

TRADE UNION PRAXIS - 6
(Towards a Sociology of Trade Unions)

ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN SOCIETY

By

Jerome Joseph

WP880
WP
1990
(880)

W P No. 880

July 1990

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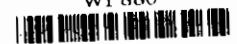
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1990/880

JEROME JOSEPH
PERSONNEL AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AREA
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD 380 056

JULY 1990

TRADE UNION PRAXIS - 6

(Towards a Sociology of Trade Unions)

6.1 Trade Union praxis - The Role of Trade Unions in Society

Whatever may be the position taken, there is empirical support for the contention that the path adopted for economic development by Indian society include elements like privatization, liberalization, collaboration with foreign capital, deregulation, competition, profit maximization and individualistic self-aggrandizement which are juxtaposed not only with state enterprises but also with the all pervasive regulatory role of the state and its agencies. Indian society is characterized by a Mixed economy, pluralist politics and ethnic diversity.

Industrial relations in the above context constitutes a complex of laws and sanctions, substantive rules and procedural mechanisms - all oriented to conferring as well as curbing the democratic rights of the working classes. Empirical realities demonstrate that in spite of redoubled efforts to evolve legislations to quell democratic labour movements, antagonistic labour-management relations persist as evidenced by working class struggles.

Work organizational structures and processes given the mixed economy framework of Indian society and antagonistic labour-management relations contribute to the praxis of alienation of

the working classes. "Scientific" management, division of labour, classical and neo-classical approaches to work organizations, the management - worker dichotomy, politico-economic inequities, socio-cultural disparities buttress the processes of the alienation of activity.

The alienation of the working classes can be classified into two conceptually distinguishable forms - "fundamental" alienation and "peripheral" alienation. The fundamental alienation of the working classes is a concomitant of the system of wage labour which is the instrument of the expropriation of surplus value for private entrepreneurs or for the state given the mode of production or the type of enterprise in a mixed economy. Peripheral alienation refers to the socio-psychological experience of powerlessness, self-estrangement, cultural estrangement, normlessness and meaninglessness. A clearer grasp of the relative significance of the two forms of alienation is possible with the help of Burawoy's conceptual scheme which he describes in his book "Manufacturing Consent" (1982).

"In order to make history, men and women must survive, and, in order to survive, they must transform nature into useful things. Such activities we call economic activities. A society comes into being when men and women enter into social relations with one another as they transform nature. The particular relations so produced or reproduced define the character of economic activities, that is, the manner or mode of production.

History is constituted out of different modes of production, that is, different patterns of social relations into which men and women enter as they transform nature. In other words, history is periodized into a succession of dominant modes of production".¹

Thus, "the mode of production" concept becomes an important tool in analyzing society. Burawoy then goes on to describe the distinguishing features of a class society given antagonistic socio-economic formations:

"The defining set of social relations in a class society is between those who produce the necessities of life and those who live off the product of others; between those who produce surplus and those who expropriate surplus; between those who are exploited and those who exploit; between peasant and lord; between worker and capitalist. Class societies can be distinguished from one another by the particular manner in which surplus labour is expropriated from the direct or immediate producers, that is, by the relations of production".²

Thus, "the relations of production" refers to the mechanisms appropriate to a particular mode of production for expropriating surplus value - rent, interest, wages, for instance.

But Burawoy goes on to contend that a mode of production is not only a method of expropriating surplus. "It is also a particular manner of appropriating nature, or producing useful things"³. This, for Burawoy, is the "labour process" which he defines as "the relations of production..... combined with a corresponding set of relations into which men and women enter as they confront nature, as they transform raw materials into objects of their imagination"⁴. The labour process "has two analytically distinct but concretely inseparable components - a relational and a practical aspect"⁵.

The term used by Burawoy for the relational aspect of the labour process is "relations in production" or "production relations". "The practical aspect of the labour process is a set of activities that transform raw materials into useful objects or fractions of useful objects with the assistance of instruments of production"⁶.

Burawoy's concepts of "relations of production" and "relations in production" are useful in explaining "fundamental alienation" and "Peripheral alienation". Relations of production as explained earlier refers to the method of expropriation of surplus given a specific mode of production. Since the system of wage labour is the method of expropriation of surplus value, fundamental alienation may be defined as the alienation of the working class under the bondage of the wage labour system of antagonistic socio-economic formations. Peripheral alienation flows primarily from the relations in production as well as from

the practical aspects of the labour process. While it has been postulated that transition to the socialist mode of production will emancipate the working class from wage labour based fundamental alienation, it can also be postulated that the peripheral alienation of the relational and practical aspects of the labour process will continue.

The concepts of "relations of production", "the relational and practical aspects of the labour process", "fundamental alienation" and "peripheral alienation" can now be utilized to address the central issue of the concluding chapter. Do trade unions in the context of a given path to development form part of the praxis of alienation or do they form part of the praxis of disalienation of the working classes?

