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TRADE UNIONS IN SOCIAL REALITY

by

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TRADE UNIONS IN SOCIAL REALITY

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I had several occasions in recent years to ask managers and
administrators their views on the role of trade unions in society.
Typical responses I received are: unions should help management in
raising productivity; unions should enforce discipline among workers;
unions should provide education and welfare to workers; unions should
participate in the national plans for economic stability and growth.
In almost each case, in the middle of a group discussion someone would
raise the question: but shouldn't unions primarily serve workers
who are their members?

This information is quite valuable in understanding the role
and effectiveness of trade unionism in our country. It is not uncommon
for the 'elite' in business and administration to look upon trade
unions as agencies designed for general socio-economic development which
also care for workers' interests. In the background of this expectation,
it is easy to take unions to task when their activities appear to
disturb established authority and economic activity. Striking or
agitating trade unionists are often quickly condemned as irresponsible,
disruptionist or anti-social. It is common knowledge that a large
proportion of India's economic 'elite' felt greatly happy with the
prospect of uninterrupted peace and production during the recent
period of government-sponsored 'emergency' when normal union activities

were sharply curtailed. At the same time, there was a widespread fear
during emergency among the captains of industry that the subdued
union activities would begin with renewed force as soon as government
lifted its control. This prediction seems to have been well-founded
judging by the large number of strikes and mass agitations reported
from various parts of the country immediately following the
revocation of 'emergency'. Such incidents should provide confirmatory
data to those who believe in the anti-social or irresponsible
character of Indian Unions. On the other hand, workers are likely to
put pressure on trade unions to ventilate their grievances and demands
which may have remained unexpressed during 'emergency'. Consequently,
trade unions in India in mid-1977 are vulnerable to internal as well
as external forces.

This is perhaps an opportune time to examine popular assumptions
and judgements on trade unions in relation to the fundamental premises
on which they exist and grow as a part of the wider society. In
this paper[1], I shall first briefly discuss the logic of trade unionism
and the structure and functions of a trade union in a democratic
society. Subsequently, I shall analyse the genesis, structure
and functions of Indian trade unions in the context of their
historical, social, political and economic environment. At the end,
I propose to consider some alternative approaches to the task of
making unions more effective in fulfilment of their basic objectives.

Unfortunately, the existing literature on Indian trade unions
is far from adequate to allow firm generalizations on their structure
and functions. Most of the general compilations on trade unions
have repeatedly chronicled the emergence and growth of the 'movement'
in the wake of industrialization and dwelt upon its strengths and
weaknesses in the background of government policy, moral values and
the maze of the Indian economic and political system[2]. There have
not been many attempts to study the structure and dynamics of trade
unionism at the grass-roots level and its role in the larger society[3].
A satisfactory understanding of these aspects would require a more
solid foundation of primary research than we have at present.
Meanwhile, it may be useful to begin a discussion on the subject
with the help of the relevant conceptual material and the available
information.

I. The Logic of Trade Unionism - An ideal type

In a democratic society, a trade union is a legitimate voluntary
association of people engaged as employees in industrial and similar
other enterprise (e.g. commercial and service-based organizations).
These people are expected to form such associations to pursue
their common interests. A trade union therefore assumes the
character of a formal organization established to achieve specific
objectives embodying its members' interests. In this sense, a

trade union is similar to other types of formal organizations such as a joint-stock company. The primary responsibility of a trade union is towards its members just as the primary responsibility of a joint-stock company is towards its shareholders. Other forms of social responsibility (industrial harmony, participation in programmes for increased productivity and economic development etc.) should follow and not precede a union's responsibility towards its members.

The common interests of union members arise from their common experiences in relation to their employment and a set of common objectives they may want to achieve as employees or as citizens. For instance, they are interested in protecting their jobs, in improving their social and economic status, in achieving better working conditions and in getting humane treatment from supervisors and managers. For one thing, trade unions may help members in the process of articulation and expression of their common interests. Second, trade unions may act as an agency through which the common interests are protected and promoted on a continuing basis. Trade unionism thus has a psychological function for workers, as it may provide to them a sense of belongingness and security. Third, trade unions, by their continuing activity on behalf of members, may tend to generate and reinforce among them the consciousness of common experience and interest. Trade union activity often makes workers aware that their economic return, working conditions,

and rights as employees are unsatisfactory and that these could be changed through concerted action. Finally, like other interest groups, trade unions may help their members to achieve the status of citizens in the government of industry as well as in the wider society. The members' interests as citizens include their general welfare and education. Hence trade unions often act as welfare agencies for their members to promote their physical well-being, social security, education and political consciousness.

In the process of expressing, protecting and promoting workers' interests, trade unions encounter an important aspect of social relations in an industrial organization - that workers' interests are often in conflict with those of the organization and its management.[4] Every formal organization such as an industrial enter-prise implies distribution of material resources (e.g. wages and salaries in relation to total earnings, allocation of time, physical conditions of work). It also involves distribution of authority and power. Distribution of material resources leads to some degree of economic inequality among the various parts of the organization (shareholders, managers, workers). The authority and power relationships within an organization imply the imposition of some degree of compulsion on subordinates from superiors. This leads to a conflict of interests between the two Trade unions seek to reduce the existing inequality of material resources and authority by striving for enhancement of workers' economic benefits and power

over their work environment. A trade union can thus be regarded
as a conflict (or protest) group vis-a-vis industrial enterprise.[5]
This facet of trade unionism as representing a conflict group
has been clearly recognised in law and society which allow trade
unions to withhold labour and agitate against employers, although
such action is permitted within certain legal and moral norms of
group behaviour (for instance, union members are not permitted to
damage company property or indulge in violence against managers).

