Structure of Trade Union Organisation

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The structural organisation of the Indian trade union movement has been shaped by a variety of factors. Predominance of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, vast differences in employment conditions in different industries and industrial regions, workers' concern with their immediate problems at the plant level, and the leadership of outsiders eager to maintain their hold over isolated small unions have combined to foster the growth of independent industrial unions, particularly of the one-shop variety.

The solidarity and cohesion which go with homogeneous national unions are thus lacking. Horizontal organisations in the form of trades councils and co-ordinating committees are occasionally formed at the city level, but these are mostly ad hoc bodies.

The diverse pulls of political ideologies and sharp differences among the trade union leaders have remained too strong so far to allow a "national trade union centre to be established.

The character and philosophy of country's labour movement are closely bound up with the structural pattern of its trade unions. The structure of union organisation not only determines the strength and cohesion of membership, but also plays an important role shaping inter-union relations, union policies, control of unions and the possibilities of union reform. The growth of trade unionism in India has been a fascinating subject of study in more than one respect. The origin of the movement lay in the philanthropic zeal of social reformers, but it has acquired a distinct political tinge in more recent times. The rank and file workers have also developed a class consciousness with the emergence of new industrial towns over wider areas and their conglomeration in particular regions.

Whether the labour movement will become a recognisable social force in due course of time is a matter of conjecture. But there is no doubt that it is increasingly gaining ground as a distinct political force entrenched, as it is, in some of the key sectors of the economy. In any case the present trends indicate that potentially organised labour is destined to play an important role in the industrial society of tomorrow. The future in this respect is impregnated with interesting possibilities in view of the new strategies which organised entities are likely to devise and adopt in a mixed economy. The present paper aims at tracing the evolution of the organisational structure of trade unions in India, and analysing the implications of that evolution with reference to inter-union relations and national trade union policies.

The term 'Organisation' signifies a co-ordinated set-up geared to the achievement of specific objectives. The structure of an organisation indicates the relative position of its constituents determining the scope of their respective functions and the degree of mutual dependence in the common endeavour. The organisational structure of any institution may be either horizontal or vertical. In a horizontal organisation, the units are at the same level of authority in their respective spheres of activity. For mutual co-operation and functional co-ordination the constituents have a council or board in which representatives discuss common issues, lay down common policies and programmes of action. The unity thus derived rests on the realisation of the commonness of issues and the conditioning factors which make for the significance of mutual co-operation. The relationship between the constituents in a vertical organisation is hierarchical. This presumes more than one level of authority in the set up, the lower level constituents being subordinate to those at the higher level.

Organisation at Various Levels

The hierarchical relations in this type of organisation may be of two kinds, viz, federal or unitary. The constituent elements may be united in a federation whereby retaining their independent status except for certain common purposes and ends. The federating body has powers and responsibilities only with regard to the matters of common concern. The constituents are affiliated to the federation and surrender their right of independent action over a specific area or in respect of broad policies. In the alternative, there may be a central body with direct membership of the constituents and possessing unitary power and authority. The constituents enjoy only delegated powers, and function as so many arms and wings of the parent body. They have no independent authority nor any separate entity of their own.

To start with it may be useful to recognise the alternative bases of trade union organisation at the primary level. The basis of organisation may be somewhat restrictive or liberal. Thus workers may be organised on the basis of identity of 'crafts' or 'occupations' or 'clearly defined skills' (Craft Unions); or on the basis of employment in a particular industry or trade (Industrial Unions); or on the basis of employment under a common employer owning more than one establishment (Common Employment Unions); or membership may be open to all workers irrespective of the craft or industry in which they are employed (General Unions). But small, independent unions organised at the shop, plant or local level do not become viable units. They do not have sufficient organisational strength to face the opposition of employers who are also organised in their own interest. Moreover, to influence state action in the interest of the working class they have to have an united front to initiate desirable moves and counteract the power and influence of the employers' organisation. Trade unions at the primary level must therefore be united on the regional or national plane whether on the basis of crafts, industries, or in a general way.

