Industrial Unions or Craft Unions?

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THF recent .strike of Central Government employees has sharply focussed public attention to the fact that trade unions are a factor to be reckoned with and not by individual employers or industries alone, but by the Government as well. The strike was organised by unions of railway-men, post and telegraph workers, government employees in income-tax and other departments, etc.

DISSIMILAR OCCUPATIONS

The question may be asked: what kind of an organisation are these unions wherein, for example, so many different grades and types of railway employees can come together and join in a concerted demonstration? Have the station masters anything in common with the platform sweepers or an engine driver with the signal man, except the demand for more? The combination of persons pursuing such dissimilar occupations is, of course, explained by the fact that by and large the trade unions in India have been organised on the Industrial Union principle. There are, however, other forms of organisation also.

First, the Graft Union, which is a union of workers of a particular craft, trade or occupation. It is an organisation generally of skilled workers only. Second, the Industrial Union, which brings together all workers in one industry, irrespective of their occupation. Third, the General Union the one big union, uniting all workers of every industry or occupation. It generally covers those workers to whom the other two unions do not cater.

In Britain we find instances of all these types of unions. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen is a typical Graft Union of loco-drivers and engine staff. The National Union of Railwaymen and the National Union of Mine Workers are examples of industry-wise unions in the Railway and Coal Mining industries respectively. The General Union is, however, the big giant and is exemplified by the Transport and General Workers’ Union.

STRUCTURAL PURITY RARE

Historically, the Graft Union came first. The skilled workers, by reason of their education, were the first to unite to protect their interests. With the increase in the number and range of industries, the preponderance of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers in the total working population increased tremendously. Inevitably, therefore, organisation tended to be based on industry, covering both skilled and unskilled workers. It was found that small unions of craftsmen did not possess the strength to negotiate with employers on equal terms.

The residual workers and workers in new industries, which are coming to birth with technological change, are apt to be organised on the General Union principle.

While structural purity is rare in British Trade Unions, the overwhelming number of workers are either in the General Union or the Industrial Unions. Even the Graft Unions are seeking in step beyond the confines of the craft and now approximate more and more to Industrial Unions by combining or merging with allied trades.

GROWTH OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONS

The advantages of Graft Unions are mainly two: (1) they have a sound organisation which can deliver the goods. In recent years, however, differentials in wages in favour of skilled workers are fast disappearing because increases in wages are being given at a flat rate. This is leading to leveling down the wages of skilled workers who find themselves in a minority. Old skills are getting outmoded and new occupations are manned by semi-skilled and unskilled workers. There is, therefore, a great pressure on Graft Unions to amalgamate with other crafts in a federation or to form Industrial Unions.

The Industrial Unions, moreover, have positive advantages:

(1) They correspond to the organisations of employers;
(2) They increase the bargaining strength of the worker;
(3) For joint consultation, industrywise organisation of workers is more efficient;
(4) A more rational wage structure can be evolved if the workers are united industry-wise; and
(5) Industrial Union principle permits of organisation at the place of work. The Graft Unions have normally to be organised at the place of residence as the workers are scattered in different industries.

PAUCITY OF CRAFT UNIONS IN INDIA

These are some of the reasons for the formation of trade unions on the Industrial Union principle in most countries. It may be mentioned that in Germany, after the last War, all Graft Unions have been abolished and the Central German Trade Union Confederation now consists of 17 large trade unions formed in as many industries. It has a membership of 6.3 million workers.

In India, except the Ahmedabad Textile Labour’ Association, which is a federation of Graft Unions, representing the different occupations in the textile industry, such as spinners, weavers, etc. There are practically no occupational unions. Our unions are mostly Industrial Unions or General Unions. One reason is that Trade Union movement was inspired and led by ironworkers, a situation which largely continues to this day. Another reason is that skilled craftsmen have sought refuge in numbers instead of forming small unions of their own. Finally, it is also due, perhaps, to lack of the urge to organise which is eharaetertistic of all our workers. A craft union cannot be organised unless the workers concerned have a strong desire to combine and promote their common interest.

A positive disadvantage of Graft Unions may be mentioned. A small Graft Union in a strategic process can have disproportionate bargaining power. This has been the experience in England with the Engine drivers. In the Bombay Cotton Textile industry, the Industrial Tribunal gave a wage award in 1948. A small section of workers called ‘Drawers’, whose work is very important to the subsequent weaving process, were dissatisfied with the piece rates granted to them. They formed a small committee and slowed down work in the City’s 65 textile
mills, which very nearly paralysed the whole industry. It was only when the rates of wages of Drawers were revised upward that the industry was able to resume normal working.

Nevertheless, Craft Unions embody a valuable principle, viz. efficiency and maintenance of traditional skills. The Craft Union encourages pride in one's trade and in the product of one's skill. These are no mean virtues in India, which wants to raise itself by its bootstraps. It would be of great advantage if the future development of trade unions in at least some major industries is along craft lines. It would make for more fruitful collective bargaining because discussions would take place between parties who understand their problems intimately and it may also have a major, though incidental, advantage of removing party politicians from the leadership of trade unions.

But the question is: Will the party politicians give up so easily?

**Power from Hill Streams**

The Central Water and Power Commission is conducting investigations on the possibility of generating power from hill-streams in Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Northern U P, Assam, Tripura and Manipur for electrification of centres in isolated and remote areas. Surveys have also been undertaken recently to select appropriate sites for establishment of small hydro-electric units in these regions.

A provision of Rs 1.6 crores is likely to be made in the Third Five Year Plan for setting up of small hydro-electric units, having a total installed capacity of 15,000 kw.

The extension of grid supply to isolated villages, particularly in hilly areas is uneconomical, and involves large capital investment. The generation of power from diesel sets is also expensive because of the high cost of transportation of fuel across long distances over difficult terrain. The rapids in streams and small water falls in hilly areas, mostly perennial, offer possibilities of economical generation of power.

To tap this source of energy, the C W & P C has designed a turbine capable of generating 3 to 6 kw of power. The turbine can be coupled to locally made self-regulating generators. Designs for the Humes penstock, silt excluder and inlet valve, using, as far as possible, indigenous materials, are also being evolved. Some of these designs have been run on a trial basis under actual site conditions in Himachal Pradesh.

Facilities have also been given to a commercial firm for trial runs of the hydro-electric generating units, having a capacity of 100 kw, which have been manufactured and developed by it. These runs are being made in one of the water channels of the Central Power House of the Delhi Electric Supply Undertaking, Delhi.