

TRADE UNION EDUCATION MANUAL

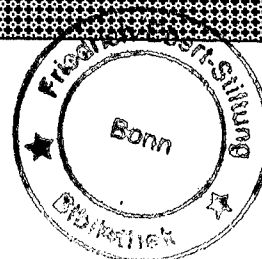
UNITED WE STAND DIVIDED WE FALL

JOINT COLLABORATION OF :

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG (FES)

INSTITUTE FOR MINERS' AND METALWORKERS' EDUCATION (IMME)

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FOREWORD

This booklet is the product of a joint effort undertaken by trade union educators belonging to different unions and labour education centres from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The idea to write collectively a series of basic trade union education manuals was conceived at a workshop on trade union education materials which was organised by the Institute for Miners' and Metalworkers' Education(IMME) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in November 1991. This workshop reviewed the existing educational materials, and after identifying the educational needs of trade unions in the coming years, decided to constitute a working group which was given the task to prepare manuals on 3 priority topics, namely, "trade union unity", "trade union democracy" and "workers and new technology".

Representing different organisations and professing varying political ideas, the members of the working group did not always agree on all matters. However, through serious and open discussions, it was possible to arrive at a better understanding of each other's position and to evolve a consensus on all fundamental aspects. Thus, the process of preparation of the manuals was in itself a successful example of trade union cooperation proving that "unity in diversity" must not remain an empty slogan.

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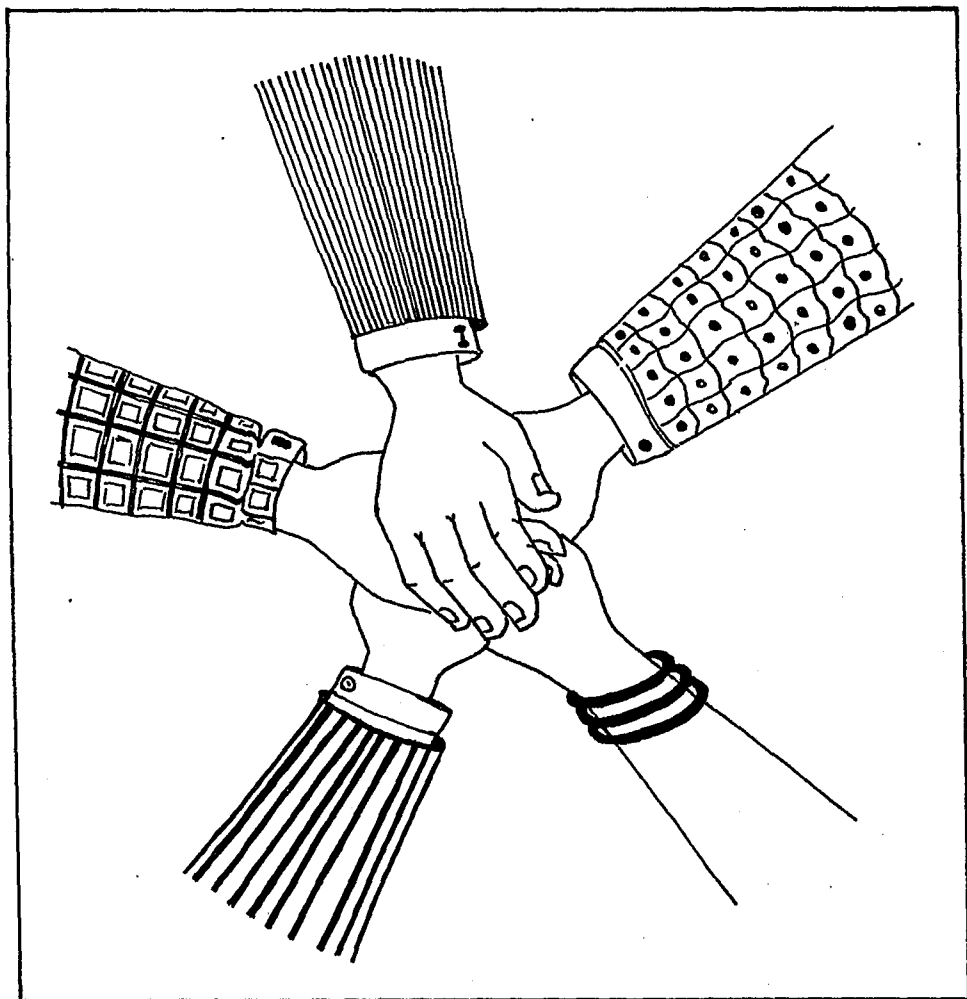
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I. TRADE UNION UNITY: DREAM AND REALITY

The word “union” and “unity” appear on the same page in the dictionary of English language. The word “union” according to the dictionary means : uniting, being united, coalition etc. The word “unity” means : oneness, being one or single, being formed of parts that constitute a whole etc...

The working class of the world first realised the meaning and the value of the word “union” and “unity” when between 1750 and 1850 after the Industrial Revolution in England, thousands of people were uprooted from their rural surroundings and huddled in the factory system where they were subjected to harsh discipline and 12-14 hours work every day, meagre wages and no protection in case of accidents, sickness or death. However, this very factory system itself provided the impetus to these oppressed workers to get a new identity as a group and act unitedly because as industrial workers, their interests and problems were common. They realised that the exploitation and the consequent hardship could be warded off and their lot could be improved only through joint action necessitating the workers to come together and act in unison. Thus, the first trade union was born.