We should however remember that trade unions would not perform
any meaningful social function if they were to remain in perpetual
conflict with management or anyone else. The element of protest and
conflict inherent in trade unionism needs to get institutionalized for
employers and employees to be able to cooperate for realization
of their respective objectives. This process of institutionalization
implies some interaction between management and union to discuss and
arrive at an agreement on the various issues under dispute. Such
interaction is known as collective bargaining. This term implies
acceptance of trade union as a party (representing workers) with
which management would negotiate as a social equal and reach agreement
on specific issues of employment (such as wages, working conditions,
productivity, employee grievances etc.). The parties also often
negotiate procedures for regulating their bargaining relationship
and implementation of the substantive terms of their agreement.
The two parties are thus involved in the process of making rules

on industrial relations matters and also regulating the conflict
of interests between them. This rule-making role of trade unions
leads to regular review and redefinition of existing rights of
management and workers. In this sense, collective bargaining helps
trade unions and their members to influence management decisions on
matters related to employment. This is a significant aspect of
labour participation in management.

Apart from the social functions of trade unions in relation
to industrial organization in a given time-place context, they
have a larger role as.part of the total society. Unions pursue
their members' interests by influencing public opinion and
pressurizing government and the community (through demonstration,
agitation, withdrawal of services etc.) Unions thus act as political
pressure groups. In this role, they highlight the social, economic
and political inequalities in the society along with the consequent
disabilities suffered by the working classes and seek to remove
such disabilities. To some extent, therefore, unions are ideology-
based organizations akin to political parties. In order to perform
this role, trade unions in some countries (such as Britain) form
their own political parties while elsewhere (in India and some
western European countries) they identify themselves with existing
political parties. Most people who are oriented to a profession
(e.g. employers, managers, administrators, academicians) find
it difficult to accept this political role of trade unions. In such

people's view, the political dimension of a trade union's activity
makes it less professional and hence 'inferior' in comparison
with business organizations. We should however remember that all
associations of businessmen and industrialists contain an ideological
basis which is reflected in their dealings with trade unions,
government and the public (e.g. when an employers' federation
attempts to influence government decisions and public opinion
on the concept of bonus in industry or on automation). Those
professionals who advocate the maintenance of existing economic and
social privileges are in reality advocates of an ideology favouring
status quo. There is therefore a sense in which all social organi-
zations have a political dimension. A trade union is one such
form of social organization.

II. TRADE UNION ORGANIZATION[6]— STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS:

(i) Multiplicity of objectives

All formal organizations have multiple objectives. However, the
basic objectives of a business enterprise are articulated in economic
terms (especially in terms of the concept of profitability).
In the case of a trade union, the common interests of its members
can often be articulated in economic terms (improvement in wage
rates, fringe benefits, incentives, welfare measures etc.)
At the same time, a large part of union objectives relates to non-
economic issues such as resolution of workers' grievances against

management, promotion of their status as employees and citizens and resistance against what workers might regard as unreasonable exercise of managerial authority. This special significance of non-economic objectives of union members has two major implications for union organization: (i) The employer's stress on economic calculus gives him the advantage of precision and clarity implied in quantitative measures. For instance, the cost of a strike can be easily computed in money terms. But it is much more difficult for a union to establish that the strike would serve the members' objective of securing greater respect and status within their organization. (ii) As Munson suggests, the union's concern with non-economic objectives may lead union leaders to look upon money "as a secondary and perhaps inferior goal. This sense of moral superiority is increased in the trade union leader, because the money he seeks is not for himself but for his members. It is satisfying, personally, to have grounds for feeling morally above an opponent. It also contributes directly to organizational strength". (Munson 1970: p.8). This hypothesis however needs to be examined with the help of empirical data. For the sense of moral superiority among union leaders may encourage them to underemphasize the importance of economic issues or create among them a 'superiority complex' which may eventually weaken members' support.

(ii) Union Structure in a Social context

Let us now examine the major structural characteristics of trade union organization.

As I have argued earlier, a trade union is a formal organization
pursuing goals derived from members' interests. The union hierarchy
broadly consists of two levels, members and leaders. While the
authority of management in industry is derived by delegation
from above (i.e. from owners' representatives), the authority of
union leaders is derived by delegation from below (i.e. members).
However, while the owners as a group do not usually participate in
the day-to-day affairs of industry, the members of a union are more
closely involved in union affairs. In fact, most of the activities
of union leaders directly influence members' interests and satisfactions.
Moreover, union leaders who derive their authority from members are
required at the same time to exercise authority over the members.
For instance, leaders are expected to guide members about how much wage
rise should be demanded when demands should be made on management,
when a strike should be called, at what stage it should be withdrawn,
and so on. In exercising authority over members on such matters,
leaders cannot neglect the fact that members can easily withdraw
their support to the union by refusing to pay union dues and
participate in union activities. Also the financial and technological
base of union organization is weaker than the corresponding base
within industrial and other organizations. Union funds are subject
to uncertain factors such as members' discretion and the efficiency
of collectors of union dues. Union leaders therefore tend to
work under conditions of relative insecurity.

