

CHAPTER-IX

UNIONISATION : A CHALLENGE AND AN APPEAL

Unity is the strength and the strength pertains to powerful bargaining - a worker's defensive response to the abuses suffered by them. The movement to unite the workers has to be necessarily pragmatic in outlook, it must attempt to organise by various means and methods. Unionisation is a task to unite the illiterate and unskilled workers. Many of union's efforts, if fail or succeed, the basic tenets and methodology of the movement took shape. Protecting and furthering of the interests of the workers will adequately be done through unionisation. The practical pursuit of the trade union objectives in the areas of wages, job security, hours of work, social security and social status amounted a challenge to the rights and prerogatives of the employers and to cannons of law.¹

Unionisation, although a challenge, is possible, provided an appeal to the workers is made with a view to safeguard their interest. The trade unions have a vital role in this matter. Unionisation can be made, if trade unions take it up seriously, as an essential need of exercising the task of unionisation. And it is essential to have a trade union, because farm sector workers are continually passing through serious hardships, exploitation and constraints. As a social worker, and as a trade union leader, a person has to recognise the worker's hardships. A large number of academicians and researchers have highlighted the socio-economic conditions of the farm sector workers.

9.1 TRADE UNION PRINCIPLE :

Trade union principle is apt to change according to the socio-economic and political background and structure of the society, and also the level of exploitation and harassment of the workers by the management. "The important point is that trade unions comes to be abstracted from trade union practice and vice-versa."² Trade unionism is a movement of collective self-help, not an act of charity or philanthropy. In India, the trade union spirit is being injected by political or social groups rather than finding its strength within itself. Trade union ideology has to centre around the worker; further it should be empowered to organise it on a democratic way.

Bagaram Tulpule³ highlighted the idea of human dignity of the workers. Accordingly "the highest ideal of the trade union must be the restoration of the individual and collective dignity of the worker as a human being and as a productive member of the community. Improvements in his wages, working conditions and living conditions are means to that end; but they cannot by themselves be considered enough." Indeed an emphasis has to be given to improve the talent, social responsibility and national integrity, which makes the worker not a 'worker' but a nationalist and humanist, which qualifies the development in terms of both economic and non-economic terms.

A popular definition of trade union referred by S.R. Mohan Das,⁴ as, "trade union is a continuous organisation of workers to strive and struggle for the improvement of their wages and working conditions by collective action." Another definition referred by the same author, as

"trade unions are class organisations which must wage a relentless struggle for overthrow of capitalist exploitation to establish a worker's state." This illustrates the fact that a capitalist economy outbreaks with exploitation in all respect. In this situation unionisation of the sufferers is possible and simultaneously must become aggressive against an exploitative conditions created by the management. So, an active and effective intense participation of workers is felt essential. Collective self-help means again creating sense of belongingness to the unity thy trade union.

Mohan Das⁵ has elaborated upon the following important characteristics of real trade union.

1) It is an organisation of human beings with a personality and dignity.

2) It is an organisation of the human beings who are workers, to realise all their human aspirations and rights through individual and collective endeavour in the sphere of their work.

3) It has to have conscious participation of and ownership by workers only.

4) Since it is to function at work levels, its primary emphasis is on the work levels, viz. the industry. In other words, it must be primarily industry conscious in its efforts for realisation of its rights and dignity at work levels.

Further he highlighted the aims of philosophy of such a real trade union as -

1) Growth and development of human personality and realisation of equality of status both from the industry and the society, as also within itself.

2) By this process, contribute materially to the contents of a democratic and free society.

Thus to-day the trade union, needs a base for their demands, as well as society's demands. Mere protection through legal and formal procedures may not fulfil the thrust of trade union. So the trade unions have to have a set of objectives in key areas like, wages and employment, productivity, innovation, health and safety of the workers, industrial democracy, work organisation and worker's development and public and/or social responsibility.⁶

9.2 BACKGROUND OF TRADE UNIONS IN SUGAR INDUSTRY :

The establishment of trade union was thought of immediately after the installation of sugar factory and its spread during the corresponding years. (See for details the earlier chapter on Trade Union Movement in Sugar Industry). Taking into account, (i) the present conditions of the trade unions working in sugar industry, (ii) key objectives of their organisation, (iii) the problems that the workers are facing and, (iv) Government's and/or industry's policies towards the sugar workers. Some of the following important approaches have been enlightened on the background of the complexity and contravercial issues so far discussed in earlier chapters. Let us examine, one by one, the points of trade union's efforts to bring the base in their struggles and agitations.

