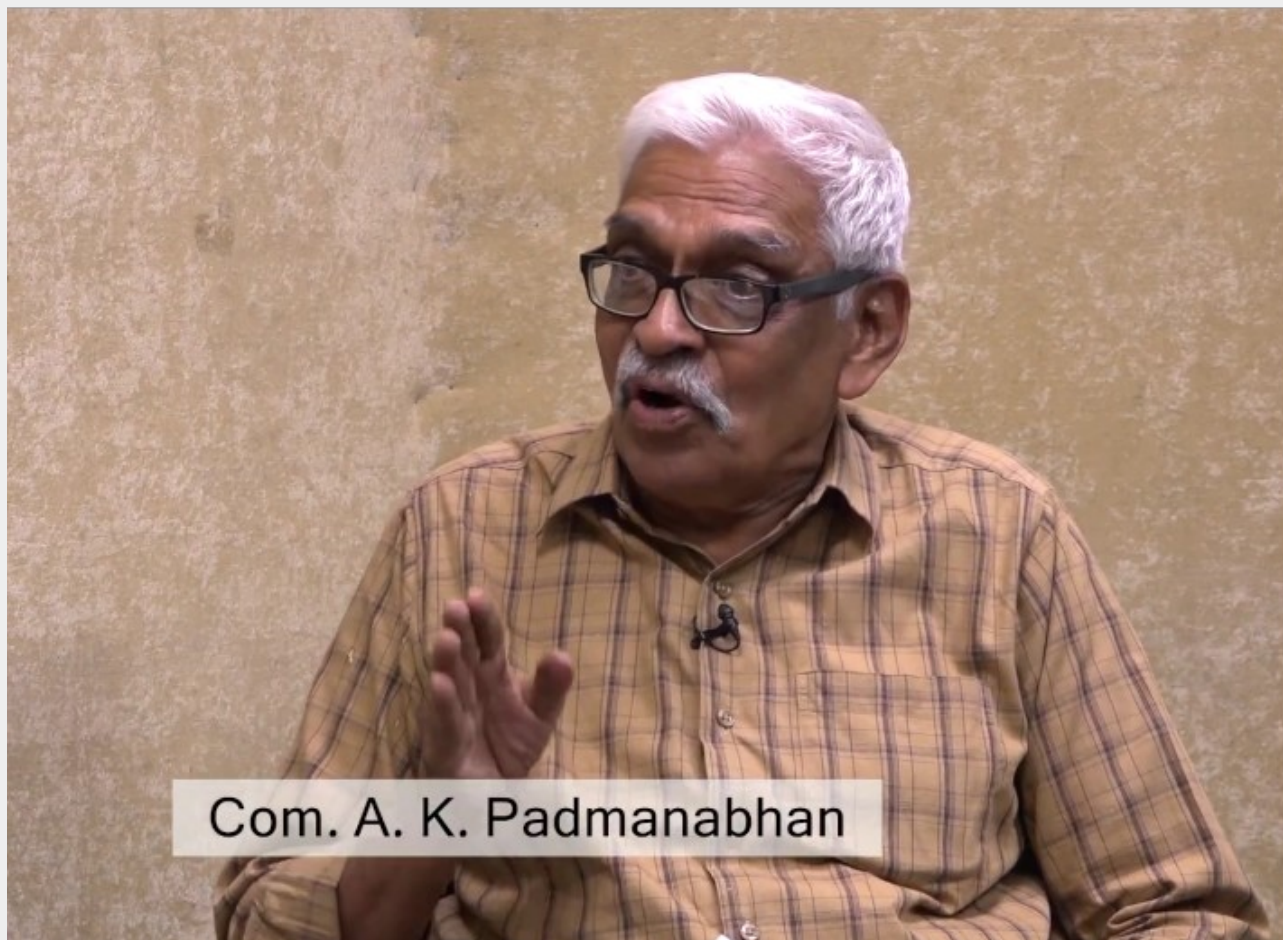




Recorded on 8 June 2023

Key Points of the Interview

- Purpose of the conversation: a continuation of an earlier discussion with A. K. Padmanabhan tracing the evolution of India's trade union movement from the post-Emergency period through to the present day.
- 1980 marked a watershed year — IMF/World Bank conditionalities, Mrs. Gandhi's return to power, and the formation of the National Campaign Committee (NCC) in Mumbai united all central trade unions except INTUC on a common charter of demands.
- The NCC charter was notably inclusive, covering minimum wages for workers, fair pricing for peasantry, and an integrated law for agricultural workers — demands that remain unresolved in 2023.
- January 19, 1982 became the first countrywide general strike after Indian independence; ten workers lost their lives, and in Tamil Nadu thousands were pre-emptively arrested and transported to Tirunelveli to prevent participation.

Com. A. K. Padmanabhan in conversation with Indu Agnihotri Part 2

- Worker-peasant alliance was institutionalized after the 1982 strike — at CITU's 1983 Tamil Nadu state conference in Coimbatore, BTR proposed a one-rupee-per-member monthly contribution to agricultural workers and Kisan movements, a practice that continues today.
- Caste-based recruitment patterns historically shaped factory workforces — even in textile mills, so-called lower-caste workers were barred from certain jobs — and this feudal legacy, now compounded by religious mobilization, continues to challenge working-class unity.
- October 1984 anti-Sikh violence in industrial townships revealed how quickly communal sentiment could fracture workers who had lived as neighbors, signaling a dangerous pattern that Padmanabhan sees intensifying through to 2023.
- Collapse of the Soviet Union weakened the ideological alternative to capitalism, enabling the TINA (There Is No Alternative) narrative and making it difficult to build a unified trade union response to the 1991 LPG reforms — yet a countrywide strike was still called within four months of the July 1991 policy announcement.
- Post-1991 globalization shifted the trade union movement from offensive to defensive — struggles now revisit demands from the 1950s and 60s such as basic unionization rights, mirroring the charter first presented by Singaravelar on India's first May Day in 1923.
- Labour codes consolidated decades of employer-drafted rollbacks: labour welfare officers replaced by IR managers, labour inspectors redesignated as "facilitators," inspection rights curtailed, and standing committee recommendations routinely ignored by government.
- Workforce fragmentation — apprentices, trainees, contract workers, outsourced workers — means 60–65% of workers in many factories have no formal relationship with the principal employer, deliberately undermining collective bargaining capacity.
- Working conditions in high-tech industrial zones belie their modern appearance — 10–12 hour shifts are the norm, double wages for overtime have been replaced by flat nominal allowances, weekly offs go unenforced, and migrant workers in cities like Bangalore live in wretched conditions.
- Dispersal of industry from traditional working-class centers (Mumbai mills, Coimbatore textiles) to rural campuses and export zones has eroded the political and cultural solidarity that once characterized those communities.
- Despite the defensive posture, ongoing struggles — a 40-plus-day strike at a Korean chocolate factory in Thiruvallur demanding union recognition, Anganwadi and ASHA workers resisting victimization, and young workers holding firm for union rights — continue to provide grounds for hope.
- The central challenge for a class-oriented trade union movement is the absence of a common ideological understanding across unions on capitalism, communalism, and caste — joint action on charter demands exists, but a shared class outlook does not, and building that remains the defining political task.