Another important feature of union organization is heterogeneity among its members. For instance, the members of an industry-based union work under different employers with disparate wage rates and working conditions. When the union secures economic or other benefits for one section of membership, others may suffer from a feeling of relative disadvantage, especially if they have participated in a struggle with employers on behalf of their fellow unionists. Sometimes, various sections of union members make conflicting demands on the same issues. While some members may want to accept management's decision to dismiss a worker found guilty of a major misconduct, others may want to oppose the decision in the interest of workers' unity.

At their work-places, union members work under the authority of managers as representatives of employers. Managerial roles and authority are more precisely defined and viable due to the precise techno-economic basis of industrial organization. While managerial authority is a matter of continuous experience for employees, union authority is experienced intermittantly during important events of industrial relations. Moreover, managerial authority has a greater degree of social acceptance than the authority vested in union leaders. Probably due to the fact that industrial enterprise preceded union organization (which is widely perceived as anti-management), the latter seems to suffer from low social approval

in all democratic societies. The unions' philosophy and methodology based on the acceptance of protest against established authority for achievement of organizational goals supports this popular belief implying low legitimacy as well as positive hostility.

The business of a trade union is not exclusively its own. It is well within the field of management activity to provide to workers the economic, social and psychological benefits which the union may try to secure for them. Hence union leaders may at times find themselves competing with progressive managements interested in employee welfare and prosperity.

As a voluntary association of members, a trade union has to face actual or potential competition from rival unions. If a significant proportion of union members become dissatisfied with their leaders, they may easily form or join another union. In those countries such as India where a very small number of persons can officially form a union, most trade unions function under a perpectual threat of inter-union rivalry.

The tasks to be performed by union leaders are relatively unstructured, uncertain and subject to a variety of forces in the economic, social and political environment. For instance, sensitive problems of decision-making may arise from the providential inability of a manager to supply appropriate tools to a turbulent group of employees. Or sometimes a union ideology may

make it necessary to give up short-term demands for increased wages
in the interest of a long-term plan to acquire better wages and
power for workers.

These structural characteristics of trade unions provide
justification for the contention that they are ephemeral organizations.
In practice, the rank-and-file members are only peripherally
involved in the union's routine organizational process. Hence
leaders constitute the crucial part of the organization. In fact,
as Munson dramatically suggests, "the leader is the union, in so
far as many members perceive the relation" (Munson: 1970: p.6.).
At the same time, in view of the various challenges posed by
internal and external forces as indicated earlier, the sense of
security among leaders is a crucial variable affecting organizational
success in serving members' interests. To some extent, union leaders'
sense of security would depend on their personal qualities and
experience as leaders. In theory one can conceive of trade union
leaders who can achieve results for their members with the help of
their personal reputation or charisma. However, in most cases, the
ability of union leaders to perform their role and achieve union
objectives would depend on their ability to adapt the union
structure to the demands made on it by members and other outside
forces such as political parties, government and employers.

The simplest (and, from the members' point of view,,the most
effective) approach to the task of structuring union activities is

to respond to the members' immediate interests and needs. Unions
following this strategy are called by Munson (1970 p.10. ff.) as
'member-centred' unions. Union leaders in such cases may find it
necessary to work closely with the rank-and-file, understand the
economic, social and psychological satisfactions needed by members
from time to time and deal with managements towards efficient
achievement of members' needs. Such union organizations are therefore
likely to be less bureaucratic and more democratic in as much as
the effective achievement of desired objectives would primarily
depend on members' involvement in the various activities. This form
of union structure can be developed where a union has strong
support from the majority of potential members to give it sufficient
bargaining power.

In those cases where a union's membership strength and hence
bargaining power are low, the leaders may have to depend on factors
extraneous to members' immediate concerns. One such extraneous
factor is political ideology. In India, for instance, the political
ideology associated with Gandhi, Marx or some combination of the
two leaders is often used by union leaders to gain and maintain
members' loyalty. This type of leadership implies what Munson
calls political unionism. As political ideology is at best of remote
concern to the rank-and-file, the strength of such unions is likely
to depend more on the charismatic qualities of the leaders. As the
main basis for unionization in this case is commitment to an ideology

and loyalty to persons holding such ideology, the leaders may be able to exercise authority over members without much resistance. The union leadership may consequently become more authoritarian or bureaucratic than member-centred unions.

An alternative approach of union leaders towards structuring the organization in a situation of low membership and bargaining power is to depend on some external agency for union activities. Some Unions may depend heavily on management's cooperation and convince members that what is decided in friendly negotiations between union and management is in the members' best interest. Others may depend on a third party such as government. The leaders' main task may then consist of influencing government decisions on union affairs and persuading members to accept government's advice or decisions. Such unions are labelled by Munson as dependent unions. In this case, as in the case of political unions, the main source of union strength resides outside the social field of interaction between leaders and members. Hence, the leadership is likely to be more authoritarian than democratic.

(iii) Major Union Tasks - Response to Environment

The primary need for any social organization is to survive. For survival, the organisation should be able to maintain a minimum membership and member commitment. It should therefore demonstrate some achievement of its stated objectives in relation to its members.

These objectives in turn can be achieved only if the union retains
a degree of acceptability among the organizations with which it has
to interact (especially, management and government). The union
should also be able to wield enough power to keep its competitors
and adversaries at a distance so that they do not destroy it.

If a trade union faces significant threat in its environment,
its activities may be primarily oriented to the need for survival.
In such a situation, members' interests may become irrelevant or
secondary to the need for survival. For instance, in a situation
of intense inter-union rivalry a union may have to demonstrate
its superiority over its rivals to retain members' loyalty. In such
cases, unions often find it expedient to resort to violence or
make unreasonable demands on management although it may be awareof
the futility of such action. A similar need for the union to
demonstrate its concern for members may arise when management begins
to steal the show from it on workers' grievances and benefits. Here,
the union organization is closely identified with its leaders and
members assume the role of clients whose interests become secondary
to the need for organizational survival.

