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Research Papers

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## THE SOCIAL ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

R.SANJEEVI

Ph.D Research Scholar,  
Department of History Annamalai University  
Annamalainagar-608002. Tamilnadu  
Mobile no:09626516383

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### Abstract

*The role of trade unions in resolving the problems facing the country. "These are political issues and a trade union is a non-political body fighting only for benefit of the employees." In contrast to the majority of the responses, however, indicates a willingness to postpone or even to set aside the goal of higher wages and facilities for their members the use of trade unions as interest groups in favor of educating the general public for radical social transformation.1 They would like to utilize the unions for raising production rather than achieving the narrower ends of employed workers. The trade-union functionaries in the given region consider themselves as agents of social change.*

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### Introduction

#### The concept 'society'

The concept 'society' has been operationalized here as the perception of the respondents regarding the attitudes of general public, workers, employers and managers, as well as the federal and State Governments.2 The attitude of the intellectuals is considered to be the most favorable for trade unions. They have not drawn a hard and fast line between the attitude of the general public and that of the workers. On the other hand, the attitude of employers and managers is considered to be the most unfavorable, followed by the Central and the State Government.2

#### Trade Union as a agencies of social change

Many outsiders are connected with the All-India Trade Union Congress, either directly, or through their training in leadership. Outsiders take part in many demonstrations, favor social change and wish to occupy political offices. Their family status allows them to devote time for activities in a

network of unions and eventual shifting over to another job when faced with victimization. Insiders are generally active in unions they have earlier created themselves. They have better contact with their colleagues at the place of work.3 They find the employers guilty of injustice against themselves and their colleagues. Their family status hinders a more active participation in public life.

#### Trade unions and industrial relations

The trade unionists from the rural and urban areas are remarkably identical to each other as far as their personal attributes, functioning and attitudes are concerned. The differences consist singularly in their social background. In the newly urbanized regions the traditional ties are weak. Accordingly, the social climate is more favorable for the growth of modern institutions like trade unions. Trade unionists are consciously endeavoring to replace caste, religions, and narrower regional and other traditional ties with

new bases of social solidarity like occupation, common interests and wider territorial affinities, backed by universalistic or at least rationalistic political ideologies.<sup>4</sup> But it cannot as yet be concluded that these traditions have already disappeared or have become irrelevant for unions and their members.

More than one-third of the respondents recognize the existence of factionalism in their organizations. Apart from inter-personal differences and lack of ideology, factionalism is attributable to the efforts of the political parties, who try to infiltrate the unaffiliated unions so as to politicize them. It appears that ideologically motivated factionalism ultimately fosters trade unionism. Politicization reduces the traditional cleavages and promotes mobilization.<sup>5</sup> Industrial relations are seen to occupy a very low priority in the hierarchy of problems facing India. In contrast, solution of economic problems and steps towards a definite political goal are considered to be very important. The array of problems mentioned by the respondents reveals a degree of interest in the affairs of their environment and an alertness, which is not expected of less intelligent persons. The goal of higher wages and better conditions, use of trade unions as interest-groups, in favor of educating the public in order to promote social change. Thus the solution of general issues is considered to be prior to the narrower ends of unions.<sup>6</sup> These data show that the trade union functionaries in the area under investigation consider themselves to be agents of social change. Their opinion that the attitude of intellectuals is more favorable towards trade unions than the attitudes of workers themselves should be seen in the light of their answers to questions regarding their own motives and the motives of the members in joining trade unions. If they themselves joined the unions mainly because of their social concern, the workers did so in order to safeguard their own interests.

This has to be considered together with other facts, whereby lack of knowledge and short-sightedness of the workers themselves is made responsible for any discrepancy between leaders and followers. One should recall that the education of workers is regarded as the best means to increase the size of membership. Instead of being confined to members, their educational measures are extended to the general public.<sup>7</sup>

The government and trade union

The government is regarded as a greater hindrance than the employers in the way of

achievement of union goals. But this order is reversed and this is apparently a paradox. In fact this shows that the interviewees expect more from a democratically elected government, which is wedded to public welfare and has several old trade unionists in responsible Positions, than from the employers. The differential attitude to the central and state governments can be explained in terms of who happens to be at the helm of affairs a party sympathetic to their organization or its rivals. At the time of investigation the Indian National Trade Union Congress preferred the Central Congress Government.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to this the provincial Coalition Government was preferred by the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh and the All-India Trade Union Congress.

#### Conclusion

It seems a paradox that negotiations are referred to agitation, but four-fifths of the interview had organized at least one strike in the recent past. Apparently, they are paying lip service to negotiations and going ahead with agitations! But this can also mean that though they are willing to negotiate, this course is not always open to them so that they resort to strikes as the last resort, or even in desperation.<sup>9</sup> Seen in this perspective, the apparent inconsistency is resolved. Trade unionists consider themselves as intellectuals and envisage for themselves a role as educators of general public and agents of social change. That many of them are intellectually talented is evident from the panorama of problems mentioned by them during the course of the interviews. The array of issues raised by them, and the solutions offered, reveal a degree of interest in the affairs of their environment and alertness, which is not to be expected of less talented persons.<sup>10</sup> Seen in this light, the mainstream of our trade union consists of agents of social change.

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