The organisational structure with wider coverage may be centred round homogeneous national unions with direct membership of the workers. It may have local units at the plant level acting as so many branches. The central body may also form zonal or regional committees for effective co-ordination of activities over limited areas, the general policies and programmes being laid down by the central union. Alternatively, trade unions formed at the plant level may be united in a federation with the individual unions retaining their separate existence. They enjoy autonomy of action except for certain common policies framed by the federal body. The essential difference between the two types of vertical organisations is that the national union exercises direct control over the activities of its constituents whereas the federation is more or a less a co-ordinating body having regulatory
powers which the affiliated unions choose to surrender in mutual interest. Yet another way in which the primary unions may retain their right of independent action as well as separate entity and also derive the benefit of organisational unity, is by means of horizontal association. At the local level, the independent unions may form 'trades councils' or 'co-ordinating committees'; at the regional or district level there may be Regional/District Committees or Councils, while at the national level, the representatives of national unions or federations may constitute the national trade union centre. This form of organisation obviously presupposes the existence of a broad basis of trade union unity at all levels.

The relative merits of industrial unions over the craft and general unions are well known. In India, as in many other countries of South-East Asia, the trade union movement has been predominated by industrial unionism. Craft unions did not thrive in the early stages of industrialisation because of the small number of recruits in skilled occupations and the corresponding predominance of semi-skilled and unskilled employees in the working class. Partly this was also due to the lack of initiative on the part of skilled workmen who enjoyed better conditions of employment as a result of their relative scarcity. Later on, when large industrial establishments adopted cantai intensive methods of production and the size of industrial workers increased, the scope of craft unionism was further reduced through the diffusion and dilution of industrial skills. There are exceptions no doubt to this general trend. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association which is a local federation of several craft unions is the most outstanding example of union organisation on craft basis. Similar organisations also exist in certain professional occupations like those of the working journalists, maritime workers, etc. But these are not the common union types.

On the other hand, general unionism has also not found favour with union organisers as working conditions differ from industry to industry, and workers belonging to any particular industry cannot feel certain that sectional interests would be made a common cause. Moreover with the growth of industrial employment, workers have been more urgently concerned with the improvement of working conditions in particular establishments rather than fighting for any general cause. Actually this single motivation in unionisation has led to the formation of more one-shop or plant-level unions than unions for particular industries as a whole. For more or less the same reason, the basis of unionisation has been the 'place of work' rather than the 'place of residence'. The leadership has encouraged this trend in their own interest. It is obviously easier to maintain one's hold over small unions organised at the plant level. General unions have a tendency to become too big to be controlled and managed by union leaders having limited ability. It is true that one-shop unions have small membership which makes them financially and organisationally weak. But with larger membership, the strength of general unions is also reduced by sectional pulls and coterie formation on industrial and occupational lines, besides the common malady of religious, linguistic and political cleavages among members, which pervade all types of unions.

**Federations vs National Unions**

Trade unions at the shop or plant level cannot function effectively if they remain in isolation. There are bruce reasons which make for the growth of organisations on a wider plane: (a) to co-ordinate the activities of small unions in the general interest of all workers, (b) to counteract the organised strength of employers, and (c) to influence the legislative and administrative organs of the state in the workers' cause.

An unmistakable trend in this growth is the emergence of federal organisations with affiliated unions, and the virtual absence of national unions with direct membership of workers. There are at present four all-India national federations and a large number of industrial federations. In the former category are: the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC). Among the more important industrial federations are the National Federation of Railwaymen, All India Defence Employees Federation, All India Seafarers' Federation, Port and Dock Workers' Federation, National Federation of Post and Telegraph Workers' Unions. Of course, the federal structure does not pervade the entire field. The number of unaffiliated trade unions is quite large. Out of about 6600 trade unions which submitted returns in 1959-60, only 1500 were reported to have been affiliated with federations which numbered as many as 66.