On the other hand, when a union acquires strong support from
members and becomes a viable social and economic organization,
it may begin to provide to members direct economic benefits such
as financial credit, welfare and recreational facilities and
employment related security. Most of these tasks involve economic

calculations of investment and return. Hence, union activities
in such cases are likely to assume the form of economic activities
similar to business. Here also, union leaders may neglect the
needs of workers in relation to their employers. In fact the
provision of welfare facilities on economic terms may sometimes
compromise members' self-esteem as citizens when, for instance,
a borrower of union loan cannot repay it in time for good reason.

The main function of union leadership is to negotiate members'
demands with management and organize worker-protest in order to
secure maximum benefit for members. This function can be effectively
performed by leaders when they are not compelled to fight for the
survival of their unions and also not too much preoccupied with the
general welfare of members. However, Munson throws interesting
sidelight on this function of trade unions to strive for member
benefits. In his view (Munson : 1970 : pp.18-21), the continuous
interaction between a union and management on employee benefits and
welfare compels union leaders to collaborate on various shop-floor
issues relating to productivity, safety, discipline, grievance etc.
Consequently, to some extent, the union leader becomes a part of
enterprise personnel management attitudes. In that sense, the union
leader tends to be "psychologically absorbed by management."
Similarly, scholars such as Allen (1971) and Bauman (1972) have
pointed out that British trade unions which emerged as protest
groups against the Elite system eventually became part of the same

system. It would be quite interesting to pursue this hypothesis in the context of Indian trade unions and examine its implications for trade union effectiveness.[7]

III. TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

Indian trade unions[8], like their counterparts elsewhere, emerged as a by-product of the modern industrial enterprise. Arbitrary and high-handed treatment of workers by employers as well as exploitative working conditions (long hours of work, meagre wages, inadequate regard for safety and welfare) created among workers a shared sense of helplessness and dissatisfaction with employers. In the beginning (around 1880) sporadic attempts were made by employees to express their discontent towards employers and government through strikes and protest meetings. A few employee associations were also formed during this early period, but they were more like welfare organizations than trade unions. Genuine trade unionism in India began when Madras Labour union was formed in 1918.

The earlier welfare associations as well as the moral real trade unions were all led by philanthropists, social workers or political leaders. These representatives of workers possessed both the ideological fervour to help the downtrodeen as well as the intellectual capacity to articulate workers' needs and interests in relation to an English-speaking alien government. Simultaneously, the political mass struggle for nationalism began to take root

in the country. The potential trade unionists were closely associated with this political movement. At the same time, the political movement needed support from organizable masses such as industrial workers. Hence trade union leadership developed a close identity with political leadership.

The close link between political and trade union leadership has been described by most writers on Indian trade unions. Since 1929, when factionalism within the congress led to a split within the All India Trade Union Congress associated with it, Indian trade unions have followed the cleavages and realignments among political parties from time to time. During the last decade, individual members and small groups within political parties have been shifting their allegiances from party to party. In many such cases, union leaders continue to hold important positions in trade unions with which they have long association although they may move to political parties with a different union base. For instance, a large number of socialists joined the congress after 1970 but continued to hold executive positions in the Hind Mazdoor Sabha which owned allegiance to some non-congress political parties. Consequently, some unions (such as HMS) are now less clearly associated with specific political parties than others (such as AITUC which is closely linked with the right-wing Communist Part of India). A growing number of trade union federations now claim that they are independent

of political parties. However, the close bond between unions and political parties was dramatically demonstrated recently when the pre-congress INTUC and the pro-communist AITUC unsuccessfully contemplated merger in the wake of the political alliance between the congress and the Communist Party. Similarly, while several attempts at creating a united forum of trade unions failed in the past, the chances of unity among the unions associated with the constituents of the newly formed Janatha Party appear quite good.

One major consequence of the political origin of Indian trade unionism is fragmentation of the expression of workers' needs and interests. The notorious phenomenon of union multiplicity and rivalry at all levels of industrial organization does not need to be discussed at length here. Its implications for union structure and functions will be discussed later.

Another consequence of political unionism is that the objectives and methods of trade union organization depend mainly on the ideology of a union. While radical unions such as AITUC tend to examine workers' interests mainly in terms of the Marxist class-struggle, conservative unions such as INTUC are likely to be concerned with the ideals of peace, harmony and productivity. For instance, the National Commission on Labour summarized the views of the major trade union centres on the function of unions in Indian Society as follows:

The INTUC while acknowledging the need for adequate attention
to fulfilling the traditional role of unions, has suggested that
unions should (i) serve their membership and cater to the many-
sided requirements of workers as responsible citizens; (ii) plan
for sustaining the interests of their membership during times of
industrial peace by organizing intellectual, social, cultural and
recreational activities, consumer co-operatives, credit co-operatives
and co-operative housing societies; and (iii) educate the rank and
file so that the traditional agitational role should gradually be
transformed into one of understanding. It has pleaded that the
union should be given an effective role in the affairs of the
industry, including in its management as co-partner in industry.
The other view is equally cogently put forth by the HMS when it
points out that "if the trade unions allow themselves to be diverted
from their traditional role in the name of requirements of economic
development, the weaker and exploited sections of the working class
will find themselves terrorised and deprived of safeguards to an even
greater extent." The AITUC strikes a different note altogether.
In its view, "the ultimate aim of the trade union movement is to
abolish capitalism and wage-slavery and establish socialism in which
not only the working class but all layers of society are freed
free from exploitation." To evoke proper response from unions, it
suggests a wide range of institutional changes. Other central
organizations have indicated views which lie between these extremes.
(National Commission on Labour : 1969 : p.287)

