We have argued earlier that the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU) affiliated to the CITU mobilises the workers in the concerned industry for the CPI(M). It will be seen that the BCMU mobilises these workers primarily around their grievances which are mostly economic in nature. It mobilises around these grievances and the ultimate weapon which it uses is the industrywide strike to press for the demands and satisfaction of the grievances of the workers. Factory level strikes are quite uncommon, which takes place only occasionally in the industry. In this chapter, we seek to answer certain important questions. In the first section, we shall discuss the issues or the grievances in details around which the BCMU seeks to mobilise the workers in the concerned industry. In the second section, we shall discuss the direct forms of trade union action (industrywide strikes) sponsored by the BCMU and other unions and the role of the BCMU in these strikes. This is important because the BCMU from the early 1970s had used strikes as a principal weapon to address the grievances of the workers. In the third and final section, an attempt will be made to analyse the success which the party has achieved in mobilising the workers in the concerned industry and the obstacle which it encountered in the period under our discussion.

I

MOBILIZATIONAL ISSUES

In this section we shall argue that the BCMU had primarily used economic grievances of the workers in the industry for the purpose of political mobilisation. The issues which it had used are wages, dearness allowance, bonus and other forms of emoluments and allowances. The issues which can be termed as political or otherwise but which springs up from economic issues are; the issue of nationalisation, the issue of closure and lockouts, the issue of retrenchment, the issue of workload, the issue of contract labour, “Bhagwalla” and female labour, the issue of work complement and Budlie labour. Two points must be noted in this regard. Firstly, all the issues are closely interlinked with each other and secondly, not all the issues had dominated the charter of
demand of the BCMU always or in other words the BCMU in different periods of time had used some or the other issues more prominently for the purpose of mobilisation. In this section, we shall primarily analyse the various issues individually which the BCMU have used to mobilise the working class in the concerned industry at different periods of time.

Economic Issues and Allowances

Economic issues have clearly dominated the charter of demands of the BCMU. Economic issues would include: the demand for higher wages, i.e. a living wage, dearness allowance neutralisation, house rent allowance, medical allowance, bonus, etc. The issue of bonus will be treated separately, in this subsection we will concentrate on economic issues other than bonus. If one goes by the charter of demands submitted by the BCMU from time to time since 1977, one finds that the demand for higher wage (a living wage) had dominated the list. We have seen earlier that wages in the jute industry after independence were awarded by several omnibus tribunals, and the central wage board. It was later settled by tripartite agreements in the industry. But despite all these awards and settlements there was no "grades and scale of wage" among the various category of workmen. Thus, this became a principal issue for the BCMU after 1977. In late 1978 along with other unions, it demanded the introduction of grades and scales for the workmen. This was the main demand of the 50-day strike of 1979. Along with this the BCMU demanded wage increase, i.e. a living wage. The agreement which followed the strike provided for the setting up of a committee for the recommendations of grades and scales of pay. The IJMA later on never co-operated with the committee and hence the issue could not be solved. Thus grades and scale remained an illusion for the workers and it is again on this issue of non implementation of the 1979 agreement, and for the implementation of grades and scales of wages, the BCMU started mobilising from the late 1983 and what followed ultimately was the industrywide strike of 1984 which continued for 84 days. The chief economic demands were the implementation of grades and scales of pay, wage increase i.e. a living wage and a dearness allowance neutralisation on the basis of Rs.2/- a point. The strike ended after 84 days after a settlement. The IJMA this time accepted its commitment to implement grades and scales to all category of workmen in the industry, which to the BCMU was the most important victory of the jute workers. The settlement also included a

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From 1984 onwards till 1992, there was no industrywide strike in the jute industry as a whole. Though on the bonus issue movements were launched particularly during the festive season. In 1987, there was a movement in the form of strike in the central public sector undertakings (jute mills) on the question of interim relief, which was led by the BCMU. It was in 1988 that the BCMU and other central trade unions decided to launch an industrywide movement in the form of strike and started mobilising the working class around economic issues. This time it demanded among other things restructuring of grades and scales, increase in minimum wage from Rs.1500/- to Rs.2100/- and an increment of Rs.55/- instead of Rs.15/-. The strike call of 1992 by the BCMU was mostly on economic issues. It demanded an increase in wage rise and neutralisation of dearness allowance. The strike ended with an agreement which provided for wage increase and neutralisation of dearness allowance. Thus it becomes clear that economic issues particularly issues of wage rise and increase in allowances have dominated the issues which the BCMU have used for the purpose of mobilisation. This will become much more clear in the second section when we analyse the role of the BCMU in the industrywide strikes.

**Bonus as an issue**

The issue of bonus is a seasonal issue, crops up every festive season, but have drawn widespread attention from the workers. Consequently the BCMU and other trade unions Central and otherwise had used this grievance to mobilise the support of the workers. The issue of bonus is not typical to the jute industry alone, it is a issue which becomes important during every festive season throughout the country. In West Bengal since the festive season begins from September onwards, hence the movement also begins in September. The issue surfaces either because the mill owners refuse to pay, or agree to pay less than the prescribed minimum or do not pay the percentage demanded by the workers. The argument of the mill owners throughout had been, "industry's incapacity to pay". The Unions particularly the BCMU had been demanding a 20 per cent bonus and if less at least the prescribed minimum of 8.33 per cent.

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Bonus became an issue for the first time throughout the country in the 1970s. It gained prominence in the early months of 1977 when the Indira Government had “hit at bonus by first reducing the minimum from 8.33 per cent to 4% and later on by repudiating the concept of bonus as deferred wage and by linking it to allocable surplus”. By doing this “it virtually eliminated it altogether”. The Central Unions including the CITU resented this attack on bonus. They demanded “scraping of recent amendments to the Bonus Act and restoration of 8.33 per cent minimum bonus and the right to settle bonus dispute through collective bargaining”. With the change of the government after the elections of 1977 the CITU expected that the Janata Government would do justice to the workers by raising the minimum but to them, “the Janata Government’s statement on bonus was not adequate” as it raised the provision to 8.33 per cent, the same as the Indian Government accepted once.

