

# CHALLENGES BEFORE THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT TODAY

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With the advent of globalisation the world trade union movement is facing a big challenge to-day. One of the major objective of the process of globalisation is to marginalise the trade union movement. Even in the advanced capitalist countries we find that membership of trade unions in most of the countries is declining at a faster rate. The trade union rights are under attack and the employers in Germany are making efforts to run several undertaking without the existence of a trade unions. The workers will sign a direct contract with the employer for a specific period and the working conditions during that period would be spelt out in the agreement. A worker has to give a commitment that during the period of agreement he would not raise any dispute and after the period of expiry of the agreement it would be the prerogative of the management to retain him and sign a fresh agreement for a later period. During the period a worker has to give a commitment that he would not join any trade union. The ILO in its recent report has admitted that the globalisation has resulted in marginalisation of the trade union movement. In a competitive environment when the employer producing at the cheapest labour cost can compete effectively in the market, labour conditions and standards tend to be lowered due to this fierce competition. In a number of advanced capitalist countries the trade unions have accepted wage cuts and lay offs. Closure of several factories and establishments on the plea that they are uneconomic have become the order of the day. Several humiliating agreements(?) have been imposed on trade unions hitting at the working and living conditions of the workers. The class collaborationist trade unions have failed to resist the onslaught resulting in workers losing their faith in the trade union movement itself. There is no wonder that the only single existing national trade union centre in USA has only 14 per cent membership out of the total workforce in that country.

## GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT

The massive dose of unemployment is the direct result of the Structural Adjustment Programmes

(SAP) imposed on the countries by the World bank and the IMF. As a result of modernisation of industry and introduction of job killing devices the job potential has declined drastically with huge army of unemployed swelling all over the world. The Human Development Report of the UNDP has clearly noted the jobless growth of the economy. The growing unemployment has brought down the collective bargaining strength of the working class since people are available to work at less wages and bad working conditions.

Particularly worst hit are the women employees. They are the first to be retrenched in the drive for job shedding. Despite tall talk of social safety net the compensation offered for retrenchment though at times euphemistically called voluntary retirement or golden handshake, is extremely inadequate which makes the workers destitute after some months of retirement.

## OFFENSIVE OF PRIVATISATION

The privatisation of public sector undertakings has become a key slogan in the SAP today. Valuable assets of public sector are handed over to the private undertakings or foreign companies at throw away prices. Public sector which played an important role in building a self-reliant economy in several developing countries is thus being liquidated and the floodgates of the economy are opened for the MNCs.

Wherever privatisation is undertaken social objectives are given a go bye. The number of workers are drastically cut and their service conditions are reduced substantially. Trade union rights of workers are also drastically curtailed in the name of enhancing profitability of such privatised units.

In India, the public sector undertakings developed national level bipartite negotiations which contributed much to building of national level unity in the trade union movement. Now, Govt is trying to do away with such national level bipartite forum. The unity of the public sector employees movement which is at the forefront of the general TU movement in the country is sought to be weakened through such mechanism.

The public sector managements due to difficulties faced by liberal imports have taken some steps without consulting the national bipartite committees, which seriously harm the interests of workers. This has resulted in decline of bipartism in the country. The idiotic guidelines issued by the Department of Public Enterprise have stalled wage negotiations in public sector undertakings.

### **CHANGING STRUCTURE OF THE WORKING CLASS**

The so-called economic reforms have drastically brought down the regular employment while the number of casual and temporary workers are increasing everywhere. All the benefits which are generally available to the regular employees are denied to the casual and temporary employees which enables the employers to bring down the cost of production. The number of contract workers are increasing rapidly since the labour laws are generally not implemented by the unscrupulous contractors and the government behaves like the silent spectator. The wages of these workers are extremely low. The growing phenomenon of child labour all over the world also reflects employers' desperate desire to engage cheapest available workforce.

This has become a global phenomenon while the form varies from the country to country. The speedy emergence of export processing zones/ Free Trade Zones all over the world with no implementation of labour laws and total absence of job security is also the worst manifestations of exploitation of workers. The governments generally encourage such systems since it is yielding good returns and adds to the foreign exchange earnings.

In USA the prison labour is being used with impunity where the government shamelessly hands over the convicts to the private employers who are permitted to exploit them mercilessly. In the recent ILO conference it was reported that the wages of these prison labour as low as 1/4 to 1/10th of the regular workers. The system has spread to Great Britain, Australia and other countries which virtually amounts to engagement of forced labour.

### **THREAT TO HEALTH, SAFETY AND ENVIRONMENT**

The introduction of new technology is accompanied by new health hazards for the workers. 80,000 chemicals are being used all over

the world causing serious risks for the workers. Millions of workers have become victims of occupational diseases. The industrial accidents are increasing rapidly resulting in loss of life or limbs of workers on a large scale. The environmental pollution has caused several health hazards to the workers and their family members whose life span is getting reduced due to the menace of pollution, land, water and air are affected by pollution and normal life of the working class is threatened by it.

