

Com. V. J. K. Nair in conversation with N. Sooraj



Recorded on 9 November 2025, at V. J. K. Nair's house in Jalahalli, Bangalore

Key Points

- Purpose of the discussion: tracing the historical conditions and labour issues that led to the formation of CITU, drawing from firsthand experience in Bangalore's public sector.
- Bangalore became a major public sector hub from the Second Five Year Plan onward, anchored by BEL, HAL, HMT, and ITI – each employing tens of thousands of workers.
- HAL (originally Hindustan Aircraft Limited) grew to 20,000 workers and included a rail coach division that became BEML, plus aero engine and helicopter divisions.
- AITUC leadership under S.A. Dange deliberately kept public sector unions unaffiliated with central trade union organisations, with HMT's employees association being the sole exception.
- Linguistic tensions in HMT were suspected to have been deliberately planted – possibly by CIA or SOPA – exploiting the fact that most factory workers were Tamil migrants, not Kannadigas.
- Wage conditions in Bangalore lagged 25 years behind Bombay's textile workers; BEL workers only gained a Dearness Allowance system around 1960–65, versus Bombay's 1940s.
- The Fair Wage Committee's three-tier framework – living wage, fair wage, minimum wage – was debated in the Constituent Assembly but never enacted into policy.
- Bengal's left-front Labour Minister Krishnapada Ghosh enforced the engineering wage board chairman's recommendation of ₹200 minimum wage for factories with 50+ workers in 1967.
- Bangalore's first wage agreement came in 1971, introducing Dearness Allowance at ₹1 per point; a 1965 bonus dispute at BEL had triggered a strike over just ₹30 annual bonus.
- Nine workers including the speaker were dismissed in 1967 after leading a major strike at BEL; post-dismissal, they secured AITUC affiliation for the Bharat Electronics Employees Union, prompting a rival INTUC-affiliated union to emerge.

- A 1967 AITUC conference at Shanmughananda Hall passed a unanimous resolution — moved by P. Ramamurti — prohibiting rival union formation after leadership elections, but Dange's faction broke it in multiple instances.
- Internal democratic rights became a flashpoint: leftists demanded elected (not selected) delegates for the 1969 AITUC conference in Guntur, leading to physical confrontations and suspensions within the BEL union.
- Repeated betrayals by CPI in Bengal and Kerala united front governments directly eroded trust among young Bangalore workers and accelerated the internal split within AITUC-affiliated unions.
- CITU had minimal presence in Bangalore around 1970 — only two or three factories — but the democratic breakdown within AITUC unions made its formation locally inevitable.
- VJK Nair recounts the founding and ideological foundations of CITU, tracing its formation in Kolkata on 30th May 1970 and the election of B.T. Ranadive as president.
- CITU was founded on the twin principles of "Unity and Struggle," with P. Ramamurti credited as the originator of the United Front Tactics — uniting trade unions around common worker demands to build mass pressure.
- Trade unions are the fortress of members, not the fiefdom of leaders — a foundational principle articulated by Ranadive at CITU's formation.
- CITU deliberately chose its name to distinguish itself from AITUC rather than position itself as a rival, aiming to guide trade unions unable to function unitedly within AITUC.
- Indira Gandhi's 1973 Compulsory Deposit Act froze wages by mandating that any agreed wage increases be deposited into Provident Fund accounts rather than paid as cash, directly confronting the working class.
- The 1974 railway workers' struggle, led through the All India Loco Running Staff Union, emerged from demands for eight-hour working days and became a major flashpoint in the broader trade union movement.
- Khadilkar's formation of the National Coordination Committee of Trade Unions (NCTU) — bringing together INTUC, HMS, and AITUC — was a deliberate move to disrupt the emerging united front; CITU responded by forming the United Council of Trade Unions (UCTU) with George Fernandes and others.
- During the 1975 Emergency, CPI(M) and opposition leaders were arrested in Bangalore; intense ideological debates in jail between communists, RSS, Jan Sangh, and socialists led some RSS members like K.K. Subbiah and P.G.R. Sindhia to break from the RSS.
- Post-Emergency, the Janata Party's Boothalingam Commission recommended raising minimum wages to above ₹500 over five years, while the proposed IR Bill triggered broad trade union protests across India.
- In Bangalore, CITU's strategy of embracing Kannada identity — organising Karnataka Rajyotsava celebrations and advocating for surrounding villages — neutralised Kannada chauvinist opposition and brought former adversaries into alliance.
- BHEL signed a ₹500 minimum wage agreement at an all-India public sector conference in Thiruchirapalli, creating a parity benchmark that CITU used to expose the lower wages at BEL, HAL, and other Bangalore public sector units.