The bonus demand surfaced prominently during the industry wide strike of 1975 when one of the central issues of the strike was a “three year bonus agreement”. The strike of 1975 was the longest strike in history till then, but had fizzled out and did not yield any result because of several reasons which we have discussed earlier. After the Assembly elections of 1977 the BCMU became active on the bonus issue and because of its initiative workers in most of the jute mills in West Bengal submitted a 14 Point charter of demand to the mill owners. The charter of demand included “the immediate declaration of a minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent”. The BCMU “has taken the initiative in organising the deputation, workers of all the unions participated”. The BCMU’s resolution of July 1977 “called on all jute mill workers in West Bengal to intensify their struggle in support of their demand for a minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent and refund of CDS deposits”. The meeting further “announced its decision to hold gate meetings and joint demonstrations”. In response to this, the captains of the industry “pleaded its inability to pay the statutory minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent due to continued uneconomic functioning”. All trade unions in the industry started preparing themselves for the realisation of the minimum in accordance with the provisions of the payment of bonus (amendment) Ordinance 1977, promulgated by the Central Government. The capital reported:

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The unions it was learnt would organise a industrywide movement under the leadership of the CITU.\textsuperscript{5}

In this bonus struggle the newly elected left Front government showed its class character by asserting that the mill management should pay the minimum. Mr. J. Basu, the Chief Minister is reported to have said to the representatives of the industry:

\begin{quote}
You may borrow or steal money to pay the bonus obligation.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

Mr. K.P. Ghosh, the Labour Minister in a meeting with the mill owners have said that the payment of bonus is a statutory liability and would be dealt with in accordance with law. As a result of the pressure which was put forward by the unions and the State Government, the bonus for the year 1977 was ultimately paid either in full or in instalments. In 1978 the workers again under the initiative of the BCMU observed a demand day on August 9. They held demonstrations at the respective mill gates and demanded 8.33 per cent minimum bonus. The BCMU has taken a stand that “bonus should be treated as deferred wages”. The issue of bonus again surfaced in 1979, the BCMU and other unions organised a token strike of one hour in each and every shift on September 21, organised demonstrations on October 10 and urged the workers not to accept the minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent as agreed by the mill owners.\textsuperscript{7} The issue surfaced again in 1981 when the millowners refused to accept the terms of settlement of the previous year. In 1980 the workers had realised 13 per cent bonus and 15 per cent for the year before, in all 14.5 per cent bonus.\textsuperscript{8}

Since then the bonus issue had remained a issue throughout the 1980s and even in the early 1990s. This is not a perennial issue, it crops up during the festive season. The unity of the workers on this issue is something which looks absent in the bonus struggle. It has been found through interviews with BCMU leaders that workers at times accept bonus far below the demanded level at some mills, because of which it becomes difficult for union leaders to pursue a industrywise and joint struggle on the issue. The millowners had successfully resisted the demand of the workers/unions for more bonus (more than the prescribed minimum of 8.33 per cent) by the argument that because of uneconomic functioning it is not possible to pay more. The millowners

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\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Capital}, September 8, 1977.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Capital}, September 22, 1977.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Capital}, August 17, 1978.
\textsuperscript{8} BCMU, General Secretary’s report in the 43rd Annual Conference 1981, pp.14-16.
\end{flushright}
had also clearly shifted from industrywide agreements to mill-wise or shop-wise agreements which is dangerous and which have led to no industrywide struggle on this issue in recent years, particularly in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s. Even then the BCMU makes the question of bonus an issue every festive season and this author found during his field trips that there were posters in the walls and gates of the mills by the BCMU demanding bonus, at least the prescribed minimum.

The issue of retrenchment

The most important issue around which the BCMU tried to mobilise workers in the industry immediately after 1977 was the issue of retrenchment. It has been stated earlier that during the emergency all the hard won rights of the jute workers was taken away and the number of workers employed in the industry was significantly reduced, which increased the workload of the individual worker. According to BCMU estimates, 80,000 workers were retrenched illegally during the period 1972-1977. Hence, there was a grievance among the workers on this issue because of three reasons. First, the number of workers retrenched lost their livelihood. Secondly among the workers employed uncertainty and insecurity grew. And finally, retrenchment increased the workload of the workers significantly.

It was such an issue that the BCMU could not have afforded to neglect. As soon as the elections were held and the left Front Government assumed office, the BCMU in July 1977 passed a resolution stating that an industrywide movement would be launched shortly for the reinstatement of workers retrenched during the emergency and for fair distribution of workload. In July 1977, the BCMU gave a call for a general strike in the industry and one of the demand was the “reinstatement of retrenched workers”. In the 39th annual conference in January 1978, the BCMU demanded among other things the reinstatement of retrenched workers. On 28th March, 1978, jute mill workers led by the BCMU held demonstrations and submitted memorandum to the respective mill managements in support of their 10-point charter of demands which included the demand for reinstatement of retrenched workers. On the same 10-point charter of demands, the jute workers observed successful token strike which was called by the BCMU and others jointly.

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In December the same year, the Central Executive Committee of the BCMU decided that it will go for a continuous strike if its 10-point charter of demand is not accepted by the mill owners. Out of this 10-point charter of demands, was the demand for reinstatement of workers victimised during the emergency. The strike of 1979 which followed, continued for 50 days and it was decided that the issue of workload would be referred to a committee. The committee appointed, recommended that the workload had increased during the emergency period as a result of the retrenchment of 46,000 workers. The millowners grossly violated the agreement of 1979 and thus refused to concede the demand of reinstatement of workers.

Workers were retrenched during the period 1972-1977, this fact was accepted by the Chairman of the IJMA, Mr. K.K. Bajoria indirectly in an interview to Capital in 1984. His arguments was put forward in the Capital in the following words:

The main point according to Mr. Bajoria is that the workers and more importantly the unions resent change. If any modernisation takes place the workload is bound to fall but the workers want their complement to remain constant. New machines, better machines have to come as has been in all industries. As a matter of fact modernisation has suffered as a consequence of this resistance, said Mr. Bajoria.12

The millowners violated the tripartite agreement reached in 1979 and rejected the recommendations of the Commission appointed by the State Government. As a result of this and certain other reasons discontent grew among the workers and the All India Jute Workers Federation (AIJWF) launched movements throughout the country from mid-1983 onwards in pursuance of their 6-point charter of demand. On April 17, 1983, over 3.25 lakh workers observed demand day all over the country. Demonstrations, rallies and dharnas were held throughout the State. The industrywide strike in the jute industry in 1984 was in all sense a continuation of the strike of 1979. One of the reasons for this strike was that the jute barons refused to re-absorb or compensate the 45,000 workers retrenched during 1972-1977. The 1984 strike yielded nothing significant except a verdict from the Labour Minister, Mr. K.P. Ghosh, that all persons who lost their jobs after May 1972 are entitled to be registered. The issue lost its importance after 1984. The pre-1972 working complement was not achieved. The BCMU and other unions realised that nothing much could be achieved in this regard hence shifted their demand from reinstatement of victimised workers to “no reduction of work force under any

12 Capital, April 2-5, 1984, p.9.
circumstances and employment of more work force fully utilising the installed capacity". In the 52nd annual conference, the BCMU demanded among other things that in the name of diversification and modernisation workers should not be retrenched". This has continued to be a major demand of BCMU even in the later years.