Ordinarily a federation is a loose type of organisation, in which the affiliates retain separate entity and power of decision making on their own initiative. The federation is at best a co-ordinating body having powers to negotiate with employers' organisations and make representation to the Government on matters of general importance. This does not make for the same kind of organisational unity in the workers' ranks as could possibly be had in the alternative form of homogeneous national unions with unitary powers of regulation and control. An important source of strength of trade unions in the United States is said to be the 'existence of national unions which, in times of need, can marshall the financial, leadership and the moral support of members throughout an industry, not simply in one plant or locality.' The same kind of cohesion, solidarity and strength cannot surely be had in the federation of independent unions.

Since there is decentralisation of power in a federal organisation, it is sometimes contended that the diversity of employment conditions in different establishments justify a federal structure of trade unions. For it is within such an organisation that local unions can maintain close touch with the workers and thus handle specific problems more promptly as well as in accordance with the local conditions. Dearth of capable leadership is a serious handicap in national unions especially because leadership is yet to grow out of the rank and file workers and because of the absence of educated personnel in the membership of unions. Basically it is also difficult to finance and administer national unions with direct membership spread over the country. On the other hand, foreign experience suggests that these unions often lead to over-centralisation of powers and oligarchic management. Moreover, it suits the convenience of outside leaders to retain greater independence of action at the local level as the growth of homogeneous national unions poses a threat to their power and prestige. Communal, linguistic and political rifts create inter-union rivalry. Thus even small unions are keen on retaining separate organisational entity and as much power of independent action as possible. This line of reasoning, however, takes only a
short-sighted, narrow view of things, and is a sign of immature unionism. For organisational solidarity and strength are more important in trade union organisation. These are better assured under the homogeneous national unions than in federal organisation.

Although a vertical structure of organisation through federation of independent unions is more conspicuous in India, there is some indication of a horizontal structure also evolving side by side. At the local (city) level, or the regional (district) level the trade unions have felt the obvious need for mutual co-operation and co-ordination of activities. There are instances of co-ordinating committees or trades councils being formed in the more important industrial towns. The earliest organisation of this kind was the Bombay Trades Council formed sometime in 1928. But it did not survive the test of time. Other similar attempts also led to the formation of only temporary ad hoc committees for limited ends e.g., securing mutual support at the time of making a representation or organising strikes. Such co-ordination committees were formed in Ahmedabad (1952), Jamshedpur (1953) and Calcutta (1955) for staging general strikes.

Multiple Trade Union Centres

The most crucial aspect of horizontal organisation is however the growth of more than one national trade union centres based on political ideologies. The significance of a single united national centre of trade unions arises from four essential needs: (a) presenting an united front of the working class as a separate force influencing social and economic policies; (b) initiating and influencing legislation of national importance in the interest of workers; (c) to help, guide and co-ordinate the policies and programmes of independent trade unions; and (d) to represent the working class in international bodies.

In a democratic society it requires leadership of an exceptional calibre to forge the necessary unity in the trade union movement so as to make it a recognisable social force. The International Labour Organisation which provided the initial spurt in many a country to organise national trade union centres, also gave birth to the All India Trade Union Congress in 1918 constituting the first united platform of the working class in India. Within the next three decades, trade unions grew in number and derived increasing strength. Being centred in some of the key sectors of the developing economy — modern factories, transport, mining and plantations — the movement not only acquired political significance, but also became one of the few concrete identifiable forces in the huge unorganised population mass of India. No wonder that the political parties and leadership of various shades of opinion desired to secure the allegiance of the working class to strengthen whatever cause they upheld.

The communist-nationalist coalition dominated the leadership of the AITUC till 1929 when the moderates broke away and formed the Indian Trade Union Federation with 30 affiliated unions. This organisation amalgamated with the National Federation of Labour which was brought into ex-
Rift in AITUC