The wide variety of ideological responses made by Indian unions
have often influenced the process of government decision-making on
vital issues of labour policy. The erstwhile tripartite forums on
labour relations (Indian Labour Conference and Standing Labour
Committee) and the National Commission on Labour arrived at many
conclusions through consensus among parties. Such consensus often
turns into compromise among parties holding varying views.
The following conclusion recorded by the National Commission on
Labour on the function of trade unions will illustrate the compromising
nature of decision-making through consensus:

The trade union movement, which we expect will evolve on the basis
of changes in its structure recommended earlier, has indeed to pay
greater attention to the basic needs of its members,....... At the
same time, it is imperative that unions keep the well-being and progress
of the communist constantly before them even in the midst of their
endeavours to help the working class. Unions have a stake in the
success of the national plans for economic development, since these
are formulated and implemented as much for maximising production
as for distributing the product in an equitable manner. Unions have
to adapt themselves to changing social needs, and rise above
divisive forces of caste, religion and language; and indeed, in
this regard, the role of the unions has been creditable. It is only
thus that they can progressively become instruments for constructive
purposes. (National Commission on Labour : 1969 : p. 287).

An interesting question regarding political unionism is: to what extent does the ideological basis of union leadership influence the interests of the members? There is little evidence to arrive at any valid conclusion in this matter. However, Ramaswamy's study (1974) of trade unionism in a South Indian industrial town suggests that

> "trade union and political matters constitute fairly
> discrete spheres of activity. The outsiders (leaders)
> are in control of a powerful union seeking to advance
> its members' job-related interests. They also have a
> deep political commitment. They are able to pursue
> both these goals without having to mix the two. (p.170)

In one sense, Indian trade unionism grew out of government action. In 1920, the British Indian government realized the need for a trade union federation to represent the Indian working class at the newly-formed International Labour Conference. The government also wanted a Labour organization to advise it (government) on matter of labour policy. The first major trade union organization (All India Trade Union Congress) was launched by the Congress Party in response to these government-felt needs.

At the same time, the government came under pressure both from industrialists in England and from Indian political elite (for different reasons) to give legal recognition to employees' right to organize. Hence in 1926 the Indian Trade Union Act provided for registration of trade unions and protection of union leaders against legal action for legitimate union activity. Trade unions thus acquired

legal rights and privileges to function as formal voluntary
organizations representing workers' interests. Thus, while trade
unions in the West acquired legal recognition long after they
began to organize and represent workers' interests, Indian trade
unions had hardly gained acceptance among workers when they got
legal status and protection. It seems this historical accident
has has had a significant effect on the social status, function
and acceptability of trade unions in India. As the unions seem to
have started more with the support from the superstructure of
nationalist politics and government than with the support of the
infrastructure of membership, the latter support perhaps continued
to remain weak. But this hypothesis needs to be examined with in
the light of historical and sociological analysis.

While legislation on trade unions and industrial relations has
undergone some changes since it was first enacted, its major
features have remained virtually unchanged. These are: (i) almost
total freedom for people to form unions, (ii) absence of any provision
for identification and recognition of a majority union to represent
workers in case of inter-union rivalry and (iii) statements on
desirability of collective bargaining between unions and employers,
but, at the same time, imposition of government's conciliation and
adjudication machinery at government's discretion for resolution
of industrial disputes.

This legal framework has several implications for union
organization and leadership. The freedom to form unions has
been used with great enthusiasm by political parties and other
union leaders to form or support rival unions. As there is no
provision for selection of a majority union for the purpose of
bargaining with employers, all unions concerned with an industrial
unit, industry or region tend to make conflicting demands on
employers as well as employees. Moreover, as government is capable
of intervening in a dispute when it wishes, the employers and unions
involved in a dispute are relatively unconcerned about the outcome
of bilateral negotiations. This makes all of them dependent on
government and its industrial relations machinery (conciliation,
labour courts, tribunals etc.) Thus while employees have the freedom
to unionize, their freedom to protest in pursuit of their common
interests is heavily restricted.

The trade unions' dependence on government's legal machinery
has considerably influenced the nature of union leadership. More
often than not, the success of a union leader and the support he
receives from members depend on his acquaintance with labour laws and
skill in interpretation of these laws. A union leader cannot get away
from the dominating influence of labour laws, whether he belives in third-
party arbitration of disputes or in direct action and bilateral settle-
ment.[9] This is an important reason for union leadership roles to be
mainly performed by lawyers, political leaders and such other

intellectuals who look for a career in trade unionism. Not many intellectuals can be easily attracted to such a career because of its many hazards, uncertainities and the social image of unionism as I shall discuss later. Hence a relatively small number of union leaders are **associated** with **large** numbers of unions. As Munson (1970: p.71) observes, the organizations legally registered as trade unions (e.g. a union of employees working in a unit or industry) are not unions in social reality. Sociologically, a union organization correspond to an office, a place from which one or a few leaders manage the affairs of a large number of officially registered unions. This office may belong to one or more of the unions located in it, or it may be a neutral location from which all the unions may function. The few leaders managing the office usually occupy the highest executive positions (president, secretary, treasurer etc.) in the various unions. Some of these leaders develop charismatic qualities by virtue of their long association with union activities or the recognition achieved by them in the political or social field. Often, these leaders belong to higher socio-economic strata in comparison with workers.[10]