The Issue of Workload

The twin related issues which dominated the BCMU's charter of demands in the 1970s and 80s was the issue of reinstatement of workers retrenched during the emergency and the reduction in workload. The BCMU had alleged that retrenchment resulted in an increase in the workload of the existing workers. The question of workload have become an issue since 1954. In 1954, the existing practice of one man one loom was abandoned and the system of two looms for one person was adopted. This was considered "as a change in the pattern and not workload" by the captains of the industry but it was clearly a source of discontent among the workers in the industry. The BCMU have mobilised the workers in the industry around this grievance and continues to do so even today in 1997.

On this demand the workers under the leadership of the BCMU had observed token strikes as well as its favourite weapon the industrywide strike. And through resolutions, memoranda, dharnas, it has tried to convince the government at the state level over this issue. As a result, the issue received widespread attention among other trade unions and the CITU. On April 27, 1978; 2 lakh jute workers under the leadership of the BCMU observed a one day token strike. In the same year in November, the CITU commenting on the struggle of the jute workers criticised the "abnormal increase in workload which was imposed on the workers by violating all existing norms and ILO conventions". In its meeting on 2nd November, 1978, the BCMU called the workers to get prepared for a continuous strike. One of the demands was the "withdrawal of abnormal norms of workload". In December, 1979, the 40th Conference of BCMU held that during the Congress rule, the millowners amassed huge profits by exploiting the workers and jute growers. It believed that during the emergency they intensified the exploitation by increasing the workload. The industrywide strike of 1979 which was a fifty day strike yielded some positive results on this issue. The strike came to an end, and it was decided that the issue of workload would be referred to a committee which will be set up by the Labour Minister and the terms of reference was to be

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decided in consultation with both the parties. The issue remained a issue even in the early 80s because of a simple reason; the IJMA and the millowners refused to accept the recommendations which was set up in 1979. One of the recommendations was that there has been an increase in the workload. And from the mid of 1983 jute workers under the leadership of the BCMU were preparing for an indefinite strike and out of the demands was the demand of full implementation of the tripartite settlement of 1979 including the decisions of the Labour Minister of West Bengal on grades and scales of pay and on workload.

The industrywide strike and the settlement of 1984 failed to solve the problem of workload. It was only agreed that "a tripartite apex body will be appointed by the state government to monitor, the maintenance of complements, changes in workload and the manning pattern in the jute industry". The state appointed the committee to examine the issues, but the issue remained since the IJMA did not cooperate with the committee. The issue had remained as a issue even to this date (1997). This author found that there were complaints by the workers interviewed throughout the industrial belt about excessive workload. Not only there are three shifts of A, B and C but the A and B shifts worker had to work more and in a discontinuous manner, a primitive practice which came into being after the third shift was introduced. Union leaders interviewed also admitted that workload still remains very high.

The issue of working complement and budlie workers

The issue of work complement and the issue of budlie workers should not be treated separately since they are inter-linked. The former is related to the proportion of permanent workforce employed in the industry and the latter is a system which is unique to the jute industry in West Bengal. What is important is that the BCMU and other trade unions in the industry have throughout demanded for an increase in the percentage of permanent workforce and decreasing the ratio of the budlies. The issue which cropped up in the early 1977 was on the fate of the budlie workers numbering around 60,000 who were allegedly retrenched by the millowners during the emergency period. The budlie workers had also drawn the attention of the BCMU since the award by Raghunath Reddy, the then Union Minister whose award relate to "budlie relief", a fact that is if budlie workers are not provided work then relief was to be provided to them. This award soon became a contentious issue after 1974. The matter was dragged to the court by the millowners.

The issue of working complement and Raghunath Reddy Award on "work or allowance" for budlie workers was a crucial one in the general strike of 1979. The trade unions demanded a permanent workforce of 95 per cent and special budlies of 20 per cent and demanded for the implementation of the Raghunath Reddy Award. Whereas the industry wanted to maintain a permanent workforce of 90 per cent and increase the budlies by 5 points to 20 per cent and wanted to drop the Raghunath Reddy Award altogether. These twin issues delayed the settlement of 1979. And finally it was agreed by both the parties that the "number of special budlies will be increased to 20 per cent against the earlier 15 per cent and the permanent workers be maintained at 90 per cent of the total complement as on May 5, 1971." Though this was the agreement the millowners paid scant regard to the provisions and started violating it from the very beginning. This was in one way responsible for the general strike of 1984, thus the strike may be considered as a continuation of the 50 day strike of 1979. The issue of Raghunath Reddy Award on relief budlie could not be clinched. The BCMU held:

It seemed to us that the strike would have to be continued for another 30 days at least, i.e. 80 days instead of 50 days to compel the IJMA to yield on this issue. The IJMA did not accept the advice of the Left Front Government on this issue. They said that they would not compromise. Hence the BCMU decided:

Uninterrupted agitation would continue as the issue of budlie relief and struggle will continue till the issue is settled. We cannot allow the IJMA to break the 1970 general strike agreement on budlie relief by going to the court and get away with it.

Thus the issue remained even after the general strike and the settlement of 1979. Another industrywide continuous strike was decided upon by the BCMU and other unions in the industry in support of their long pending charter of demands. The decision for a continuous strike was reported at a press conference on November 10, 1983. The strike which continued for 84 days ended up with the agreement and settlement of April 7, 1984. The employers agreed to maintain a permanent complement in each mill at 90 per cent of the working complement as on May 5, 1971. On the same basis 20 per cent of the workers were to be maintained as special budlies and were

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14 BCMU (1979), Memorandum of Settlement, 1979, p.13.
15 BCMU, Memorandum of Settlement, 1979, p.5.
16 Ibid.
guaranteed employment of 220 days in a year. It was also agreed that the vacancies in the cadre of special budlies will be filled up from other budlie workers.

The agreement though was signed but so far as the question of implementation was concerned the IJMA was not to do so. The BCMU in the year 1992 demanded among other things that the working complement has to be kept at 90 per cent permanent and 20 per cent special budlies. The issue was also an issue in the 1992 industrywide continuous strike. This author during his field tours found that the issue had remained an issue for the BCMU. The budlie workers are a fact in the industries, their interest could not be ignored. The main problem for the budlies had been to get employment in the industry which intends to manage with as little as workforce as possible. The quasi permanent nature of the budlie workers due to which they constantly feel the insecurity in employment is an important grievance. In order to mobilise this category of workers it is essential that the BCMU mobilise them around their own grievances particularly with the demand for permanent employment of the budlie workers. And this the BCMU had done throughout the period under our study.

