation in that part of the labour force which is employed in the organised sector. 1.75 crores in 1971 and 2.68 crores in 1992, means that the relative weight of the organised sector labour in the total labour force, never very large, is getting even smaller. Organised sector labour, no doubt, is far more influential in the field of national industrial and economic policies than its numbers would suggest. Nevertheless, if its proportion keeps going down, its influence is also going to go down. Trade unions servicing this stagnant or contracting segment of the total labour force already find their influence getting eroded.

Within the organised sector itself, bargaining strength of trade unions has been eroded in recent times due to a variety of factors. Trade union rivalries have proliferated further. Individualist Trade Union leaders subscribing to no broader organisational loyalties or ideologies have arisen and gained significant following. Perhaps as a reaction to this, 'internal unions' limited to employees of individual plants or companies and run by the employees themselves have come up. Such self-reliance, to be welcomed in itself, is unfortunately accompanied by a total lack of any socio-economic or organisational perspective at the macro level among these 'insider' leaders.

Yet another important factor affecting the dynamism of Trade Union movement is its aging leadership. Few Trade Union leaders are below sixty, many are over 70. They can hardly display the dynamism of their younger days. New younger leadership does not seem to be coming up in adequate numbers to take the place of the aging leaders.

But the greatest challenge of the Trade Unions comes from the developing economic and industrial situation and the policies being pursued by the government. In the name of globalisation, liberalisation, free market, international competitiveness, productivity, technological upgradation and so on, a climate has been created in organised industry in which employers as a class are moving into the offensive against workers and Trade Unions. Stress in public policy has shifted, in the name of flexibility in employment, from protecting the interests of workers to protecting those of employers. An exit policy is being energetically pushed in the full knowledge that it will throw tens of thousands perhaps lakhs of workers out of jobs and all the solace that is offered to them is some compensation from the so-called National Renewal Fund.

In this unfriendly industrial climate, Trade Unions and workers find their bargaining strength undermined. To make things worse, industrial relations legislation is slated to be amended to put further shackles on workers.

Such new job opportunities as may come up in the years to come will be largely in the informal sector. Conditions here are even more dismal so far as working people are concerned. This sector is itself divided into segments separated from one another. There is the technologically modern small scale industries segment which constitutes a peripheri around the organised sector proper. Although formally some protective labour legislation is applicable to this segment, in practice provisions of labour law are rampantly flouted by employers with impunity. Even where minimum wages are notified under the Act, they are often so low that a full time worker drawing such minimum wage, if at all he gets it, stands still below the poverty line. Being mostly non-unionised, the workers are unable to enforce their legal rights. Of late, there is a demand from employers in this segment that they should be exempted from labour laws as these render their industries non-competitive. The problem is serious since an increasing number of workers from the organised sector is being pushed out into this segment due to the devious strategies of corporate managements.

Handicrafts and village industries constitute a very large segment of the informal sector. Public policy claims to provide numerous facilities and concessions to this segment. The main thrust of policy, however, is clearly on the large, modern industries using advanced technology. Free market, liberalisation and MNCs who are now being invited to come into even the medium and small sector, make the survival of handicrafts and village industries precarious. Lack of organised strength among the people engaged in this segment makes them highly vulnerable.

Landless agricultural workers and casual labourers are the poorest and most exploited and oppressed segment within the informal sector. Even among these, dalits and tribals who constitute a sizeable proportion are the most depressed. Ironically, it is these segments which are being made to pay the price of so-called development.

An unfortunate aspect of this scenario is that workers in the organised and informal sector do not view each other as allies having common interests and problems but as rivals hunting each other. The organised sector workers feel that their jobs are being taken away by the unemployed in the informal sector who offer themselves for employment at very low wages and benefits. Workers in the informal sector feel that their plight is caused by the organised sector workers making a disproportionate draft on the country's resources for their own high wages and benefits leaving the informal sector deprived and impoverished.

Public policy is likely to be the most important determinant of how difficult these challenges are going to become. Not only the employer-employee interface but also the state-working people interface will, therefore, be a crucial front on which workers and their organisations in all sectors will have to act.

How will working people cope with these emerging challenges and defend their interests? This broad question subsumes some more specific questions. Is the idea of common interests of all working people in the country an imaginary construct or does it have any reality? If it has some reality, can its specifics be clearly identified? Can all sectors and segments of workers address such specifics through common strategies and methodology? Even within each sector or segment, does the emerging challenge call for some reformulations of goals, organisational structures operating strategies and methods? Can workers of one sector do anything to assist those in the others in the pursuit of their goals and in building their organisations in the pursuit of these goals? If yes, what and how? More such questions may suggest themselves.