The education, experience and socio-economic status of these leaders as well as their formal leadership positions in many union segments all combine to give them considerable authority and power over their members. In so far as union management relations are based on government and legal machinery, union members are more

dependent on leaders than leaders depend on members. For workers,
a union and its leaders often play the role of a legal agency
which could protect and help them in resolving their grievances
against management. Union leaders are aware of this perception of
members and may validate it by their behaviour towards the latter.
It is not uncommon to hear that leaders show arrogance towards
members and that they care little for them. In fact, I have heard
union members complaining that their leaders are more arrogant
and officious than their supervisors at the work place.[11]   While
there is little systematic information on this aspect,   there is
some common observation to suggest that the union leaders' dependence
on government and their physical, organizational and social distance
from the rank-and-file contribute to the development of authoritarian
bureaucracy among union organizations.[12]   This bureaucratic phenomenon
among unions would no doubt vary from union to union, depending on
the specific situation of a union and the personality characteristics
of the leaders managing it.

On the other hand, the multiplicity of unions and the consequent
problems of union rivalry create considerable insecurity among the
union leaders and their organizations. To a large extent unions
seem to be interested in maintaining or creating rivalries among
themselves, each of them hoping thereby to widen its political or
organizational support. It is possible for them to do so in the
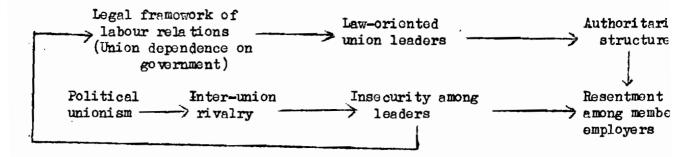context of the freedom to unionize and absence of the right of

recognition by employers. For this reason, insecurity seems to pervade all unions in a given situation. Hence all of them have to struggle for survival. This struggle for survival often compels unions to vie with each other to receive employers' and members' attention. Hence unions often indulge in spectacular activities regardless of their ability to serve workers' interests. Union leaders are known to launch strikes or agitations without adequate consideration of relevant issues if they find themselves losing control over members in some organization or industry.[13]

The sense of insecurity among union leaders arising from inter-union rivalry is reinforced by the attitudes of union members as well as management. I have already referred to the negative attitude of union members towards their leaders. On their part, entrepreneurs and managers in industry usually look upon unions as a necessary evil.[14] While managers may publicly pay a lip service to the need for trade unions in a democracy, many of them in real life hate trade unions for their nuisance value. For such people, unions are desirable only to the extent that they help management to keep workers under control.

The leaders' insecurity arising from the various forces as mentioned above may encourage them to fall back on government intervention in union matters, since government wields power to regulate industrial relations. Thus the problem of Indian trade

union organization as I have discussed here can be summarized with
the aid of the following diagram.

Legal framework of
→ labour relations ——————→ Law-oriented ——————————→ Authoritari
(Union dependence on   union leaders   structure
government)

Political   Inter-union   Insecurity among   Resentment
unionism ———→ rivalry ————————→ leaders ——————————————→ among membe
employers

I must clarify here that the observations made in the above paragraphs
aim only at projecting a general picture of Indian trade union organization
Undoubtedly there must be exceptions to the general picture. Some
trade unions in places such as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and other industrial
centres are known to have established themselves as effective interest
groups of employees sorting out their disputes with management through
bilateral negotiations.

IV. NEED FOR CHANGE

The organizational and functional weaknesses of trade unions in
the context of their rationale in a democratic society have been
realized and discussed over a long period. In view of the role
played by the existing legislation in supporting these weaknesses,
it is often suggested that trade unions and industrial relations
in the country can be made more effective by a few simple modifications
in labour law. For instance, it is suggested that a union should be

permitted legal registration only if it has a sizeable support
from potential members. It has also been suggested that a bargaining
agent should be selected by concerned employees within an organiza-
tion or industry through the process of secret ballot. Also, some
people advocate minimization of government intervention in
industrial relations by making collective bargaining compulsory.

Such changes would no doubt contribute to greater effectiveness
of trade unionism in the country. In fact, these charges were
contemplated twice during the period 1947-52. In 1947, a law enacted
by Parliament provided among other things, for compulsory recognition
of representative unions as well as protection to employees against
unfair labour practices on the part of employers and unions. Again,
in 1950, two bills were drafted by government. These bills reintroduced
the provisions of the 1947 legislation and also made collective
bargaining compulsory. However, both the 1947 Act and the 1950 Bills
were made ineffective by government's executive authority. Let
us examine the ground for the rejection of these changes.

There was reluctance among all sections of the industrial
relations community to accept changes in current legislation.
Employers were reluctant because they feared that the proposed
changes might strengthen trade union movement. Government was
reluctant to accept the changes in relation to its own employees.
Non-INTUC unions were reluctant to accept the changes unless
they were applied to government employees as well. Besides,

government and its trade union wing (INTUC) were afraid that any
more towards compulsory recognition of a collective bargaining
agent might result in a set-back in the existing majority and
strength of INTUC as other unions (HMS, AITUC) which had then
become more popular among workers. Thus, there was a common
understanding among the concerned parties against a   democratic
choice of bargaining agent each for a different reason.