9.2.1 The Wage Rates :

Wage determination is a most complex and controversial issue in theory and in practice. Professor Ross and Peter Drucker hold the view that collective bargaining is a political process. Therefore, wage determination cannot be explained in economically rational terms. However, Dunlop represented that an economic theory can be developed only on the assumption that the union aims at maximising something, say, the wage bill, then is it necessary to specify whose wage is to be maximised ? A number of alternatives are discernible, like (i) achieving the largest possible wage bill for the particular segment of the economy, regardless of the fact, whether all wage earners will be employed or not, (ii) ensuring highest average wage income for each unit of labour affiliated with the union etc. Even non-economic considerations also have a bearing on the wage policy. Thus for Dunlop this is merely 'the bargaining of an approach to a theory of wages under collective bargaining built upon more general and realistic views of wage bargaining. And to Peter Drucker, the wage rate is the traditional symbol for the real conflict rather than the issue itself. The real issue centre around the nature and function of wage. Wage to employer is a cost but to worker, it is something valuable, more than income. On the contrary Slichter argued that, economics has not had an adequate conception of the economic nature of trade unions, which is an important source of income creation. Economics has failed to see that "trade unions are income creating organisations."⁷

The issue related to seasonal migrant cane cutters are more economical and less political. The trade union strategies and policies are based on the economic aspects. The earlier discussion illustrates the fact

that, the bargaining is centred around the economic demands. The non-economic strategy of the industry related to the issue is, non-acceptance of the workers as the employees of the industry even when judicial decisions are in favour of trade unions. The political factor in this issue is that, the sugar industry has been occupied by a political lobby known as 'sugar lobby' in the politics of Maharashtra State and it always safeguards the interests of co-operative sugar industry.

The factory sector trade unions are successful in organising strategical agitations for revision of wage rates of farm sector workers. But they are unable to solve the obstructions permanently. The recommendations to that effect were expected from Dadasaheb Rupwate Committee. So, how trade unions instill their demands before the industry and Govt. • should be taken into account. Similarly, it is also worth mentioning that trade unions must try to protect the industry. So, a challenge is left before the trade unions to design their future agitations and movements to strengthen both the industry and the workers.

The trade union duties in respect of wages and employment being operated by trade unions since their inception. The agitations and strikes of workers in sugar industry have been followed only after judicial debate. The workers of Agricultural Corporation and the present farm sector sugar workers have got united for the protection of their economic interests.

9.2.2 Employment and Productivity :

In respect of the recruitment of the workers, the trade union opposed the present strategy of recruitment through trusts and societies,

as it is harmful to the workers. Similarly, a wide range of employment in processing activities of by-products of sugar industry may have to be covered by trade unions, so a task has been left before the trade unions to unite the workers involved even in subsidiary units of the industry. Simultaneously the trade unions have to consider the operations, management and administration of sugar factories, because number of sugar factories are facing certain bottlenecks, some of them are seriously sick. This directly affects the employment of the sugar workers. Therefore, trade unions have to look into the policy matters like sugar price, sugar policy, sugarcane price policy, licensing policy, zoning policy etc. So, the task is huge and significant in each and every respect of the industrial activities.

• The present attitude to trade unions in India towards productivity is not of the marked hospitality and opposition because higher productivity is a health hazard for the workers. It also implies the exploitation. The farm sector workers do not face the problem of their productivity and its gains to sugar factory etc., because the wage payments are being determined on the amount of physical work done during the period of a day/days. However, their physical capacity may be considered if the total factory system collapses or disturbed. In most cases the workers have reported that, they do not get the sufficient work throughout the crushing season. So, a waste of productive labour is a problem in this sector. Therefore, trade unions have to concentrate their task on the day-to-day factory operation, which automatically reflect on employment and productivity of the workers.

9.2.3 Innovation :

Innovation may be brought either in the products or in the process of its production. Innovation is a key to the economic development. It also involves serious economic risks. Establishment of trusts and societies by sugar factories; to recruit the harvesting and transport workers is a harmful innovation to the workers.

The trade unions have recommended to enact a separate law like Mathadi Kamagar Kayada (Head Load Workers Act) in Maharashtra to deal with the matters related to farm sector workers of sugar factories. The payment of wage they suggested is on piece work basis. But this depends upon the trade union's strategy to bargain with the Government and the industry.