In India, as in other countries, the rise of unionism was the result of collective and united efforts of the workers to bring about the much needed improvement in the then prevalent socio-economic conditions. The formation of the first trade union in India can be traced back to 1890.

Since then, a period of more than 100 years has gone down in the pages of history. And although India today ranks as one of the eight industrially most advanced countries of the world, we are still very backward as far as the development of the trade union movement is concerned. In 1924-25, the first attempt at gathering exact statistics regarding the membership of different trade unions was made by the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the first trade union centre in the country. Statistics listed in the “Directory of Trade Unions” contains a list of trade unions in 1924. There were 164 unions of which 68 submitted returns. These 68 unions

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP GROWTH

1927 - 1986

YEAR	REGD. UNIONS	UNIONS SUBMITTING RETURNS	MEMBERSHIP	AVERAGE MEMBERS PER TU
1927	29	28	100,619	3594
1930	119	106	219,115	2067
1935	236	205	268,326	1309
1940	667	450	511,138	1136
1945	865	573	889,388	1552
1950	3522	1919	1,821,132	949
1955	6658	3345	2,170,450	612
1960	10,811		3,923,000	696
1965	12,948	6771	3,763,000	
1970	22,121	8909	5,431,000	629
1975	29,391	9690	6,267,000	642
1980	35,939	4399	3,716,000	841
1983	38,935	6844	5,417,000	792
1984	41,863	6372	5,316,000	798
1985	43,309	7718	6,414,000	823
1986	45,095	7558	6,367,000	832

DIVISIONS IN INDIAN TRADE UNIONS

1920 AITUC

1947 AITUC INTUC

1948 AITUC INTUC HMS

1949 AITUC INTUC HMS UTUC

1955 AITUC INTUC HMS UTUC BMS

1970 AITUC INTUC HMS UTUC BMS CITU

1971 AITUC INTUC HMS UTUC BMS CITU NLO

1972 AITUC INTUC HMS UTUC BMS CITU NLO UTUC(L.S)

had a total membership of 2,23,337. The Directory also listed 8 federations with an aggregate membership of 195,000. Today, a total of 13 central trade union organisations with 15,983 affiliated unions and 26.13 million members have filed their claims before the Government of India for recognition as central trade union organisations. Apart from these, we have many unrecognised central organisations, state-wide organisations and industrial federations. Thus, while we can take pride in the fact that so far as membership of the trade unions is concerned, over the last approximately 60 years, there has been phenomenal growth, this growth has not been without the pains of division and fragmentation of the working class. From one strong central trade union, namely the AITUC, which was formed in 1920 and which remained the sole umbrella organisation of the working class for about 26 years, splits, further splits and more splits went on fragmenting the unity, strength and bargaining power of the working class. While reasons for this division and fragmentation are many, it would be worthwhile to briefly take a look at the history of splits in the Indian trade union movement.

The country witnessed an era of intense trade union activities from 1920 to mid-1940s. These activities reached a peak on the eve of independence with nationalist leaders leading the unions as a part of renewed political agitation. Naturally, 1946 and 1947 saw some bitter struggles waged by workers and industrial disputes, strikes and protest actions reached an alltime high. Also, by this time, most of the Congressmen and Socialists were put behind bars for their activities, and consequently the Communists took full control of the AITUC. This was opposed by the non-Communists in the AITUC. On 3rd May, 1947, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was born. This ushered in yet another national trade union centre with a distinct ideology. This process continued as we see the formation of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) in 1948 and in quick succession the formation of United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) in 1949. Yet within a gap of 5 years, we witness another national trade union centre in 1955 with the formation of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS). This continued further with the formation of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in 1970, the National Labour Organisation (NLO) in 1971 and the UTUC (Lenin Sarani) in 1972.

The other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal also had similar experiences. In some of these countries, national trade union centres have emerged with State intervention. For instance, in Bangladesh, there are around 25 registered national federations and some other unregistered ones too. The degree of unionisation in all these countries is less than 10%.

Thus, we have a very contradictory situation in reality. Trade union unity is a goal that has been accepted by all sections of the movement. It is not possible to find even one trade union leader or political party which does not accept in theory the necessity of unity. And yet, unity has all along remained at best a pious hope and at most a deceptive slogan.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What was the reason for the formation of trade unions*
- *How did trade unionism develop in India and in other South Asian countries?*