Subsequently, when problems of inter-union rivalry became more
difficult, the government, in consultation with employers and trade
union leaders, recommended a voluntary approach to identification
of majority unions and mutual non-interference among unions. Thus,
in 1957 government persuaded employers and trade unions to accept
a code of discipline which provided for voluntary recognition of
unions by employers on the basis of verification of union membership
by government agencies. The success of such measures depended
entirely on moral commitment on the part of union leaders and
employers. Not surprisingly, this effort soon proved futile.[16]
Later, the National Commission on Labour discussed the problems of
trade unionism. The Commission recommended that the minimum
number of persons to form a union should be raised to ten per cent
of the employees in a plant. The Commission also suggested that a
union seeking recognition as a bargaining agent should have a
membership of atleast thirty per cent of workers in an establishment.

The power to decide the representative character of a union for
collective bargaining was vested in an industrial relations commission
at the national or state level. It was also suggested that the
recognized union should be statutorily given certain exclusive
rights and facilities in the interest of effective bargaining.[17]
These recommendations were made clearly with a view to shifting
the industrial relations scene towards stronger unions, fewer union
rivalries, collective bargaining and less interference by government
in bipartite relations. Unfortunately, the Commission's recommendations
have not travelled beyond promises of timely implementation.

V. AN APPROACH TO CHANGE

In the background of this analysis of the state of affairs
regarding trade unionism, what choices are available to government
and trade unions to achieve union goals more effectively?

As union leadership often represents political and personal
vested interests, and since workers often show indifference
to union action, some people like to conclude that trade unions
should not be given much importance in our society where, it is
stressed, the prime need of the hour is uninterrupted production
for economic development. Those who argue on these lines could
comfortably stress as evidence the peaceful industrial relations
climate in the country during the period of 'emergency'. With
the revival of the institution of workers' participation in
management, it is still easier and more convincing to predict that

employers and workers may eventually collaborate as a single interest group and that they may resolve all disputes bilaterally with the help of government.

These are alluring thoughts, especially for those of us who regard, and perhaps have experienced, trade unions as an agency with a nuisance value for employers and the community. We should however, remember that as long as we live in a society wedded to representative democracy, it is inevitable that there are many interest groups representing people's interests in their multifarious roles. It is also inevitable that, to some extent, these interest groups will make incompatible and even conflicting demands on the society and its various sub-systems. Likewise, it is unavoidable that employees in relation to their superiors in industry constitute a conflict group in the context of the authority and power structure within industrial organization. For all these reasons, it is of utmost importance that we socially (and not just legally) recognize trade unions as representing the fact of employees' common interests.

At the same time, we should squarely face the numerous dys- functional aspects of current trade unionism in the country. While multiplicity of trade unions cannot be altogether removed in a democratic society, there is a clear need to ensure that trade unions work for the genuine common interests of their constituents and not merely for perpetuating organizational power

or out-manoeuvring one another. This would require an effort at
re-structuring industrial relations at the plant and industry
level where material issues of workers' interests are handled.
Inspite of many plans and promises in the past, government has so far
failed to streamline the process of representation of workers and
bargaining between management and unions at the grass-roots level
of work-organizations. In this matter, there is no viable alternative
to the institution of selecting bargaining agent through democratic
procedure and obligation on management and the bargaining agent to
bargain as separate but interdependent interest groups to resolve
their differences.

In such an arrangement, the status of minority unions needs to be
clearly defined. In the first place, too many minority unions are
obviously a hazard to the strength of workers' organization as well as
to the effectiveness of union management negotiations. Hence, it is of
utmost importance to restrict the number of unions representing a
group of workers. I believe the suggestion that only those unions
which have support from at least ten per cent of employees in a
unit should be allowed to register as unions is worth serious consi-
deration. Some observers are greatly concerned about the role of
existing minority unions which enjoy rights and privileges
as workers. It is suggested that the industrial relations climate
would improve to everyone's satisfaction if all unions are allowed

to bargain jointly with the employers. This appears to be a good
democratic solution to the difficult problem of union rivalries.
However, recent experience shows that rival unions may not be
able to bargain jointly beyond the period of initial euphoria
after agreeing to do so.[18] It appears that minority unions should
play only the role of minority unions if we want bipartite relations
to become really effective. Hence, the role of a minority union
has to be limited to representation of individual grievances and
such relatively minor issues.

So far government has resisted an unambiguous system of
collective bargaining on the assumption that election by voting
among workers is detrimental to their unity and the fear that
western-type collective bargaining process may lead to perpetual
conflict between the parties. It is now necessary for government
to make a candid assessment of the impact of its labour policy.
One cannot get away from the fact that the ad hoc policy of
government on union recognition for effective bargaining has
hardly led to a system of effective resolution of industrial conflict.
The ad hoc policy was no doubt convenient for some governments,
some managements and some unions to solve problems as they wished.
But it has hardly led to a stable arrangement for resolving
disputes. Hence it is necessary to revive the proposal for
collective bargaining between bargaining agents on the two sides.
Collective bargaining is a vital ingredient of a democratic
industrial relations system.

It should be added that collective bargaining should be adopted
for the efficiency it implies in resolving industrial disputes
and not just for the freedom it gives to the two parties. There is
no doubt that the parties' freedom would have to be defined
carefully to ensure that freedom and responsibility are combined
rationally. It is worth considering whether mutually acceptable
mediation and arbitration with a legal sanction behind them will
serve the purpose more effectively than government controlled
adjudication as at present.