Thus, here lies the task before a trade union to activate the strategy to bargain and/or agigate against the trusts and societies. John Child in his book 'Industrial Relations in British Printing Industry' (pp. 370) had rightly concluded that, it is no less certain that in response to change in the technology and social organisation, the unions will have to adopt themselves - their structure and strategy - more swiftly than they have in the past, if they are to play an effective part in protecting the worker's security and raising their status. An alternative strategy has been elaborated at the end of this work as a recommendation to the industry, workers and the Government to bring a healthy atmosphere in this industrial sphere.

9.2.4 Health and Safety :

This field of study is extremely wide, covering such topics as lighting, heating, ventilation, humidity, dust control, prevention of emission of fumes and gases, optimum method of working, shift systems, effects of repetitive work, adjustment of human relations, investigation of processes likely to lead to disease, maintenance of high standard of hygiene and sanitation, maintenance of nutritional standards and proper treatment of injuries etc.⁸ Sugarcane harvesting and transporting activity is a strenuous job and requires the workers be in a good health and strength. The workers were paid less than the wages of unskilled workers in the factory sector workers. There are tremendous irregularities in managing the harvest and transport activities of the sugar factory. The bullock cart workers are in a little more satisfactory position in comparison with HC workers; in respect of harvest and transport activities.

The bullock cart workers have to wait for weighing and unloading the carts, but as they are settled at the factory sites, they do not face the severity of this. However, this makes them to earn less, even when they have a capacity to earn more, as their work is of piece of work nature. This creates a strain on the workers.

The survey reveals the fact that, almost all farm sector workers were not served by the basic amenities at their camp places except carter workers. Carter workers are usually settled at factory site, where a few basic amenities like light, water, medical aid, rationing etc. are made available. On the contrary the HC workers have to settle without safety, without light, without drinking water facilities which were expected to

be made available by the sugar factories. The huts are erected on rough soil surface covered with dried sugarcane leaves. Because of the humidity and irrigable land area around their camps the mosquito bites was common among them. Besides because of strenuous work during the day time, the workers get sound sleep at night. Addiction of liquor was common among male workers. Similarly tobacco eating was observed even among female workers.

Maintaining health and safety is an important area and in which trade unions can do valuable constructive work. The State level factory sector worker's trade unions have occasionally pleaded about the hazardous life style of the workers. Government of Maharashtra is also aware of this fact. A Government Committee is working to solve the problems of these workers permanently. But the trade union leaders are not satisfied with the functioning of the committee, because of the domination of the industry and the support of the Govt. to the industry and to the Committee. This is reported by a trade union representative in the committee.

Trade unions have asked to make medical help and veterinary services available both to the workers and their bullocks and other live stocks respectively. To minimise the strains of the work, the trade unions have suggested the sugar factories to improve the harvesting and transport system. Similarly, trade unions have demanded educational facilities to the kinds of the workers and creches for the small children of the workers, so that workers will work satisfactorily and without worries and strains at the cane fields. Also it is essential to educate the workers in respect of their health, work and social awareness etc. Sugar factories can do this provided they have an interest in the worker's welfare.

9.2.5 ORGANISATION OF WORK AND WORKER'S DEVELOPMENT :

Work organisation plays a significant role in improving or maintaining the efficiency of the workers. Most of the work organisation in respect of cane cutters is determined by the factory management. So, workers have no role to play in work organisation. They only harvest sugarcane as a days work. As reported by number of workers, if irregularities in the arrival and departure of vehicles continues and factory is unable to operate regularly, the worker will leave the job and decide to go back to their original places. The sugar factories vis-a-vis trade unions should be very particular in utilising the labour force properly. The workers must

- get remunerative wage rates, leisure and basic necessities.

The trade unions have to take genuine interest in all problems, performance and prospects of the workers. They must not neglect the responsibilities in daily operation of the sugar factories. Trade unions should find it essential to co-operate with all aspects of factors management, research, work organisation and worker's interests, Government and industry's policies etc. The development of the industry must accompany the development of the workers and vice-versa.

9.2.6 Social-Responsibility :

Trade unions do not and must not forget the social or public responsibility. The unions will have to discharge its various functions, always keeping in view the social and/or public interest. It is a social obligation to participate in community's economic development programmes.

Trade unions have to acknowledge the economics of cane cultivation and crop management because the quality of a crop determines the whole efficiency. Good recovery will be maintained provided the factory has good transport facilities. So, this is a social responsibility of trade unions to guide the farmers regarding this. At present, every trade union is making this known to the concerned since the problem of recovery has emerged in this region.

Besides it is also a social responsibility to ascertain the functioning of the co-operative department and Government policy in respect of sugar industry and co-operative movement which are close to the industrial prosperity.