The Issue of Bhagwalla, Contract System and Female Labour

Bhagwalla and contract system are two different kinds of employment and the BCMU and other unions have opposed it throughout in the industry. The BCMU had also raised the slogan of employment for female labour and better working conditions for them. Out of the two Bhagwalla and contract system, which the BCMU have opposed the intensity of opposition to Bhagwalla is lesser than the second one. This is because the workers have not resisted the system of Bhagwalla vehemently but had resisted the system of contract labour because it had threatened the employment of workers and more particularly the budlie workers. Contract labour is clandestinely used by the millowners in violation of agreements, in the place of budlie workers and for contract labour less wages are paid. This helps them in keeping the wage bill low. It was also found that contract labour is used in the place of normal workers by shutting down certain departments in the mills. The works of these departments are then performed by employing contract labour. The purpose of employing contract labour in both the cases is the same, to reduce the total wage bill, which constitutes a significant portion of the manufacturing cost.

In the 38th annual conference of the BCMU in 1976 the general secretary reported:

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Workers called Bhagwallas are employed by the millowners without payment. Apart from this the contract system even exists today. Many departments are lying closed and these works are generally done by outside contract labour.\(^\text{17}\)

The BCMU's argument had been that the prevalence of the Bhagwalla system is an indicator that the workload of the workers have increased. It was argued that when a worker is pressurised to perform additional work and when he fails to complete the work then he employs labour from outside and shares his own wage.

The abolition of the Bhagwalla and contract labour became an important demand of the BCMU during the industrywide continuous strike of 1979. In the memorandum of settlement, the millowners agreed “that no contract labour shall be employed in any perennial and regular nature of job by the employers” and it was also agreed “that the system of Bhagwalla, if any, where it exists shall be abolished.”\(^\text{18}\) It remained an issue even after the agreement. The only reason could be that the employers did not honour the settlement of 1979. In the industrywide strike of 1984, the BCMU and other unions demanded the abolition of contract labour and Bhagwalla. It is during the strike that we find charges and counter-charges were made on this issue. These charges and counter-charges were put forward by A. Chakraborty and T. Mukherjee in the following words:

According to trade union sources, the workers' complaint of an increase in work load is borne out by the existence of the "Bhagwalla" system. The industry agrees that the system prevails in north 24 Parganas. It contends that the system cannot be abolished in view of the union pressure.\(^\text{19}\)

Despite these charges by the BCMU that the millowners were responsible for the practice, the IJMA maintained that the system prevailed because the worker was interested in its survival, since the workers usually brought members of their family as "bhagwallas". The BCMU has put forward three arguments refuting these claims of the IJMA. First to the BCMU the workers do not always bring in members of their families. Secondly, one who earns so less would not like to share his income with others and thirdly, if this system is abolished each worker would have less work and less erosion of his income. K.K. Banerjee, Chairman of IJMA, said:

The Bhagwalla system generally prevails in the finishing departments where the workers bring in his son or a relative to assist him. Since this issue is

\(^{17}\) BCMU, General Secretary's report in the 38th Annual Conference of 1978 (In Bangla). p.5.

\(^{18}\) BCMU, Memorandum of Settlement, 1979, p. 13.

productivity linked the workers make some extra money. True, there will be some fall in productivity if this practice is discontinued but it will not be significant. And if Bhagwalla becomes the critical point of contention the industry is prepared to do away with it.\(^{20}\)

It was agreed in 1984 that the system of bhagwalla and contract labour will be abolished. There was nothing new in this agreement, the contents already were there in the 1979 agreement. The memorandum of settlement read:

The employers agree that no contract labour shall be employed in any perennial and regular nature of jobs. It is agreed that the Bhagwalla system, wherever it exists still, shall be abolished.\(^{21}\)

And despite the agreement for the second time after 1977, the system of Bhagwalla as well as contract labour prevailed. The General Secretary of the BCMU pointed this out in 1986. This author found the system prevailing in some of the mills in the state and through interviews from BCMU leaders came to learn that for the Union the abolition of “Bhagwalla” and “contract system” was still an issue and a demand.

We have discussed earlier in Chapter II that the number of women workers had been drastically reduced in the industry after the enactment of the “Maternity Benefit Act”. Women workers are now confined to the finishing departments of the industry. The percentage of women workers will even be lesser than 5 per cent of the total workforce, hence the problems of the women worker had not been an important issue since 1977. Still the BCMU have demanded certain benefits for the women workers. It is because of this that certain points were agreed upon in 1984. The agreement of 1984 concerning read:

The employers agree to maintain and improve the employment of women workers in the jute mills within the framework of the Factories Act.\(^{22}\)

Despite this agreement the BCMU General Secretary expressed concern over the number of women workers in the industry in 1989. Though this issue concerning women labour have remained and BCMU tries to mobilise the women worker around this issue, but clearly it is not an

\(^{20}\) Ibid.


\(^{22}\) Ibid, p. 12.
important issue for it. This is largely due to the decline in the number of women workers in the industry.\textsuperscript{23}

The issue of lockout and closure

Since the emergency the most frequently used weapon by big capital in an attempt to throw the burden of sickness on the workers is lockout. And consequently lockout and closures have become an issue for the trade unions in the country. The CITU as early as in January 1977 along with the representatives of HMS, Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, BMS, United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) and Trade Union Co-ordination Centre demanded among other things the immediate reopening of all closed factories with full compliment and wages. Earlier, the West Bengal unit of Trade Unions; CITU, UTUC, TUCC, HMS and HMP with the representatives of workers from all major industries in the State discussed the situation facing the working class and the toiling masses and put forward 10-Point demands which included the demand for stoppage of retrenchment and closure. In July 1977, after the Left Front Government assumed office the Central Trade Unions in Calcutta met the labour minister and raised in the meeting various issues facing the working class including the reopening of closed mills.\textsuperscript{24} In early 1978, the West Bengal unit of CITU, UTUC, TUCC, HMS and HMP have in a joint statement urged upon the Central Government to authorise the State Government in West Bengal to institute an enquiry on closed factories and, if necessary to amend the industries (Development and Regulation) Act 1951 and empower the State Government to reopen the closed units. The unions estimated that at that time a large number of industrial units employing around 25,000 workers were lying closed due to declaration of closure or lockout.\textsuperscript{25} Clearly therefore after the emergency the CITU at the all-India level and the State level was expressing its concern over this growing incidence of lockouts and closures. B.T. Ranadive in the fifth CITU Conference in Jamshedpur (November-December 1983) noted that “the increasing resort to lockouts by the employers is to breakdown the resistance of the employees and compel them to submit to the dictates of the employers.” He said:

The anti-social character of this lockout is to particularly noted, viz., using starvation to beat down workers, thereby reducing their democratic and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{23} Women workers are now confined to the finishing departments of the industry.
\textsuperscript{24} Reported in \textit{The Working Class}, August, 1977.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Working Class}, February, 1978.
\end{footnotesize}
fundamental rights to a farce - the right to earn and live by their labour - all to satisfy the profit lust of a few magnates.\textsuperscript{26}

He also pointed out to the phenomenon that lockouts accounted for a higher share of mandays lost than strikes. Thus, for the CITU by the early 1980s lockouts had become a central issue and on this issue it was mobilising the working class throughout the country.