Apart from this legal dimension of promoting collective bargaining,
it may gain strength on the basis of concrete experience. In
many cases, those unions which have little or no support from
government agencies take recourse to genuine collective bargaining
by identifying and representing members' interests. If such efforts
are successful, the union leaders are encouraged further to adopt
collective bargaining as a means for achieving workers' ends.
Progressive success may establish effectiveness of the effort
and hence one can expect that collective bargaining will eventually
become an accepted system of dealing with labour problems.

Collective bargaining may prove detrimental to a social order
in a situation of extreme economic stress. Strikes, lockouts
and other forms of work disruption may involve great risk to social
stability. In such a situation, government should consider a

viable alternative to collective bargaining. If for instance, state

control over industrial relations is necessary, it should be

designed clearly and unequivocally. Industrial relations in such

an eventuality will have to follow the norms or directives emanating

from government or its nominee. State control may be necessary

in some situations. But it is harmful to a democratic system and its

members to express lip-sympathy to democracy while the system is

actually managed arbitrarily, as it happens now in the Indian

Industrial relations system.

The lack of professionalism among union leadership, the use of

organizational power for survival and the inadequate concern with

the long term interests of workers along with those of the wider

society have been lamented time and again by students of trade

unionism in our country. It is time attempts were made at the

societal level to bring home to trade union elite that unions have to

pursue long term social objectives and not merely the immediate

economic and political interests of workers and leaders. The social

objectives need to be redefined from time to time in view of the

changing conditions within the society. For instance, it would

be socially absurd for any trade union to continuously struggle

for higher economic returns and better working conditions because,

beyond a point, such demands may make the employer incapable of

maintaining a viable economic unit. In such an eventuality,

union leaders would have to find other, socially more relevant

ways of expressing and meeting workers' needs - such as their
psychological and need for social recognition and human dignity.

If trade unions have to achieve this kind of social purpose,
the political dimension of trade unionism will have to be
reexamined. Of course, trade unions will always have to act as
protest groups or conflict groups. But once they acquire a new
social purpose, the limits of their political action will have to
be redefined. Also, perhaps as protest groups their target of
protest would have to vary according to the social situation at a
point of time. The nature of protest too will have to vary according
to the situation. As trade unionism, through its bureaucratic
tendencies and vested interests, often creates less of freedom
of individual workers, they will have to be vigilant to ensure that
such loss of individual freedom is minimized.

If trade unions move in this new direction of serving workers'
interests, they will by necessity have to evolve a new type of
leadership with new goals in view. This may create an opportunity
for unions to attract competent people who would be as professional
as those in other goal-oriented organizations. This may eventually
bridge the credibility gap about union leadership among employers,
workers and others and thus lead to more refined professionalism.

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NOTES

1   I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Mr. Bagaram Tulpule, Mr.A.C. Nanda and Dr.E.A.Ramaswamy for their valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay. I am also indebted to Professor Morris D.Morris for the inspiration I received from him.

2   For instance, Giri (1958); Punekar (1948); Sharma (1962); Singh (1963); Johri (1967); Karnik (1966); Kennedy (1966); Crouch (1966); Vaid (1965).

3   Among the studies of Indian trade unions at the grass-roots level are: Sheth (1960); Vaid (1962; 1965); Bogaert (1970); Sheth et al (1968 a; 1968 b); Pandey et al (1969); Munson (1970); Ramaswamy (1977); Reindorp (1971); I also know of several empirical studies of trade unions undertaken by scholars in universities for doctoral research.

4   I refer to management as representative of employers .or owners in industry.

5   The concept of a trade union as a conflict group is based on Dahrendorf's (1958) penetrating analysis of authority, power and conflict in industrial society.

6   Some of the propositions stated in this part of the paper are based on the conceptual framework suggested by Munson (1970) (-especially chapters 1 and 2).

7   Munson (1970), while identifying three·types of union leadership function (survival of the organization, pursuit of members' interests in relation to employers and providing direct benefits to members), postulates a continuum along which the three major functions can be placed—obviously most union leaders are likely to perform all the three functions simultaneously. The emphasis may vary from situation to situation.

8   For details, please refer to Karnik (1966), Sharma (1962) and other studies mentioned in note 2 above.

9   In this connection Munson (1970 : p.107) gives an interesting
     example of a veteran political revolutionary who took to
     union leadership. "He still called himself a revolutionary
     and he still liked conflict, but......his satisfactions came
     from how he had compromised an impossible case, scored a
     a debating point on a famous lawyer, secured an adjournment
     which no one thought would be possible, or won a big
     settlement for his union."

10   There are stray references in some studies to the social,
     economic and educational superiority of union leaders in
     comparison with members (e.g. Sheth : 1960; Crouch: 1966).
     However, there the available information is very inadequate.
     Studies on union leadership (Mathur: n.d; Punekar et al :
     1967; Reindorp : 1971) offer no enlightenment in this regard.

11   See, for instance, Sheth (1960)

12   Kennedy (1966: pp 86-87) and Crouch (1966) offer some
     general remarks on this subject.

13   See, for instance, Dayal et al (1972); Sheth et al (1976).

14   Kennedy (1966 :p.89); Sheth et al (1976).

15   The most unequivocal and clear-headed recommendations in
     this regard are made by Kennedy (1966: Chapters 3-4).

16   See National Commission on Labour (1969), p.346.

17   Ibid. pp. xx, xxiv

18   Some organizations such as Indian Airlines and Hindustan
     Steel recently tried to solve industrial relations problems
     in joint meetings with all unions concerned with their
     employees. These experiments failed soon after they
     were launched.

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