Uprooting large number of families in several projects have become a common phenomenon and no efforts are being made to rehabilitate the victims. Their struggle for adequate compensation and rehabilitation is considered as a cry in wilderness.

### **ANTI-WORKERS LAWS IN THE OFFING**

Whatever labour laws enacted as a result of long drawn struggles in the past are being watered down in stages or being scrapped in the name of liberalisation. Cut in social security expenses in Europe is becoming a common phenomenon. The BJP government, when announced the Second National Labour Commission in India has brought in the entire concept of liberalised economy and the change of labour laws to match the process of liberalisation through the terms of reference of the commission despite opposition by all the trade unions in India. The multinational companies are already raising a hue and cry that the present labour laws are not conducive the free entry of foreign capital in India and do not match the needs of market economy.

The TU and democratic rights of the working class are already under attack while right to strike is being curtailed every where.

The abolition of provision of Inspection oby govt inspectors of factories in some states in India is a clear mockery of the labour legislation itself.

### **GROWING INEQUALITY**

The liberalisation has resulted in increasing inequality in the country. The gap of income in the advanced capitalist countries and the developing countries is also growing with each passing day. According to UN Statistics the per capita income of advanced capitalist countries is 78 times the per capita income of the least developed countries. The GATT agreement and the WTO are seeking to increase this gap still further which would adversely affect the standard of living of the working class and other poor people in the world.

Already top 20 per cent of the world population is enjoying 85 per cent of the world income while the bottom 20 per cent of the world population has only 1.3 per cent of the world income! Moreover the process of liberalisation is also widening the disparity between the rich and the poor at a faster pace within each country with more and more people falling below the poverty line.

#### **NO NEED FOR FRUSTRATION**

Attempts are being made by the advocates of globalisation to tell workers that we cannot oppose globalisation since 'there is no alternative' to this process. Even some trade union leaders openly advocate that despite our opposition, the globalisation has come to stay and we should try to protect the interests of the workers within the framework of globalisation. The deteriorating economic situation and rising unemployment is also helping to strengthen the frustration among the workers.

However, if globalisation is allowed to continue the conditions of the working class all over the world will deteriorate at a faster rate. This would make the struggle for elimination of poverty meaningless. It is now an acknowledged fact that all assurances given in the Declaration of World Development summit held in Copenhagen in 1995 have remained only on paper while the profit hungry multinational companies continue to garner more and more profits at the cost of livelihood of common people all over the world. We must fight back this menace.

#### **GLOBALISATION CAN BE FOUGHT**

If trade unions unite at a global level, they can meet the challenges of global capitalism effectively. The massive struggles of the working

class in South Korea, France and Brazil have shown that globalisation can be resisted if the working class unitedly fight against the menace. The nationwide 5 strikes organised by the trade unions and mass organisations in India have shown that working class is ready to fight if they are mobilised on common issues facing the toiling masses.

The second international TU conference against globalisation being held at Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) on 1-3 September 1999 is a global attempt to meet the challenges posed by global capitalism since the first conference held in Havana (Cuba) in 1997 created awareness among the working class all over the world to fight the machinations of multinationals on a world scale.

'The Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights' to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa on 25-28 October 1999 is another attempt to mobilise the working class to fight the new economic policies of governments dictated by the IMF and the World Bank.

These conferences will pave the way to meet the challenges faced by the trade union movement in the world today. It is also notable that through these initiatives many ICFTU and WFTU unions are coming together in raising their voices against World Bank/IMF policies and their menacing impact, thus harnessing wider unity of world trade union movement. If the trade union movement rises to the occasion and strengthen the national struggle with more determination and enhance international solidarity action, it can effectively meet the challenges and defeat all machinations of global capitalism against the working class and the common people.

## **CONDOLENCE MEETING OF SAROJ VASISTH**

On August 1, 1999, the condolence meeting of Com. Saroj Vasisth, Convenor of the Haryana State Co-ordination Committee of Working Women and a State Committee member of Haryana CITU, held in Rohtak has drawn several thousands of people all over Haryana.

Com. Saroj was a leading organiser of the CITU in the state who was murdered along with her 6 year old daughter by her husband.

Condolence meeting was organised jointly by CITU, Haryana Anganwadi Workers Federation, Sarba Karmachari Sangha & Haryana Unit of All India Democratic Women Association.

Among the speakers, who addressed the meeting and offered homage to Com. Saroj and her daughter were Com. Tapan Sen, Secretary, CITU, Hanan Mollah, Secretary AIAWU, Brinda Karat, General Secretary AIDWA, Satvir Singh and S.N. Solanki, General Secretary and President of Haryana State CITU respectively, and Nilima Maitra, President, All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers & Helpers.