- The 1980 Bangalore public sector strike, involving 1.25 lakh workers across BEL, HAL, ITI, HMT, and BHEL, lasted nearly four months and brought the city's economy to a halt before being resolved with a ₹25 interim increase.
- By 1978, CITU had grown significantly in Bangalore's public sector by forcing democratic union elections, winning recognition in Bharat Gold Mines, and building a broad united front that included former INTUC leader D. Rajagopal.
- CITU's development through the 1970s–80s was anchored in two parallel strategies: broad united front politics at the industry level and intense internal democratic debate to determine the correct line of struggle.
- Reviewing the history, limitations, and strategic challenges of the trade union and working class movement in Karnataka and India, particularly under CITU/CPI(M) leadership.
- CPI(M) was a weak force in Bangalore pre-1980, with stronger influence in Mangalore, Gulbarga, Chikkamangalur plantations, and Kodagu.
- The 1978 Salkia Plenum established two key concepts: a continuously functioning leadership divorced of local responsibilities, and a dialectic between extension and consolidation – both shaped the decision to relinquish district secretary posts and expand the movement across Karnataka.
- By 1985, major unions in Hubli, Dharwar, and surrounding areas had joined CITU; the 1996 conference confirmed CITU led 20% of organised labour in Karnataka.
- Socio-cultural shifts in the 1980s – particularly the arrival of color TV in 1983 and the decline of circulating libraries and public meetings – weakened working class political engagement and changed the character of the factory floor.
- Feudal family structures in backward regions like Harihar and Hubli-Dharwar limited the replicability of Bangalore's organizing model; economic gains were made for workers, but social movement participation remained low.
- A 1983 rally in Bangalore, drawing workers from across Karnataka, launched the campaign for a Common Minimum Wage; the struggle was later taken up at the all-India level, with BTR endorsing it at the Dhanbad session of the CITU General Council.
- After BTR's demise, Pandey insisted minimum wage agitation be confined to the state level, contradicting BTR's national minimum wage guidance and undermining unity – a point of contention with leaders like C. Karnan from Kannur.
- Liberalization from the 1990s onward restructured factory floors: Bangalore's public sector shrank from 1.25 lakh permanent workers to under 5,000, replaced by large numbers of temporary, contract, and casual labour.
- Employers responded to wage struggles by retaining a small high-wage core while outsourcing production to small industrial estates, effectively suppressing the total wage bill of the working class as a whole rather than individual wages.
- Data from the Annual Survey of Industries showed workers' share of value added fell from 33% pre-1990 to 12% currently, while employers' share rose from 12% to 55% – a structural shift CITU resisted but could not reverse.
- Company-based union bargaining – promoted by employers using "family" language (e.g., Godrej family, Maico family) – diverted workers from industrial-level solidarity and allowed employers to escape class-wide confrontation.

- Fragmentation across 8–10 central trade unions in India, versus unified labour centers in France, Germany, and the US, is identified as a core structural weakness preventing effective class-wide negotiation.
- A proposal was made to transform the existing JCTU (Joint Committee of Trade Unions) in Karnataka into a functioning confederation, with all presidents forming a presidium and general secretaries forming a secretariat, as a practical step toward long-term trade union unity.
- CITU has reached a plateau, but higher levels of organisation are possible — the key condition is unifying the working class across industrial, government, railway, and financial sectors to fight common issues collectively.