In the line of the CITU, the BCMU in the jute industry was also mobilising on this issue. In the 38\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conference, 1976, Kamal Sarkar, the General Secretary, highlighted the attacks of the jute millowners by lockouts and closures. According to him 40,000 workers were jobless in the industry due to closure of 12 jute mills. The Conference also adopted resolutions on the opening up of closed mills. And in the mid of 1977 it had become an issue for launching an industrial strike. The industry observed a general strike on July 28, 1977. The 38\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conference in December 1977, out of the resolutions adopted one demanded the reopening of closed mills and reinstatement of victimised workers. This had become an important mobilising issue for the BCMU, that is clearly evident from the fact that in various conferences in 1978, 1979 and in 1980 it adopted resolutions which included resolutions on the reopening of jute mills lying closed. But one thing is surprising that in the strike of 1979 it was not one of the principal demands of the BCMU and there was no settlement on this issue. The only explanation for this could be that the situation was not as worse as it became later, in the second half of the 1980s. Hence demands concerning retrenchments, concerning other forms of benefit occupied the central demands of the BCMU. The industry at this point of time was also using the threat of “block closure” for a certain period in order to avoid its crisis and pass it on to the workers. The BCMU was able to resist this offensive through its memorandum to the Central Government which was accepted through the State Government.

The incidence of lockouts and closures became more serious by the early 1980s. The CITUs 5\textsuperscript{th} Conference in 1983 condemned “the government for not taking any steps against the growing incidence of closures and lockouts”. The CITU noted:

\begin{quote}
In the last two years, the jute barons led by the IJMA declared lockout in mill after mill on the plea of shortage of raw jute and financial difficulties. In this way 23 jute mills were kept locked out for long periods affecting the jobs of over 60 thousand workers.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} B.T. Ranadive, “Presidential Speech” (5\textsuperscript{th} CITU Conference), People’s Democracy, April 17, 1983, pp. 1-2.

This concern was also expressed by the labour minister at the governmental level. The labour minister noted:

The lead (in lockout/closure) was taken by the jute industry at one time as many as 17 jute mills were under lockout.\(^{28}\)

The issue of lockout had clearly become a major issue for the CITU and the BCMU. In mid-1983, the working committee meeting of the All-India Jute Workers Federation decided to prepare for a countrywide strike and as a precursor to the strike an all-India day was observed on August 17. Seven major demands were concretised and the second important demand was the “immediate reopening of all closed and lockout jute mills in West Bengal and other States.”\(^{29}\) In December the same year, all the unions, the prominent among them the BCMU decided to give a call for indefinite strike from January 16, 1984. One of the allegations of the BCMU was that the millowners had been keeping 15-20 mills under lockout on a rotational basis affecting over 65,000 workers. The strike concluded after 84 days and was unable to settle the issue. The issue remained, this is evident from the statement which was issued to the Press on February 22 by some of the trade unions including the BCMU:

We want to draw the attention of all concerned to the serious situation in the jute industry manifested not only...Now the jute barons are using the same plea of shortage to impose lockout and closing down as many as 12 mills involving around 50,000 workers.\(^{30}\)

At the industry level the jute workers of West Bengal observed an all-India demand day on September 10, under the initiative of the BCMU through the submission of 6-point charter of demands. The principal demand was the nationalisation of the entire jute industry and immediate take over of all the closed jute mills. Similarly on August 17, 1986, 2.5 lakh jute workers and entire rural West Bengal observed complete general strike on 8-Point demands which included the demand for opening up of closed and locked out jute mills in the State.

This demand for opening up of jute mills lying closed and under lockout continued throughout the late 1980s. It was not only the BCMU but also other central unions who expressed concern. In mid-1987, the parent union CITU also had decided to campaign against


\(^{29}\) Ibid., p.10.

\(^{30}\) "Joint Movement by Jute Workers", Ibid., April, 1985, p. 17.
unemployment, closures and lockouts. The West Bengal State Committee of CITU which met on July 1987, took note of the problems of unemployment. The situation to them:

have further aggravated due to large scale closures and lockouts and growing sickness of industries. Although this is an all-India phenomenon…...the condition in West Bengal is far more serious.31

The meeting decided to build up united movement with all mass organisations of Kisans, students, youths, women and cultural organisation, on the demand for jobs for the unemployed, reopening of the closed factories and setting up new industries. In the first half of 1988, BCMU had decided to go on a complete strike and one of the demands of the strike was the demand for reopening of all closed mills. In 1991 and 1992, the BCMU had also made it as one of their principal demands. From the 52nd BCMU Conference in 1991, it decided that its principal demand from then onwards would be to reopen the jute mills which are lying closed. Thus, the BCMU since 1977 had made it an issue but it made it a principal issue only in the second half of the 1980s. It had constantly tried to put pressure on the millowners through struggles and on the other hand have tried to draw the attention of the State and the Central Government to this offensive by the millowners.

The Issue of Nationalisation

One of the vital issue around which the BCMU and other unions mobilise workers is the issue of nationalisation. The demand for nationalisation of the entire industry gained wide currency after the enquiry commission of 1970 suggested that the just solution to all the problems lies in nationalising the industry. This issue received importance from trade unions since then. This demand had not only been a major demand and issue for the BCMU during all the industry wide movements since the early 1970s but it had also sought to mobilise opinions in favour of this demand. The General Secretary of the BCMU on two occasions had helped to pass resolutions in the Legislative Assembly of the State urging nationalisation of the entire industry. This was done after three years of assumption of office by the Left Front Government.

This issue of nationalisation received due importance in the deliberations and discussions within the BCMU. One of its resolutions in 1984 read:

The 46th Conference of the BCMU notes with grave concern that the owners of the jute mills is playing with the lives of 2.5 lakh jute workers and 40 lakh jute

31 The State Committee meeting of the CITU was reported in the Working Class, September, 1987, p.9.
growers. Hence this Conference calls upon the Central Government to nationalise the entire jute industry from purchase of raw jute to the sale of jute goods.