II. WHY IS THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT DIVIDED ?

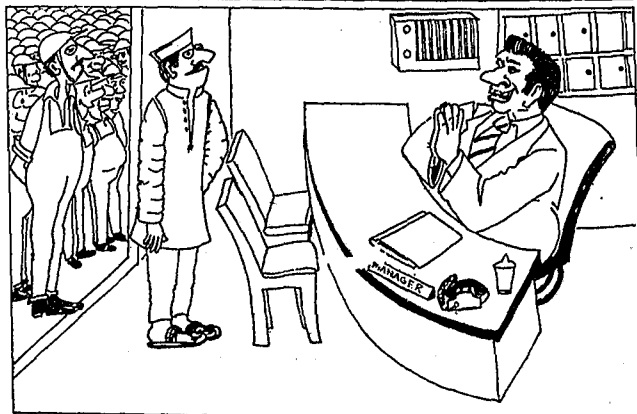
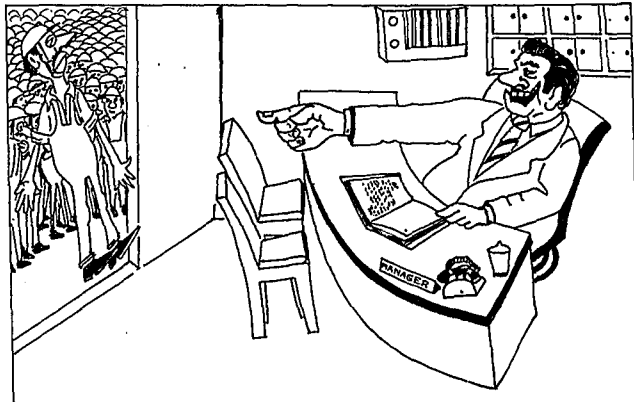
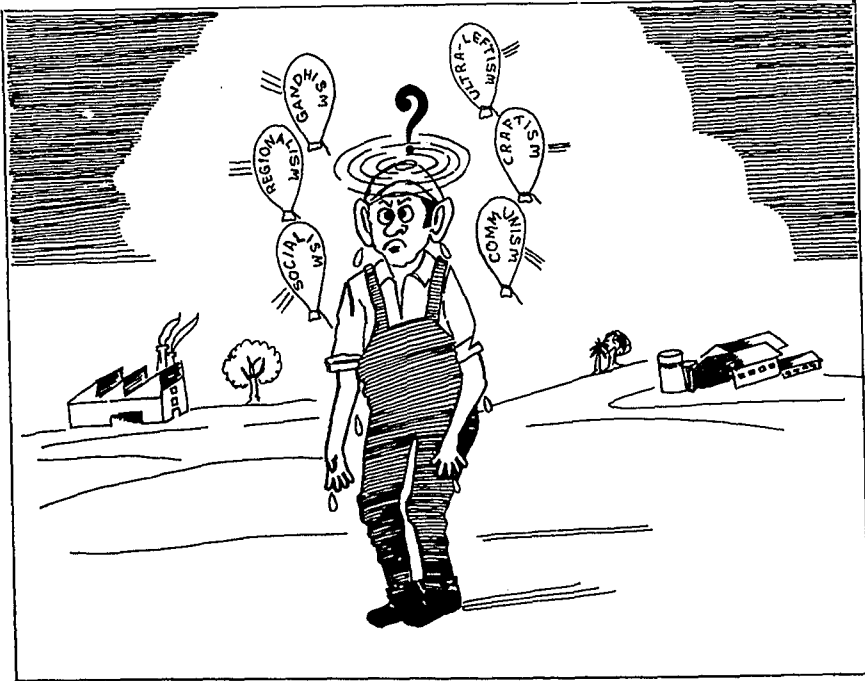
The growth of trade unionism can be analysed in terms of numerous factors. These factors are : economic, political and social conditions, legal framework, quality of leadership, attitudes of the government, employers, workers and the public and international factors. As we shall see, these very factors which have been responsible for the growth of trade unionism have also become the contributory factors in keeping the trade union movement a divided house.

Let us examine a little more in detail these and other similar factors which are responsible for the disunity in the trade union movement of the Sub-region.

1. Politics and Trade Unions

Almost from the very beginning, the illiterate and poor workers had to depend on educated and influential men for pleading their cases. This help came mainly from political workers and in some cases from social workers. Broadly speaking, politics was inseparably associated with the trade union movement from its inception. The political parties were instrumental in organising the trade union movement. Subsequently, they have continued to dominate and manoeuvre the trade unions to suit their interests. This has resulted in political unionism, rivalry, multiplicity and dominance of outsiders, thereby weakening the movement. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that much of trade union ideology is but a replication of political ideology.

As long as the parties remain separate, the unions associated with them are also bound to remain separate. It has been observed many a time, that as and when some parties amalgamate and come together in a united front, the unions associated with them follow suit and develop close relations with each other. But as soon as the parties fall apart, the unions also find themselves at loggerheads. The unity established disappears and warfare in the political field is