The unity was however shortlived. A rift was again precipitated when a section of the leadership desired to actively support the Government’s war effort. They seceded from the AITUC in November 1941 and organised a rival central federation—the Indian Federation of Labour—with as many as 182 affiliates. At the end of the war the AITUC emerged again as the most dominant trade union body on the national plane. But then came realignments of a more fundamental nature. Within two years of independence, the trade union movement was split into four rival bodies and created similar divisions among the unions at the primary level. The militancy of the AITUC was considered to be a threat to the political philosophy of the ruling party based on industrial peace and a moderated approach to the labour movement for the sake of orderly progress. Thus the Indian National Congress entered the field of trade unionism and formed the INTUC in May 1947. In December 1948 was born the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (merging the IFL) on the initiative of the socialist labour leaders who were neither in agreement with the militancy of the AITUC, nor felt happy with the INTUC’s policies of moderation and compromise. Another group of socialist leaders ranging in their views between the AITUC and the HMS formed yet another central organisation in May 1949 known as the UTUC, and proposed to carry forward the movement on non-party lines.

The Indian trade union movement is thus pulled in different directions by the four national federations which are at the apex of the organisational structure to-day. Divisive pulls on the basis of political views and trade union methods are also known to have created rifts among the ranks of the industrial federations. The organisations at the base as much as those at the apex are yet to discover a broad basis of unity so as to establish an unified trade union centre on the national plane. The INTUC enjoys the tacit support of the ruling party and is considered to be the most representative all-India organisation of the working class. But the membership of its close rival—the AITUC—comprises a sizeable proportion of the organised workers in India. And even if the numerical strength of the HMS and the UTUC would appear to be small, their significance in the working class movement is much greater in view of their hold on the unions organised in some of the more progressive sectors of the economy. Above all, there are quite a large number of unaffiliated unions besides the independent industrial federations.

Some Conclusions

The structural organisation of the Indian trade union movement may thus be said to have grown out of a large variety of factors. Predominance of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, diversity of employment conditions in different industries and industrial regions, the workers’ concern with their immediate problems at the plant level, and the leadership of outsiders eager to maintain their hold over isolated small unions, have combined together to foster the growth of more independent industrial unions particularly of the one-shop variety. The organisational structure has assumed a distinctly vertical pattern with federal bodies claiming a more predominant place. This has meant only a loose type of unity among the trade unions at the local/plant level.

The solidarity and cohesion which go with homogeneous national unions are thus lacking in the present state of unionism in India. Horizontal organisations in the form of trades councils and co-ordinating committees are occasionally formed at the city level but these are mostly ad hoc bodies. Trade union unity at the all-India level is yet to be achieved. The diverse pulls of political ideologies and sharp differences among the trade union leaders on union methods have remained too strong so far to allow a national trade union centre being established.

The remedy to this state of affairs would seem to lie with the workers themselves. For if the workers are conscious of their strength in unity and throw up leaders from their own ranks, the objectives of trade unionism as such are bound to replace the objectives foisted on it by political creeds and dogmas as well as the vested interests of outside leaders. A national front of the working class will then emerge and play its due role in social transformation, shaping the destiny of workers as much of the nation.

Notes

1 R A Lester, “Economics of Labour”, p 567.
2 Indian Labour Year Book (1961), Labour Bureau, Government of India.
3 Victor D Kennedy, “Reflections on Indian Trade Unionism and Labour Relations”, in Free Labour Herald, October 1954.
4 Charles A Myers, “Industrial Relations in India”, p 99.
5 An unprecedented though temporary unity was achieved in 1960 during the Central Government employees’ strike which was organised by different Central Federations of Government employees’ unions, and was backed by the three rival national Federations-AITUC, and UTUC.

Concern over Agriculture in Asia

AGRICULTURE and trade were the outstanding topics of the debate on the economic situation of Asia which marked the beginning of the ECAFE annual session in Wellington, New Zealand, on March 16. The question that concerned most of the delegates was how to instil new life into a sluggish agriculture and to turn the scales of foreign trade more in favour of Asian countries. Trade and agriculture, instead of hindering development, should become its dynamic force, the delegates emphasised.

The delegates stressed the seriousness of Asian economic problems aggravated as they were by increasing political and military difficulties in the Region. The discussion was also given a sense of urgency and gravity by the fact that it was taking place at mid-point of the United Nations Development Decade and not so long after the Geneva Conference on Trade and Development. Asian, production, it was observed, was lagging behind target figures and national income growth was below the Decade’s goal.