Earlier in November 1983, Niren Ghosh, President, BCMU, in a press release just before the industry wide strike put forward "nationalisation" as one of the main demand of the BCMU. The demand was:

The entire jute industry from purchase of raw jute to internal and external trade must be nationalised forthwith. If the 13 textile mills of Bombay can be nationalised, why should not the entire jute industry be nationalised? Is there any political string somewhere?...

In September 1984, the CPI(M) organised movements in the state, it observed a 24-hour bandh in the state. One of the demands of the movement was the nationalisation of the jute industry, take over of closed industrial units, nationalisation of the units taken over, etc. It was able to mobilise the support of other Left political parties on this issue. The election manifesto of the Left Front on the eve of the 1987 elections demanded the nationalisation of the jute industry, determination of fair price for raw jute, monopoly purchase of jute by the jute corporation, stoppage of import of synthetic jute, etc.

The General Secretary of the BCMU reiterated its demand for nationalisation in 1987. He said:

They must be removed from their positions, and the country must set about reviving the industry by first nationalising it, and then by taking energetic plan and programme of revival by using scientific technological and managerial talent available in the country....By nationalising the mills even paying no compensation would be a fair and square act.34

The demand for nationalisation was again reiterated by the CITU and other Left unions in August, 1989. The CITU and other Unions in order to record their protest against the anti-working class policies of the Central Government observed a one day token strike on the 30th of August, 1989. One of the demands was the nationalisation of the entire jute industry and raw jute trade.

We have said earlier that the BCMU had also tried to mobilise opinion in favour of this demand. By 1984, the BCMU had mobilised substantial support of other sections on this issue. He claimed:

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32 BCMU, Resolutions passed in the 46th Annual Conference, 1984, pp. 4-5.
the demand for nationalisation of the industry is not only the demand of jute growers and jute labour. All democratic minded people support this demand.\footnote{35}

Opinions were so mobilised in favour of this demand that even the National Union of Jute Workers (NUJW) affiliated to the INTUC accepted it as one of their principal demands despite the fact that the centre rejected the demand for outright nationalisation. It had to accept this as an issue because of its fear that if it failed to stand by this demand it may get isolated from the workers. The BCMU was also able to carry it further to the all-India level. The demand for nationalisation was reiterated again in 1990 when the BCMU on behalf of the jute workers submitted a memorandum to the Central Government demanding among other things the nationalisation of the entire jute industry. One of the important demands which it put forward for immediate intervention were:

(a) Total nationalisation of the jute industry from the purchase of raw jute to manufacture and sale of jute goods in the domestic market and abroad.

(b) Immediate reopening of the closed and sick mills and taking over the management of the mills who are paying less wages.\footnote{36}

Thus, throughout the years nationalisation remained a persistent demand of the BCMU. The CITU to which the BCMU is affiliated also supported this demand or it would be wise to argue that the overall demand of the CITU were pursued by the BCMU. Ranadive in 1979 addressing a conference of the BCMU is recorded to have said that the only way to stop the loot by the mill owners is to nationalise the entire jute industry. This has been supported throughout by the CITU. In 1985, the CITU have given a call for industrial strike in West Bengal and Maharashtra. In a unique show of unity on the issue of closures, lockouts and industrial sickness all trade unions in West Bengal supported this strike which was a success. One of the demands out of the total twelve demands was “to nationalise the jute and textile industries and run them through workers’ participation in the management on equal footing.” One of the other demand was to withdraw the conditions laid down by the Central Government for nationalisation of the taken over industries.

II

BCMU AND STRIKES IN THE JUTE INDUSTRY (1972-1992)

\footnote{35} \textit{The Working Class}, n.d.

\footnote{36} The memorandum was reproduced in one of the issues of \textit{The Working Class} in 1990.
In this section a modest attempt will be made to analyse the role of the BCMU in organising and sponsoring strikes in the jute industry, since it had used strikes as the ultimate weapon of struggle in advancing the interest of the working class in the concerned industry. Strikes are used not only by the BCMU for the purpose of addressing the grievances of the workers but it helps the BCMU to consolidate the workers and helps mobilise the workers for the party.

The period 1972-77 was a period of hardship for the working class in West Bengal including the jute workers. The political climate in West Bengal is often described as an "authoritarian one", which saw the systematic onslaught of the CPI(M) workers and activists throughout the State. So far as the jute workers were concerned, most of the hard-won rights of the workers till 1969 was taken over by the millowners. Systematic offensives were launched, out of this offensives the most important one was retrenchment. It is now estimated that during the period more than 40,000 workers were retrenched. And what is more is that the State Congress Government under the leadership of Siddhartha Shankar Ray aided the millowners openly. What was the role of the CITU in West Bengal and the BCMU in the concerned industry in this period? The CITU was engaged in struggles for the protection of the rights which the working class had earned through struggles and the BCMU was also engaged in the same battle. This struggle however was in a subdued form after the imposition of the emergency in the middle of 1975.

The working committee of the West Bengal unit of the CITU in its meeting in January 1972 condemned the unprecedented attacks on the democratic movements mounted by the ruling party. It condemned the preplanned attacks. This was reported in "the working class" in the following words:

The working committee has, in a resolution, condemned these planned attacks organised by the ruling party to liquidate us and democratic organisations opposed to its anti-people policies, and resolved to organise a broad based united movement to resist these attacks.

It stated further:

It was accordingly resolved that (a) 'Anti-Repression Day' will be observed by workers and employees in all factories ...(b) a broad based convention of Trade Union representatives from all industries and districts will be held on January 30 to finalise a programme on joint movement against repression and terror.77

And accordingly a "Anti-Repression Day" was observed by the CITU between January 31 to February 6, 1972. Before that in an extended meeting of the office bearers of the CITU, a
communique was issued after the meeting which expressed grave concern over the attacks in West Bengal. It stated:

The CITU expresses its grave concern at the growing murderous attacks on its leaders and cadres, organised by the ruling Congress in West Bengal, through anti-social elements with the active connivance and encouragement by the police officials. Several trade union offices have been ransacked and records destroyed. A reign of terror has been let loose to intimidate the workers where the CITU is strong. Despite several complaints, the police officials refuse to take any action while recklessly going on arresting CITU activists on fictitious charges.38

Therefore, the CITU gave a call to “its affiliated unions and other trade unions all over the country who value democracy to rally behind the working class and the people of West Bengal and observe one day as anti-repression day.”39 The anti-repression day was observed throughout the country. Rallies were held in West Bengal against repression along with other unions. Thus, the CITU and more particularly the West Bengal unit of the CITU was launching struggles against repression by early 1972.