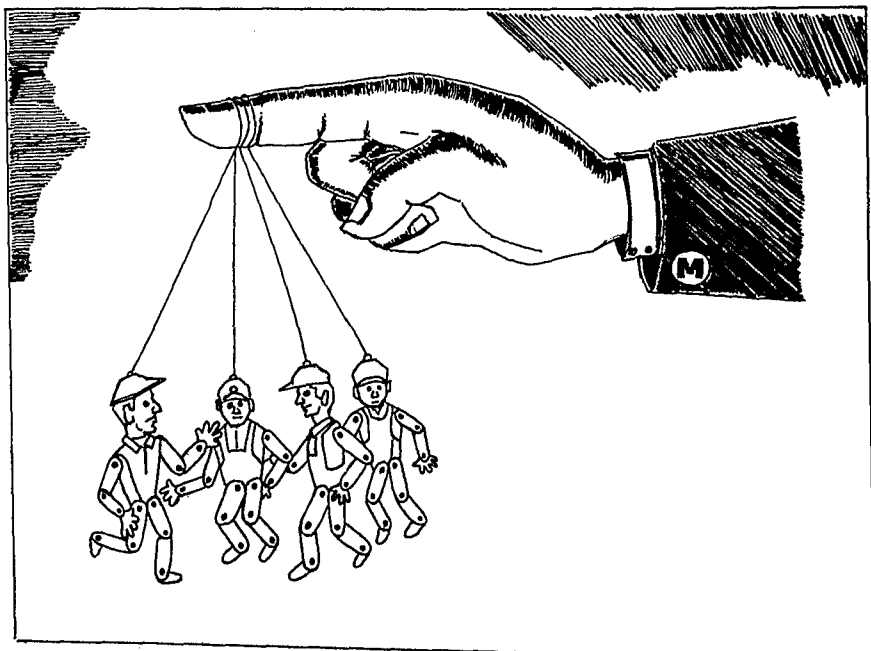


mirrored in the trade union field as well.

The trade union organisations at the national level time and again fail to reach an agreement because of ideological and political differences. Even if they can unite for purely trade union activity, political forces still play an important role. The situation is further complicated by the fact that as a result of multiplicity of unions, the question of leadership in a united movement creates serious problems. Before independence, the trade union movement was a wing of the national independence movement. After independence, generally, it became a projection of national politics. By and large, before independence, the movement at least had a unity of purpose, which disappeared after independence.

2. Trade Union Leadership

By and large, in India, the leadership of the trade union movement has come from the political parties. From the very beginning, the trade union movement has been dominated by outsiders. This cuts the very basis of trade unionism, i.e. **of the workers, by the workers and for the workers**. The reasons are many. Major among them are: large-scale illiteracy, poverty, ignorance of democratic traditions and fear of employers. In most of the cases, we find that trade unions are seeking the help of political leaders and influential individuals to protect their members' interests, and in some cases, against the onslaught of employers and the indifferent attitude of the government machinery and bureaucracy. Moreover, the language of administration and legislation continues to be highly technical which is not easily understood by an average worker. This situation has encouraged outside leadership. This is more evident in political aspirants seeking to use trade unions for their political and economic ends. Thus, every time such leaders see confrontation or non-conformity facing their political or ideological views, they leave and form another union. History shows that all the past fragmentations were not something which workers themselves wanted. The division was not over

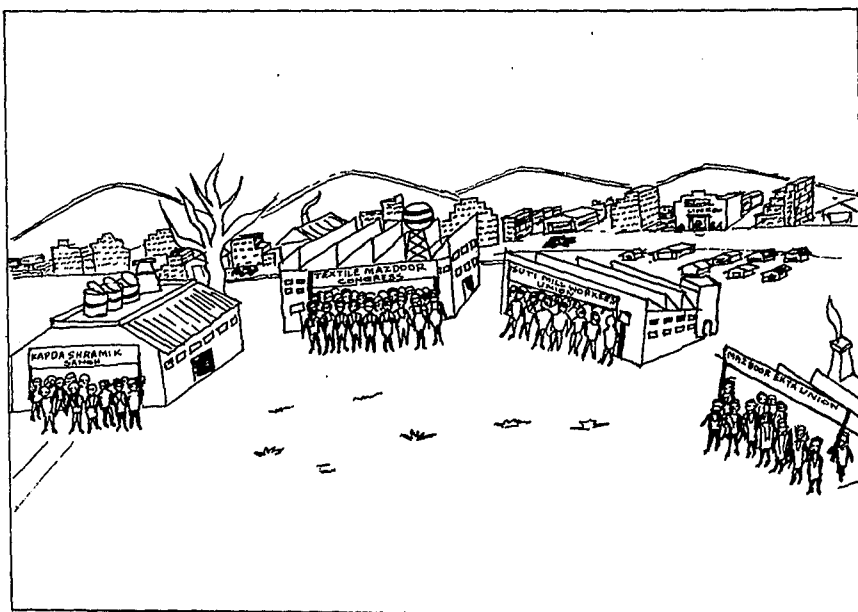


issues with which the workers had any identification. Ordinary workers became victims of their egoist leadership which divided the unions to suit its ends, even as workers watched in mute silence.

These negative traits are found among outsiders only. In some cases, inside leaders have also developed vested interest and tend to perpetuate their leadership by any means.

3. Role of Management and Employers

Management and employers who have traditionally looked upon unions as "evil" have also devised methods to break the unity and strength of organised workers. There have been innumerable cases where in the face of strong representative unions of workers, the managements and employers have themselves promoted the formation of "yellow" unions which sing to their tune. Such managements also bypass the representative union and negotiate with the minority "yellow" union. Unfortunately, we do not have adequate legal provision to compel the employer to recognise a representative union unconditionally. Even when there are laws, they are not given effect to in practice. Thus, in a way, multiplicity of trade unions is encouraged by the managements and employers. In the case of the government, which is still a very big employer, we find that public-sector managements willingly encourage the presence of more than one union in the enterprise and even negotiate with minority unions, perhaps for political reasons. Multiplicity of trade unions is in a way recognised and accepted by the government as an employer. We find situations in the large infra-structure and public-sector industries that each central trade union organisation has unfurled its flag. Thus, the combined membership of all trade unions in many cases exceeds the total employment figure in that particular industry. This is because of dual membership of unions. The government as an employer finds this a convenient situation.