The logic of the state given its class character has been one of using its legislative power to evolve legal instruments which appear to protect and promote the political rights of the working class while simultaneously the same legislative power is used to place numerous curbs on the exercise of these rights. The political purpose of the behaviour of the state can be explained only in the context of its socio-economic formation. Industrial relations both in its legal as well as its practical aspects therefore becomes a process of control of work organizational structures and processes. The right to associate, the right of recognition, the right of representation, the right of bargaining and the right to strike are conceded by the state but are hemmed in heavily by a tangle of legal and political restraints.

The strategy of the state therefore is to progressively curb the political rights of the working classes. Simultaneously, the state also tries to ensure certain minimum levels of living to the working classes through wage, welfare and social security legislations in all the modes of production. However, most of these facilities are available only to those who have the good fortune of holding a job in the organized sector.

The strategy of the employer in the thrust towards increased productivity and higher profitability is to call into play legal, behavioural and economic measures in order to elicit the cooperation of the workforce. A major managerial strategem discernible in the industrial relations sphere in recent years is the progressive introduction of collective bargaining as a mechanism to institutionalize labour-management conflict. Even the amendments to the Trade Unions Act, (1926) and the Industrial Disputes Act, (1947) envisaged by the state give pivotal importance to collective bargaining in labour management relations. Most of the major sources of frictions between labour and management - wages, bonus, technology upgradation, service conditions - have become subjects for collective bargaining. While the mechanism itself is a useful instrument for healthy labour - management relations, the manner in which collective bargaining is being introduced is a matter for concern. There has been little or no commitment to the democratization of the process of determining the bargaining agent given the reality of

multiple unionism in the Indian industrial relations environment. The subordination of working class interests to the expediency of electoral interests has not helped the cause of the development of trade unions which truly represent working class interests.

Yet another managerial strategem has been on the one hand to keep on increasing the economic, welfare and social security benefits to the workforce through the collective bargaining mechanism while on the other hand certain vital proletarian rights have been curbed progressively.

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The scenario of managerial strategems described above has been both the cause as well as the consequence of the economism and the sectarianism of trade unions. The leadership as well as membership in the organized sector fall prey to the ever rising demands of economism and sectarianism which leads to the progressive estrangement of even the progressive, democratic forces from substantive working class interests. The strategy of the employer is oriented to satisfying workforce needs which flow from the twin trap of economism and sectarianism. Thus, the entire industrial relations system is oriented to sectarian self-aggrandizement with little or no commitment to the dictates of a genuine path to socio-economic development oriented to the creation of a socio-economic formation which would reflect the social character of production and distribution structures and processes.

Trade unions caught in the trap of economism and sectarianism only intensify the contradictions between town and country, industry and agriculture, the organized and the unorganized sector, those who produce and those who live off those who produce, the employed and the unemployed, the right to work of all able bodied citizens and the rights of a privileged few. Trade unions informed by economism and sectarianism protect and promote the interests of wage labour but do not call into question the foundations of a system which spews the crippling system of wage labour itself. Thus trade unions limited by economism and sectarianism may be contributing to the disalienation of the workforce from peripheral alienation but may also be covertly or overtly contributing to the buttressing of the phenomenon of fundamental alienation.

Trade unions buttress the praxis of fundamental alienation even if they appear to be contributing to the praxis of peripheral disalienation. Whether the trade union exists in the context of private capital or bureaucratic capital is immaterial. Whether labour-management relations has been institutionalized in the form of collective bargaining or not is inconsequential. Whether the trade union is overtly left-of-centre or right-of-centre is irrelevant. If the trade union and its ideological orientations, strategies and tactics are informed by an overt or covert acceptance of the abrogation of the democratic rights of labour and manifests itself in the form of economism and sectarianism, it is part of the praxis of fundamental alienation

even if it appears to be contributing to the praxis of peripheral disalienation. So long as the trade union is not committed to the creation of a society in which the relations of production reflect the social character of the relational and practical aspects of the labour process, it is part of the praxis of alienation of the working classes. Even if fundamental alienation no longer exists, there will always be scope for disalienation from peripheral alienation. It is this insight which perhaps explains the need for Glasnost and Perestroika in modern socialist societies so much so that even the dilution of state capital and the legitimization of private and collective ownership are viewed as elements in the process of democratization.