• 9.2.7 Self Control :

This is one of the important duty of trade unions, because there cannot be a single objective such as maximisation of economic gains to the workers. The unions have to have wider objectives to protect the long-term interests of the workers themselves. The workers themselves should control their own trade unions. But in India, trade unions are controlled by either a professional class or a local political group or a union affiliated to political parties or an independent self-interested group or any other institution or organisations.

The trade unions should periodically and constantly review the performance of their working, with this review should be made known to the workers. They should also reorient the workers. This required understanding, self discipline, self-control and self-education. Trade unions should assess their own performance on the following tests :

a) Whether they have succeeded in improving the economic conditions of the workers ? Whether they have succeeded in enhancing their satisfaction in the work ?

b) Whether they have contributed to the efficient functioning, stability and development of the enterprise ?

c) Whether they have done anything to further the public good ? etc.

This is only possible if there are sound trade unions functioning at all levels. It is difficult to organise the workers involved in farm sector, because of their migratory character. However, the unions working at factory sector have shouldered the responsibilities of furthering and welfare of the farm sector workers. So, the workers, after two strikes are very confident in trade union movement. But this may not be the case with all workers. Heterogeneous factors function even in this sector also, because of the influence of the contractors, who generally belong to the influential groups. Thus self control of trade unions at present conditions is not possible because of illiteracy and migratory character of the workers.

9.3 OPINIONS OF TRADE UNION LEADERS : A SURVEY REPORT

A survey of trade union leaders, who are actively engaged in either unionising the farm sector workers or leading such other unskilled workers or unorganised workers was conducted. A questionnaire was administered among them. But the response to it was not satisfactory. However, whatever response was received was enough to serve the purpose.

Following are some of the observations of trade union leaders :

1) Almost all trade union leader respondents agreed to have their own trade union of cane cutters and transport workers. Presently their problems have been referred by factory sector trade unions.

2) All respondents except 2, accepted that the area of operation of trade union of farm sector workers should be at the State level; because most of the problems and demands are related to State level decisions. On the contrary two respondents were of the view that, trade union must be formed at unit level first, then district level and State level federations may be established.

3) Almost all leader respondents have tried to organise the workers of this category. They even tried hard to organise the 1980's and 1986's strikes, which strengthened their leadership capacity to organise these workers. The leaders of different trade unions, who are working for the sugar workers, particularly, the factory sector workers are struggling hard for the 30 years to organise these workers. But the workers come to unite temporarily. Almost every respondent has advocated their view that, cane cutters and carter workers may not be organised because of their migratory character. So, the trade union leaders working in other fields have expressed their support, if any body is trying to organise them separately. A different kind of strategy be followed to unite these workers, they responded.

4) The following were some of the problems expressed by the trade union leaders while organising the strikes and/or uniting the workers.

- a) They are the seasonal workers.
- b) They are being recruited by the contractors.
- c) They always change the factories at destination.
- d) They are paid on piece work basis. No other facilities are being provided to them, like, provident fund, bonus, gratuity, retention allowances etc.
- e) Indebtedness, ignorance, and illiteracy.
- f) Migrating from drought prone area, so sychopancy is natural.
- g) Neglected by all user agencies and organisations.
- h) Deserving an immediate favourable results of strikes and agitations.
- i) They do not know the significance of collectivity and unions. They never express their willingness to go on strike, because of immediate effects on their survival.

A trade union leader (INTUC), who is handling factory workers' union, has expressed his opinion that, to organise a union of these workers is not so difficult job, because these people express their credibility over the efforts of trade union leader immediately if the leader begin to struggle for their economic demands.

5) Almost every trade union leader has a concurs in building and organising a trade union in the following manner :

- a) The significance of the union be taught to the workers.
- b) One must begin with economic demands of the workers because workers are more sensitive to economic demands. At this stage, leader may teach the significance of unity and form a trade union.

6) Two leaders analytically responded to the question. How the union is be formed ? The response to this is -

A) There is no need to teach the significance of the trade union. The workers are well aware of the role of trade unions, but the only problem is that, cane cutters and carter workers are under the influence of the contractors. The workers have been much impressed and suppressed by the contractors. The sychopancy of the workers is due to financial help received in the form of loans given by contractors during off season. So, a task is to get rid of these intermediaries operating in the form of contractors. Contractor is the main obstruction.