It is also often found that because of this disunity, considerable time and energy of the unions is lost and wasted in fighting rival unions over petty issues. This works to the advantage of managements and employers.

4. Labour Laws

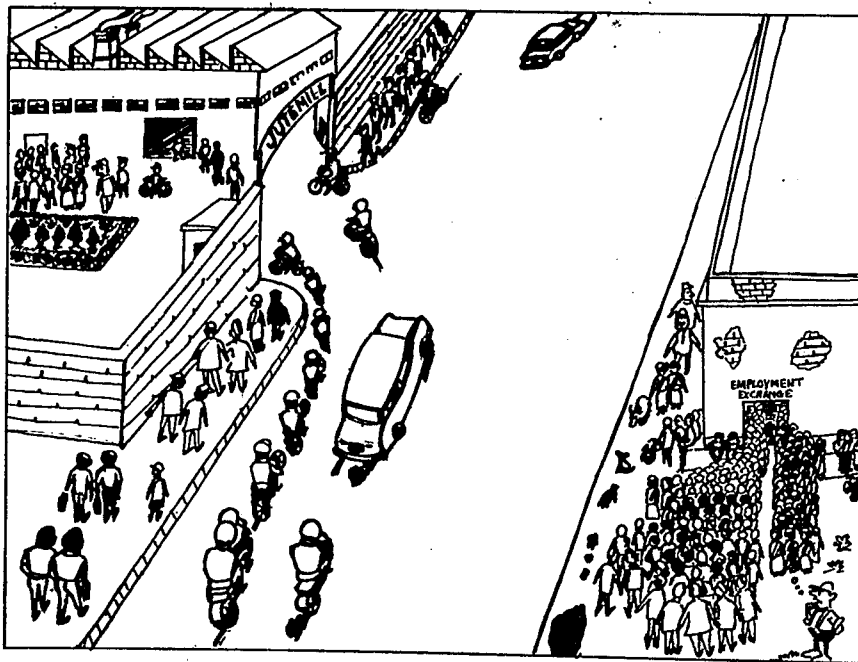
Labour laws have also become in a way a contributory factor leading to a fragmented union movement. In Pakistan, under the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969, workers are prevented from forming industrial or general unions. It institutionalises multiplicity of unions in each enterprise, thus creating a permanent divide among workers. In Bangladesh also, law has been effected for creating division among workers. Similar experiences can be obtained in other countries.

5. Structure of Organisation

Trade union structures also suffer from severe limitations. There is no coherent or uniform pattern as can be seen in the West, where more or less everywhere the concept of *one industry-one union* has taken firm and strong roots. In general, in the industrial sector, unions are mostly organised at the enterprise level. Thus, for example in the Indian textile industry, one finds that there are hundreds of enterprise level unions and not one national union representing the textile industry workers. Workers from the same industry remain fragmented in numerous unions and consequently, their bargaining capacity also suffers. The emergence of enterprise level unions has also affected the national federations of industry-wide unions and correspondingly the unity of workers and a united voice at the national level.