So far as the jute industry was concerned, the BCMU affiliated to CITU was also preparing itself for agitation. This time the agitation was to be the counter effect of the arbitrary and illegal decisions of the IJMA. The IJMA has effected a cut in DA and it refused to pay the full rise in DA. Against this wage cut, the workers under the leadership of BCMU organised massive protest on February 11, in which more than two lakh workers of 65 jute mills signed a memorandum and submitted this to the respective mill managements demanding full payment of rise in DA. It must be noted here that the BCMU was finding it difficult to launch a movement throughout the industry because the unions in the industry were not united. The AITUC was not willing to go for a movement because of its party level alliance with the Congress and the INTUC was not willing to launch any. Despite this situation, the Central Executive Committee of the BCMU gave a call to all the unions in West Bengal for an indefinite strike in the industry.40

The strike call was ultimately given in the month of April. In a joint press statement on April 9, the BCMU, BPCMU and the Bengal jute mill workers union jointly gave a call for an industrywide continuous strike in the jute industry from May 8. It decided for a 10-point charter of demands which included immediate nationalisation of jute industry; a minimum wage of Rs.300/-

38 Quoted from the Communique in The Working Class, February 1972, p. 20.
39 Ibid.
per month; permanency of budgie workers; revision of wage structure; variable DA at 0.35 paise per point on 1939 base; Gratuity at the rate of one month's full pay for each year of service; permanency of workmen at 115%; free quarters or house rent allowance at 20%, etc. The strike was however not given jointly because some of the unions differed with the BCMU. But it was called by all the unions from the same day, May 8 and this created enthusiasm amongst the workers.

Tripartite meetings were held with the State Labour Minister, Gopal Das Nag and ultimately the strike could be averted because the jute barons accepted some of the demands of the unions on May 7. On the achievement of the strike, the "working class" reported:

The jute barons who were opposing any settlement of the issues facing the bipartite committee were forced to concede Rs.45.60 per month as wage rise making the total minimum wage of a jute worker Rs.235/- per month...

This was possible only because of the remarkable unity achieved by them during the struggle. Their determination to do away with the age old backward wage system was so firm that both the employers and the Government had to climb down from their high and mighty attitude and agree to another wage increase. The achievement of the workers was significant. It came after the 1969 agreement when the millowners had conceded Rs.30/- as interim relief to the workers. Thus, within a period of three years the minimum wage of the workers increased by Rs.75/-. How was this possible in an era when the jute millowners in West Bengal had the blessings of the Congress Government in the State? This could only be achieved through the strike threat. The BCMU took the initiative in organising the movement. This it could do because it had a membership strength of around 1 lakh. It appealed to all other trade unions for a united movement, though the AITUC, INTUC and HMS refused to give a favourable response. But when the BCMU, the largest union gave the call for the strike the other unions in the industry, National Union of Jute Workers (INTUC); Jute Workers Federation (HMS); Federation of Chatkal Mazdoor Union (AITUC); Jute Textile Workers Union (NFITU); Bengal Provincial Chatkal Mazdoor Union (UTUCC); Bengal Jute Mill Workers Union (UTUC, Lenin Sarani) and Paschim Banga Chatkal Mazdoor Federation (TUCC) supported the strike.

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41 Ibid., p. 3.
42 Ibid., June 1972, p.4.
Till 1975 no major movement in the industry took place. The CITU in West Bengal, the parent organisation of the BCMU mostly directed its efforts against the attacks by the Congress Government. Democracy and trade union rights were to be protected. In May 20, the same year, the CITU chalked out a programme of action to carry forward the struggle to defend democracy and trade union rights. The CITU along with other trade unions, the United Trade Union Congress, Trade Union Co-ordination Centre, etc. submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister in a mass deputation on the 19th May, 1972 against violation of democratic norms and trade union rights. The memorandum held:

The terror and repression that the working class and the people of West Bengal faced during the last two years, has been intensified after the elections. The armed rowdies and gangsters carrying the flag of ruling Congress party have started systematic attacks against workers and employees against trade unions and democratic rights...the police, the CRP and administration are aiding and abetting the armed rowdies and gangsters who are perpetrating the attacks with open declaration...

Thus, the CITU throughout the year 1972 was up against the oppression which was let loose by the administration. It was fighting for democracy and protection of trade union rights. At the industry level the BCMU was planning to organise mass deputation and submit memoranda to the respective managements protesting against the violation of the tripartite agreement which was reached on May, 1972. The BCMU held that the millowners violated the other terms of agreement, other than the wage increase. The violation was regarding fixation of wage rates for the casual workers, grades and scales of clerical workers and other staff etc. But despite these calls, nothing much was to follow in the months preceding.

It was in the 34th annual conference in October, 1972, the BCMU prepared a set of demands and called for new struggles for the attainment of the same. Some of the important demands were the following:

1. Fair price for jute growers...;
2. Immediate nationalisation of the entire jute industry...;
3. 20% bonus for the year 1971;
4. Implementation of the terms of agreement of 1969, 1970 and 1972;

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5. No reduction in earnings due to transfers and
6. For night shift, 48 hours wage for 45 hours.\(^{45}\)

The demand also included the demand for full compensation for layoffs due to power shortage, overhauling of the E.S.I. Scheme, stoppage of retrenchment and confirmation of all budlie workers. But the BCMU was finding it difficult to mobilise workers. It was only in June 15, 1973, the BCMU along with other unions mobilised workers for a strike and the workers observed a highly successful one day token strike. The working class reporting on the strike wrote:

*Defying semi-fascist terror and all attempts of the ruling Congress and INTUC to create disruption and confusion, 2,30,000 jute workers of West Bengal have again created history by observing a highly successful one day industrywide token strike on June 15...*

It reported further:

*The strike was complete in all the jute mills of Budge, Howrah, Hooghly, Calcutta and Barrackpore industrial belt - the areas worst affected by semi-fascist terror.*\(^{46}\)

This decision of a token strike by the BCMU was taken in May, in their Central executive committee meeting. The resolution which was passed by the executive committee stated:

*The BCMU once again appeals to all unions in jute industry to respond to its call for united action including one day industrywide strike for realisation of the demands of the jute workers and sit together immediately and finalise the date of the strike.*\(^{47}\)

Subsequently, the BCMU organised protest demonstrations in mills and mass deputation of workers on May 25, to prepare the workers for the one day token strike. The UTUC, UTUC (Lenin Sarani) and TUCC supported the strike. The AITUC only supported it halfheartedly. And the INTUC and HMS decided to oppose the strike. The strike however was a success.