Man as the subject of history therefore is committed to the humanization of socio-economic formations through the praxis of disalienation. The praxis of disalienation is both a continuous process as well as a necessary process in both antagonistic as well as non-antagonistic socio-economic formations. While emancipation from fundamental alienation has been viewed as the primary task of the working classes, recent developments for the restoration of democratic rights shows that progressive disalienation from peripheral alienation has become the most important preoccupation of the working classes today. This has become more than evident in the recent developments in socialist countries. Hyman commenting on the question of whether conflict would be eliminated in a socialist society, has said, "Conflict in industry would not be eliminated in a society in which

consciously expressed social needs replaced profit as the main dynamic of economic activity. No social order can provide perfect and permanent harmony. Whatever the institutional framework, work relations can be expected to generate some frustration and discontent and thus give rise to antagonism. But in a socialist society, industrial conflict need not be rooted in an antagonistic social structure; it would not stem from the exercise of control on the interests of a minority class of capitalists, or by an authoritarian bureaucracy. Conflict would thus be frictional rather than fundamental: there would exist a practical basis for commitment to agreed rules defining economic interrelationships".

The praxis of disalienation of the working classes will therefore have different meanings and a different agenda depending upon the society in question. Socio-economic formations, whether at the societal or at the enterprise level, based on the primacy of private ownership over social or collective ownership, private profit over social need, individualistic self-aggrandizement over social consciousness experience fundamental as well as peripheral alienation.

It has been argued that the praxis of trade unions in socio-economic formations characterized predominantly by economism and sectarianism has only been oriented to the praxis of peripheral disalienation. More wages, better working conditions, improved welfare measures, a more congenial

organizational climate, greater employee power, greater inroads into managerial prerogative may have been achieved by the unionized, organized sector in the process. But if the goal of the working classes is to establish a society which reflects the social character of production processes, attention inevitably turns to the praxis of fundamental disalienation.

The basic question for those committed to the praxis of fundamental disalienation therefore appears to be:

1. Whether structural transformation should be viewed as a by-product of a unilinear concept of historical development in which the confluence of objective conditions becomes an important prerequisite for such a transformation.
2. Or whether considering that the working classes are the subjects and not objects of human history, structural transformation can be brought about by the creative and constructive synthesis of the elements of both capitalist and socialist socio-economic formations through the instruments and processes of parliamentary democracy.

The praxis of disalienation of trade unions then becomes a function of :

1. A greater commitment to the task of critical education, mass action and organization for bringing about a structural transformation in the quality of working life as well as the quality of life of the working classes.

2. A critical review of the prevailing diversity of views on the question of the forces supporting and forces opposing such a structural transformation with a view to arriving at a consensus through dialogue.
3. A vigorous effort in the direction of the networking of all forces committed to the praxis of disalienation cutting across politico-economic and socio-cultural categories.
4. A critical evaluation of the strategies and tactics available or used earlier for initiating a structural transformation
5. A concerted effort to build linkages with the international working class movement.
6. Total commitment to economic self-reliance and productivity on the one hand and constant vigil to protect the democratic rights of labour like right to work, right to quality of work life, right to associate and represent labour effectively on the other hand.

Modalities of Peripheral Alienation

It has been argued that in capitalist socio-economic formations, workers experience fundamental as well as peripheral alienation. As society makes a transition to a socialistic

pattern of formation, while fundamental alienation is overcome, peripheral alienation will continue to persist unless certain progressive actions are taken.

However, it is also evident from earlier discussions that even in capitalist socio-economic formations characterized by fundamental alienation, initiatives are taken by capital and its representatives in relation to the peripheral disalienation of labour in the relentless process of the reproduction of capital. The efforts made by capital for the disalienation of labour while the fundamental alienation of labour remains unchanged, may take several forms. Basically, most of the efforts revolve around various forms of worker involvement in ownership and worker participation in management. Recent trends in socialist socio-economic formations shows that disalienation takes the form of not only democratization of enterprise management but also of the democratization of the ownership of enterprises. Mixed socio-economic formations have also experimented with participatory mechanisms.

Corporate experience shows that worker involvement in ownership can be partial or total depending very much on the legal form ownership takes. The modalities of the partnership in ownership continuum are as follows :

<u>Form of Ownership</u>	<u>Level of Worker Partnership</u>
Sole proprietorship	Nil
Partnership	Nil
Private Limited	Nil
Public Limited	Nil or Partial/Unequal one share, one vote.
State owned	Nil
Joint Sector	Nil
Traditional Co-operatives	Differential
Industrial Co-operatives	Worker owned/Equal and collective ownership.

It is evident that neither the private nor the nationalized sector has given any importance to worker involvement in ownership. Even the traditional co-operative has promoted oligarchic ownership. It is only in marginal cases of industrial co-operatives that collective ownership has been promoted. Thus one can conclude that this form of collective ownership is the highest form of peripheral disalienation irrespective of whether the given socio-economic formation is characterized by fundamental alienation or not.