6. Sectarian and Social Stratification

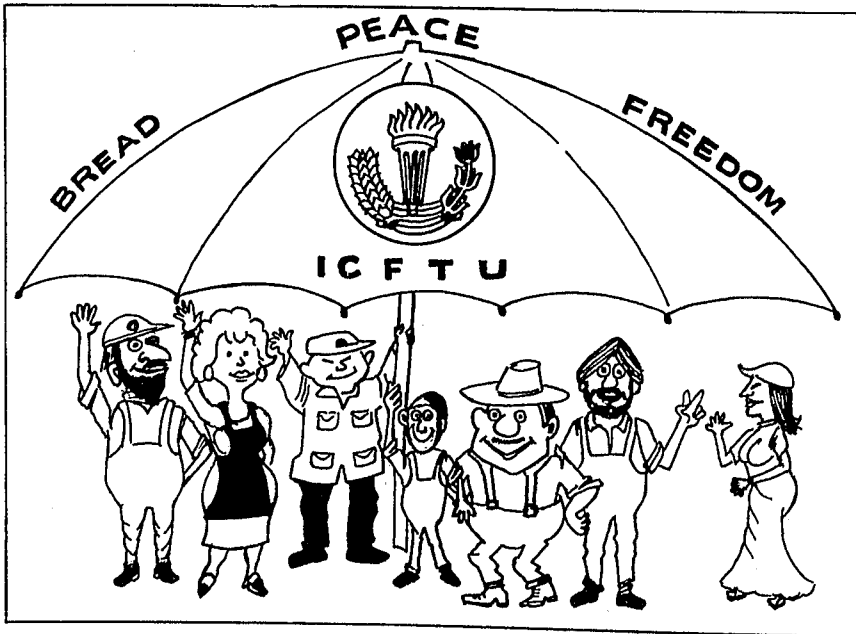
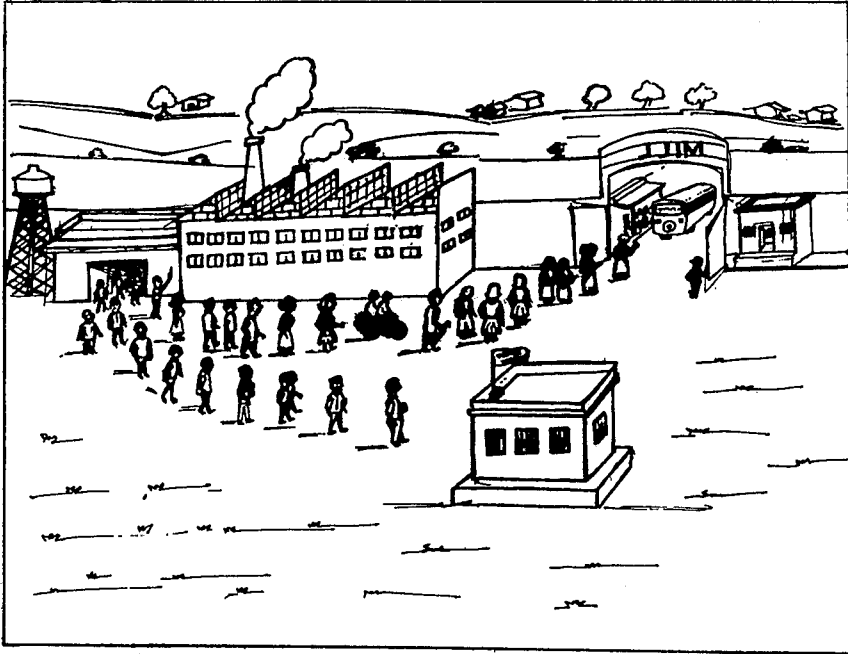
While traditionally, the trade unions were mass organisations of industrial workers, over the years, service sector employees have also organised strong unions. So much so, that lately,



managers have also begun to form unions. But unfortunately, the expected cohesion and networking of unions in different sectors which would have resulted in a strong trade union movement, is still elusive. Examples of strong and united unions of both white and blue collar workers under one umbrella organisation are present in Western countries, but we have failed to learn from their experience. Even amongst the existing unions, we have instances where the unity of workers is divided on sectarian and social lines. Thus, we have examples of unions being formed exclusively on caste, ethnic, religious and regional basis. These tendencies have further fragmented the unity of the working class. Craft unions in industrial establishments have also exercised an adverse effect on workers' unity.

7. Organised Vs Unorganised Workers

The biggest challenge facing the working class movement is the rapidly growing numbers of non-unionised labour. And no one else but the organised trade union movement seems to be responsible for this. In every large business enterprise, the number of contract, casual and temporary workers is growing. More and more jobs are being entrusted to them. So each time a union comes to ask for more money for its members, the employer pushes some more jobs to cheap labour. In other words, the employer only transfers some more work from union members to contract labour. The unorganised workers look at the organised ones with envy for having cornered the benefits of improved wages and service conditions. The organised workers appear to be less bothered about the deprivation and oppression of unorganised workers. How can the working class unite when it is faced with two opposing sectional interests? The apathetic attitude towards the informal and unorganised sectors by the organised sector unions tends to broaden the cleavage between workers and workers which in the long run affects trade union unity.



8. Urban Vs. Rural Workers

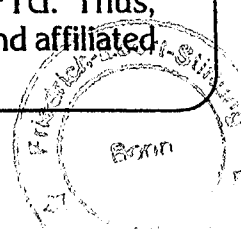
Since its inception, the trade union movement has by and large remained active only in the industrial sector and has ignored the potential of the rural sector. Consequently, the growth of trade unions has been lopsided. This has also created a situation whereby rural workers have migrated on a large scale to locations of urban industrial employment and competed with industrial workers even at lower wages, thus weakening the bargaining strength of the existing unions in the organised sector. Even at the level of workers, there have been innumerable instances of exploitative tendencies. Organised urban industrial workers who spare no efforts to fight for their demands in the city, deny minimum wages to farm labourers who are employed to work on their fields in the village. Let it be emphasised that in their own self interest as well as for achieving greater working class unity, urban trade unions in the organised sector must extend a helping hand through manpower and resources to organise the rural workers. Or else, working class unity will only remain a distant dream.

9. Women Workers

Inadequate attention to special problems of women workers has alienated women workers from trade union activity. In a situation where women workers are participating more and more in the productive sector, a major sector workforce is left outside the domain of union activity which has ultimately weakened union strength.