B) Factory setor worker's unions are operating since 30 years for the welfare of the sugar workers. Fortunately these unions have their branches at unit (factory) level, taluka level and/or district level and at the State level. The branches working at different levels must initiate in organising the cane cutters and carter workers separately. The help of social workers may be taken to reorient the workers. If possible a branch of trade union may be taken to the village level, where the workers have settled permanently. But only the obstruction in the process is contractor, because he belongs to influential group in the villages. So, workers cannot go against the interest of the contractor even when they desire. This can be provided a collective action is made by the workers.

7) Every body had expressed their willingness to search a pragmatic or practical approach instead of theoretical to build an effective trade union of cane cutters and carter workers.

8) While responding to the nature of exploitation of workers, the leaders were of the following views.

i) The workers do not set a wage equal even to the minimum wages linked to the price index.

ii) The factory sector unskilled workers earn more than cane cutters and carter workers, with less strain in comparison with the harvest and transport workers. Carter workers get their wages, but not the return on the capital invested in the form of bullocks and carts. Even current expenses on this capital is not taken into consideration. The wage rates are not determined regularly. The arrears of the wages are not properly paid to the workers. The determination of wage rates for every three year should be followed strictly, opined all trade union leaders.

iii) There is no time table of the work. Whole day the workers are involved in the work. They are not getting a full work for a day because of irregularities in the factory operations, transport operations, weighing and unloading operations, etc.

iv) No social security measures are available to the workers.

v) Their standard of living is much below the poverty line.

vi) The sugar factories are reluctant to facilitate the basic requirements of the workers. There is no binding on them, however, a factory can provide the basic needs on its own will.

vii) Contractors always exploits the workers, indeed, their earning depends on the rate of exploitation. Most of the contractors practise unfair tactics. They do not keep a muster roll of workers. The mukadamas

have either to remind or maintain the record of the work in written form if he is literate.

viii) Cane farms are hazardous and strenuous to harvest because of improper crop management by cane growers. Even roads are not motorable and sluggish to the bullocks the damages of carts are frequent. Moreover, the bullocks are not in proper health because of inferior quality of nutrition.

9) Some of the following demands have been aggressively put forth by respondent trade union leaders.

a) Application of BIR Act 1946 to cane cutters and carter workers, because they are the employees of the industry.

b) The workers must get wages, at least equal to the wages of unskilled workers in the factory site. i.e. Rs. 1700.00 p.m. and they should be linked to price indices.

c) Sufficient dwelling units to the workers.

d) The hours of work be determined.

e) Social security measures be provided to the workers, P.F., medical aid, bonus, gratuity, retention allowance, ration cards, compensations to the accidents etc. be made available.

f) Salary payment register and muster rolls be maintained as a statutory need by the sugar industry.

One respondent had commented that, the payment of wages be made through banks.

10) A question; who takes the benefit of exploitation ? Was asked to the leaders in response to it, it was stated that the contractors with the alliance of sugar factories take more benefit. However, most of the profit is indirectly retained by the sugar factories. The whole practice has been indirectly supported by the Government as a political issue. Even big farmers are indirectly benefitted by the exploitation of harvest and transport workers.

11) Every leader agreed to have a separate trade union of cane cutters and carter workers.

12) Extensive and intensive research work and an alternative approach was expected by the trade union leaders.

Santaram Patil (Kolhapur), Madhukar Katre (Ahmednagar), Bhau Phatak (Pune), Kishore Pawar (Pune), Madhukar Bhise (Pune), B.R. Patil, Babanrao Pawar, V.P. Borawake, M.S. Pawar are some of trade union leaders who have referred to the cane cutters and carter workers for last 30 years.

Thus, formation of a trade union of carters and cane cutters is a challenge, because of the task hidden in the formation and its need due to the exhaustive exploitation of the workers. And an appeal is made to unionise the workers so as to minimise the exploitation through unity and diversity.

REFERENCES

- 1) Trade Union Philosophy - Bagaram Tulpule, Seminar Papers on Philosophy of Trade Unionism in India : A Developing Democratic Country, Joint Management Council, 1973, p. 1.
- 2) Ibid, p.2.
- 3) Ibid, p.5.
- 4) Definition and Philosophy of Trade Union - S.R. Mohan Das, J.M.C. 1973, op.cit., p. 8.
- 5) Ibid, p. 11.
- 6) Trade Unionism by Objectives and Self Control - S.A. Sapre, J.M.C. 1973, op.cit., pp. 67-98.
- 7) Quoted in S.A. Sapre, Ibid.
- 8) Ibid, p. 90.
- 9) Ibid, p.96.