Corporate experience again shows that peripheral disalienation through participation in management under a capitalist socio-economic formation is a function of five critical variables : Form, purpose, content, level of participation and the modality of representation for worker participation in management. Each of these variables is described below :

FORM : Workers' participation in management has taken several forms in the Indian context. Some of these are : Suggestions Schemes, Quality Circles, Shopfloor Committees, Works Committees, Plant Level Committees, Functional Committees (safety, recreation, culture) and Worker Directors. Whatever may be the form, what is critical for determining the potential of a specific mechanism in terms of peripheral disalienation is the extent to which its structure and function contribute to the decision-making processes in the organization. This is a function of the purpose for which participative forums are used.

PURPOSE The process of decision-making is really a process of exercising power. The extent to which power is shared through the participatory forums will determine its potential for peripheral disalienation. The extent of powersharing therefore becomes a function of the purpose for which power sharing mechanisms are being used. The extent of powersharing can be viewed as a continuum :

<u>Purpose of Forum</u>	<u>Extent of Power Sharing</u>
Managerial Prerogative	I decide, you do.
Information sharing and gathering	I just want you to know : I want to know.
Communication	I decide for the following reasons.
Consultation	I would like to talk to you before I decide.
Delegation	Here is a decision, you take the decision, I'm still accountable.
Joint Decision-Making	Here is a decision to be made, let's do it together.
Autonomous Work Groups	Let workteams take decisions.
Worker Self-Management	Let workers and/or their representatives take decisions.

LEVEL

Besides form and purpose, the level at which participatory mechanisms are introduced is critical for the peripheral disalienation process. Such mechanisms could be introduced at one or more of the following levels : shopfloor, department, plant, division, corporate, industry and even at the level of the economy as a whole.

CONTENT :

The kind of decisions which come up for consideration in the participatory mechanisms determine the degree of peripheral disalienation of the participatory processes. If only innocuous issues are processed in the participatory forums and more substantive issues are taken up outside the forums, certain obvious conclusions follow about the efficacy of such forums in the disalienation process.

REPRESENTATION :

The extent to which the participatory processes are informed by democratic principles and practices would determine the extent of peripheral disalienation. Nominated representation on participatory forums would be less efficacious than elected representation in the peripheral disalienation process.

The analysis of the participation of workers in ownership and management of organizations from the perspective of the praxis of alienation and disalienation yields certain generalizations which will be useful from the point of trade unions. The following generalizations emerge :

- * The praxis of alienation and disalienation varies with the socio-economic formations in which the processes are being analyzed.
- * The variations in the processes of alienation and disalienation can be captured better if alienation is viewed as being basically two-dimensional : fundamental alienation and peripheral alienation. Fundamental alienation is the alienation which is inherent in the relations of production in a given

socio-economic formation.

Several propositions related to the efforts made by capital to reduce peripheral alienation can be formulated:

- * The greater the share of workers in the ownership of the organization, the greater the disalienation of workers from peripheral alienation.
- * Worker ownership and worker control would therefore be the highest form of disalienation from peripheral alienation in a capitalist socio-economic formation.
- * The greater the share of workers in decision-making processes in the organization, the greater the disalienation from peripheral alienation in a capitalist socio-economic formation.
- * The greater the share of workers in decision-making, the more potent will be the participatory forums in contributing to disalienation from peripheral alienation.
- * The closer managerial decision-making is to self-management in its purpose the greater the likelihood of its contribution to disalienation from peripheral alienation.
- * The more substantive the decisions taken in the participatory forums, the greater will be the contribution towards disalienation from peripheral alienation.
- * The greater will be the potential of participatory forums for disalienation from peripheral alienation, the more such forums are located at all levels in the organization.
- * The more democratic the process of determining representation on participatory forums, the greater the likelihood of their contribution to disalienation from peripheral alienation.
- * Trade union acceptance of some of the above initiatives towards disalienation from peripheral alienation will at most lead to the humanization of work.

The commitment of the working classes to the praxis of disalienation is a continuous process. Many of the problems faced by socialist socio-economic formations can be traced to the failure of trade unions to play the role of protecting and promoting working class interests. Recent developments in the socialist countries show a resurgence and awakening with reference to the functioning of trade unions. The Perestroika movement in the Soviet Union, for instance, has revolved around the following concerns :

1. The democratization of society through the conferment of civil rights.
2. The democratization of political processes in Party and in Government.
3. The democratization of work organizational structures and processes through collective ownership and worker self-management schemes. Private ownership has also been legitimized and is now viewed as an element in the democratization process.

The praxis of trade unions therefore is a function of the continuous commitment of the working classes to the praxis of disalienation although in concrete historical contexts the meaning and modalities of the praxis of disalienation may vary.

The meaning and modalities of the praxis of disalienation of trade unions in today's context given global trends should, therefore, focus on the preservation and promotion of the democratic rights of labour in order to ensure labour's and society's right to both quality of working life as well as quality of life. And the role of trade unionism as defined above holds irrespective of whether the socio-economic formation in question is capitalist, socialist or a mixed economy.

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