10. Influence of International Trade Union Organisations

The trade union movement which grew from the inspiration of the trade union movement of the West, naturally could not avoid the influence of division of the nations of the world into two blocks and the corresponding two world organisations of labour, namely ICFTU and WFTU. Thus, Indian trade unions strictly remained confirmed and affiliated



to one or the other international organisation, thereby contributing their mite to the fragmentation of the working class at the international level. So much so, that even national federations remained affiliated to the respective Trade Secretariats, the ITSs in case of ICFTU, and the TUIs in case of WFTU. It is only the recent political changes in the world that have brought about the disintegration of one of the international organisations, the WFTU. Let us now hope that the unity of the trade union movement at the international level under one organisation may ultimately become a reality in the near future.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the factors that have impeded trade union unity ?*
- *It is said that workers and unions themselves are responsible for disunity. Do you agree ?*

III. HOW TO OVERCOME IMPEDIMENTS TO TRADE UNION UNITY

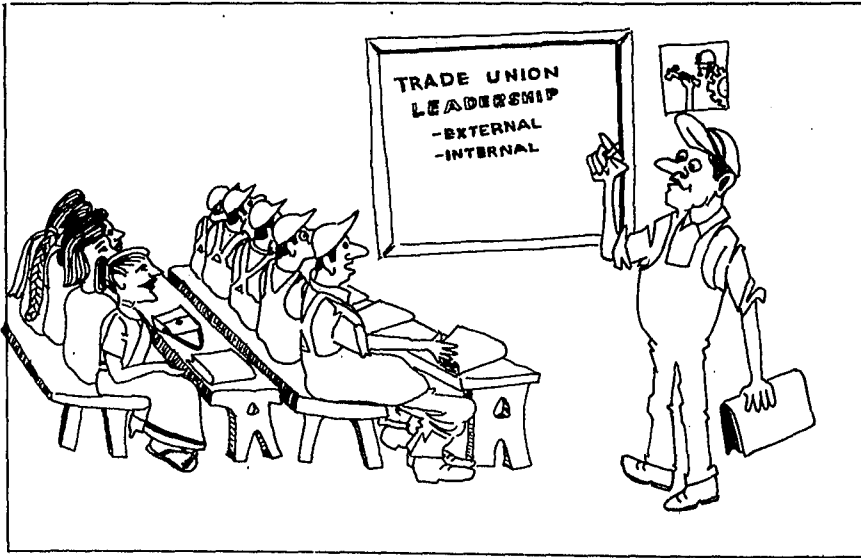
Having thrown some light on the causes of trade union disunity, let us examine the impediments to unity and suggest measures to overcome them in order to achieve the desired goal of unity.

1. Overcome dependence on political parties

Dominance of trade unions by political parties is mainly responsible for inter-union rivalries and fragmentation. During the earlier stages, conditions in which the unions functioned also favoured the growth of political activities. After independence, the political parties perpetuated their dominance over unions and from time to time offered sops to unions owing allegiance to them by way of political rewards to leaders, recognition, representation and favoured bargaining status and assistance of the government and legal machinery. The powerless and helpless workers could do nothing but to follow the diktats of the political parties. This situation must change now. Trade unions must free themselves from political ties that restrict their autonomy.

2. Develop internal leadership

Right from its inception, trade union leadership has been dominated by outsiders conforming to various political ideologies and interests. By and large, these leaders have discouraged any tendency among the workers to do their own thinking or allow them to ascend the leadership ladder. This situation will have to change and pave way for a more democratic functioning with committed efforts to bring forth and develop democratic internal leadership from amongst the workers. Of course, the relevance of "outsiders" as advisers to unions will always remain important.



3. Change workers' attitudes

Workers' attitudes, especially in the well-organised sectors, are also to some extent responsible for the stagnation of unity efforts. These workers rely on the union only to further the goal of monetary benefits. Thus "unionism" is replaced by "economism". They take the union for granted. Paying membership fees becomes their only obligation (if at all). And if they come across another union or leader who promises to get them more, they do not hesitate to cross the floor. Such members become selfish and indifferent in their commitment towards the trade union, and are a threat to any form of trade union unity. Such attitude reflects lack of involvement in union activities and a distorted perception of the role and function of trade unions. This warrants workers' enlightenment.

4. Transform unhealthy leadership attitudes

Trade union leaders have in fact been claiming that their members have faith in the particular brand of ideology promoted by them. In reality, this has been only a delusion. Leaders have, on the basis of this argument, built up unions which are either aligned with one party or the other. These attitudes have created walls of division in the working class. A change in attitudes amongst the leadership is a must if unity is to be achieved. Leaders will also have to shed their monopolistic tendencies to allow for and accommodate political pluralism in unions in the larger interest of workers. The formula of "unity in diversity" will have to be adopted and adhered to by the leaders.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How do you overcome the impediments to trade union unity ?*

IV. HOW TO PROMOTE TRADE UNION UNITY

In the previous chapter, we have identified some of the causes and impediments which are responsible for the fragmentation and disunity in the trade union movement. It again brings us back to the question, what really do we mean by working class unity?

To put it very simply, working class unity means the coming together of all workers under one independent and autonomous organisation with the fundamental aim and aspiration to protect and promote the common interests of the workers.

However, translating the above simple definition into reality is not so easy. It requires a basic structural change to be effected in our unions and the development and practice of new attitudes by trade union members and the leadership. It also requires adjustments, compromise and certainly sacrifice by all those who are involved in the endeavour.

Let us try to look a little more in detail as to how we can move in the direction of trade union unity given the present constraints and limitations.

1. Unity in identification of problems

A very safe and non-confronting beginning towards unity can be made by making common cause in identifying the problems of workers at the enterprise levels and then extending the same at the industry level and possibly at the national level. Identification of common problems and joint representations will strengthen the case of the workers and ensure speedy and effective redressal in the interest of the workers.

2. Eliminating intra-union rivalry

Intra-union rivalry, which is a more dangerous form of damage to unity, must be completely eliminated. This calls for complete commitment of the leadership towards the

common good of the union, keeping aside factionalism in a union. Also, workers must be vigilant and should not get swayed by such leaders who create divisions in the union and demand personal loyalty instead of loyalty towards the union.

3. Joint action programmes

Efforts can also be made to bring together rival unions at enterprise levels for launching and conducting joint action programmes on common labour demands and issues. Such joint action programmes will instil a sense of solidarity and unity among the workers and their leaders. Same and similar endeavours can be taken up at the national centre level. After all, we have a history of successful joint action programmes against anti-labour measures. We just have to ensure the continuity and frequency of such endeavours.

4. Joint education and research activities

Diverse trade unions at the national level can formulate a common programme of conducting joint trade union education and research activities. Trade unions may invite leaders and members of rival organisations to their education programmes and activities; to begin with, as observers, and later on, even as participants. Joint studies and research activities on common questions and issues of labour may also be taken up by diverse trade unions.

5. Joint action on the social front

A beginning towards unity can also be taken up by initiating joint programmes on a common forum on social issues. These could include social awareness programmes on issues like nationalism, communalism fundamentalism, literacy, price-rise, dowry-system, reform of the education system etc. After all, trade unions also have a responsibility towards society at large.

6. Joint efforts with non-affiliated unions

Politicisation of unions over the years was also responsible for the creation of a new pattern of unions. Disgusted with the dominance and control of political parties and ideologies, the new unions in pharmaceuticals, consumer products, chemicals, electronics and other hi-tech industries preferred to stay independent. These unions are really among the strongest unions with nearly 100% membership, sound finances and internal leadership capabilities. In spite of these good qualities, these unions have no voice at the national policy-making levels.

Central trade union organisations must realise the importance of these independent unions and create a suitable climate where the two can come together and work jointly, with an ultimate aim of uniting their forces. After all, both can complement and supplement each other's strengths in the larger interest of the workers.

7. Merging rival unions

With a little sacrifice of personal loyalty, identity and egos of the trade union leaders, and eschewing petty political games, efforts can be made at the enterprise level to merge rival unions into one industrial or local union. The same objective can further be realized by bringing the rival unions into one federation.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Suggest measures for promoting trade union unity.
- Have you any instances to cite where unity efforts have been made?

V. BENEFITS OF TRADE UNION UNITY

Having discussed the various dimensions of trade union unity, should we not try to identify the advantages of trade union unity?

1. Strength

A united trade union movement will become a strong social force to defend the rights and well-being of the workers, and their interests will always prevail over the selfish motives of employers, government and political parties. Such a strong organisation will be able to offer better protection to labour against exploitation. It will also definitely strengthen the bargaining power of the workers.

2. Independence

A united trade union movement, bringing workers of all shades and ideologies together, will be the master of its own destiny. Free from any interference or control, it will be able to exercise effective pressure on government and employers by winning better labour and social legislation and respect for trade union rights and workers' dignity.

3. Financial Autonomy

A united labour movement will be able to build up financial autonomy, and existing resources and energies spent to fight rival organisations can then be conserved and saved to strengthen the movement.

4. Solidarity

A united trade union movement will definitely strengthen the bonds of solidarity among the working class and help remove economic and social disparities.

5. Influence on Government Policy

A united trade union movement will influence the government to adopt equitable, just and democratic economic, labour and social policies.

6. Protection of Democracy

A united trade union movement is an indispensable pillar of a democratic society. Such a united movement will firmly oppose and resist any kind of dictatorship or authoritarian government that may threaten the people and the country.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the benefits of a united trade union movement?*
- *Elaborate on the importance and significance of trade union unity in the present day context.*

You must have all heard of the axiom which says, it is very easy to break a thin wooden stick; but when many such thin sticks are tied together, it is very difficult to break this bundle of sticks.

The entire trade union movement is also built on the moral of this axiom. We have come a long way since then. But somewhere along the way, our united strength got disintegrated. All is not lost yet.

Let us commit ourselves to renewed efforts with rejuvenated vigour to discover the meaning of unity. Let us unite, because

UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL

THE FRIEDRICH EBERT FOUNDATION THE CONCEPT AND THE TASK

We are a non-profit, private educational institution, committed to the concepts and basic values of democratic socialism and the labour movement.

We work in the spirit of the first Reich President of the German republic, Friedrich Ebert. It was his legacy that the foundation be established.

With our worldwide activities we also want to keep alive the memory of the democrat Friedrich Ebert.

Our aims include :

- Political and civic education in a democratic spirit for people from all walks of life.
- Fostering international understanding and partnership with developing countries.
- Fostering with scholarships German and non-German students with exceptional scholastic talents and especially suitable personalities as well as young graduates from Germany and abroad.
- Scholarly research in the foundation's own institutions, supporting research projects.
- Fostering the arts and culture as elements of a living democracy.