*It was only in the second half of 1973 that the jute workers and growers for the first time were preparing for joint action for the first time on September 15, the two organisations, the BCMU and the Provincial Kisan Sabha, held a huge demonstration in Calcutta. Reporting on the demonstration, the working class wrote:*

*Thousands of jute growers and workers from the outlying districts, reinforced by a sizeable number of students, women and white collar employees, assembled at*


\(^{47}\) Ibid.
the Subodh Mullick Square from where they marched on to the Raj Bhawan in a mass deputation.48

On November 5, a token strike was observed by the workers. This was a strike which was called by all the Central trade unions in the industry. And what was important and absolutely a new feature was that the strike was not for any immediate economic gain of the workers, but it was in defence of the jute growing peasants and for the nationalisation of the jute industry. It was only after this successful strike, the Central unions started preparing for a continuous industrywide strike in the industry from January, 1974. And after the tripartite meeting failed to settle the issue in December, the Central trade unions working in the jute industry decided to call for an All India continuous strike from January 14, on the demand for nationalisation of the jute industry, take-over of raw jute trade and foreign trade in jute products, 20 per cent bonus, uniform wages and other benefits on an all India basis.49 Earlier, the BCMU in its 35th annual conference had called upon the workers to get ready for a continuous industrywide strike. The strike commenced from January 14. The working class commented:

Two and half lakh jute workers all over India downed tools from January 14 with remarkable unity and continued their struggle with firmness and determination despite the disruption tactics of the INTUC.50

The INTUC did not participate in the strike. The leadership signed an agreement with the IJMA bosses behind the back of other Central trade unions with whom they have joined in framing the demands. The leadership of the NFITU and the HMS also joined the INTUC. The IJMA was supported by the Labour Minister and the Chief Minister during negotiations. The INTUC, therefore, had to secretly sign a deal with the IJMA bosses, which was, however, repudiated by the jute workers and other Central trade unions. This was reflected by the total participation of the workers in the strike, it was a complete strike. Not a single mill out of the 62 mills in West Bengal was working. The workers also showed their determination by participating in a magnificent rally of about a lakh jute workers on the Sahid Minar Maidan in Calcutta. The State Government openly sided with the IJMA and let loose all kinds of attacks on the workers. Biren Roy wrote:

Section 144 was promulgated in different jute mill areas in 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Howrah districts preventing the meetings of the jute workers. Brutal lathi charges were resorted to in Bhatpara (24 Parganas) where many

49 Ibid, January 1974, pp. 4-5.
leaders of jute workers including four MPs were arrested. Large scale arrests were made during the course of the strike and many false cases instituted against workers and their leaders. Lathi charge and goonda attacks were resorted to in many places. But defying all repression and attacks, the jute workers stood like a rock. The working class of West Bengal and other States also stood by their jute brethren.  

The strike was ultimately called off on February 15 after 33 days at a rally of jute workers. On the achievements of the strike, the EPW wrote:

In terms of the financial benefit, the recently withdrawn 33 day general strike of the West Bengal jute mill workers has only been modestly successful. It has secured an additional lump sum payment of only Rs.55/- to each worker, and some other rather minor improvements in the agreement earlier signed by the INTUC leadership. But the significance of the strike for State politics is considerable.  

The other gains of the strike were that the IJMA in principle agreed to the introduction of grades and scales of pay for the daily rated workmen in the industry and assurances were given by the IJMA that there would be no victimisation for participation in the strike. Thus, the economic gains of the workers were only moderate. But the strike was significant for various reasons. Firstly, the strike was a united one, not only that the workers owing allegiance to the six Central trade unions joined the strike but also the workers under the umbrella of the INTUC joined. It also must be noted that the BCMU, the largest union in the industry played the most important role in bringing about this unity. Secondly, the INTUC was getting isolated from the workers. Thirdly, for the first time the workers not only fought for their economic demands but also in the interest of the jute growers. They raised the demand for nationalisation of the jute mills and the minimum price for raw jute. Thus, the strike of 1974 should not be judged by the short term moderate economic gain of the workers but from the larger political context.

Only one more continuous industrywide strike was to take place after the 1974 strike in the industry till 1979. This time the strike call was given by the INTUC and later on supported by other Central trade unions. The INTUC had given the call because of its fear that the workers were moving out of its fold. The INTUC lost credibility because it had not participated in the strike of 1974. Prior to this call for a continuous strike the workers observed a one day token strike in the jute industry on 24 September, at the call of the Central trade unions. It was in support of the 7-point charter of demands. The demands included the purchase of raw jute by Government at

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Rs.100/- per maund; implementation of the expert committee’s recommendations on D.A.; full wages for layoff due to power cut; 20 per cent bonus, etc. The continuous industrywide strike was to take place from 6 January, 1975. The call was unilaterally given by the INTUC, AITUC and a section of HMS, but it was later on supported by the CITU and other trade unions in the industry in the interest of united movement in the industry. The BCMU in its 36th annual conference held at Jagatdal, in an unanimous resolution called upon “the workers in the State to go on an indefinite strike from 6 January, 1975 united and called upon the other jute trade unions to build up unity of the workers at all levels for the success of the strike”. The strike was on a ten-point charter of demands. However, there was no demand for an increase in wage. The principle demands were:

1. Publication of Bhattacharjee Committee’s Report on consumer price index and its implementation with retrospective effect;
2. Maintenance of wage parity in view of power rationing;
3. Implementation of union Labour Minister’s decision in respect of budlie workers;
4. Payment of 20 per cent bonus;
5. Implementation of all terms of settlements in 1972 and 1974;
6. Opening up of fair price shops and adequate supply of essential goods;
7. Government to make monopoly purchase of raw jute at the rate of Rs.100/- per maund;
8. Nationalisation of jute industry and take over of foreign trade of jute goods and
   Provision of free housing accommodation for jute workers and amendment to ESI scheme.53

In preparation for the strike, thousands of workers in all jute mills observed a one hour strike in each shift on 18 December and submitted memorandum to their respective managements in mass deputation. All this preparatory steps were under the initiative of the BCMU. The strike began on January 6. The Trade Union Record reported:

Jute workers numbering about 2,50,000 of all the 62 jute mills are on strike from 6 January on a ... charter of demand. At this time of last year too the jute workers went on 33 day strike against the agreement entered into by INTUC.

with the Government and jute employers. But this time all Central trade unions including INTUC have jointly organised the strike starting from 6 January. The West Bengal Government earlier had not only resorted to DIR, but had also issued an order granting an increase of Rs.16 in the DA of jute workers in the name of implementing the Bhattacharjee Committee’s Report. But according to the said report, the jute workers are entitled to a much larger amount - Rs.54.75 and not Rs.16.54

The strike continued for 46 days and ended on 20 February without a settlement. It was the longest strike in the history of the industry. There were several reasons why there was no settlement to the strike and the strike ended with a fiasco. The first reason was the adamant attitude of the jute management from the very beginning to scuttle all negotiations. Secondly, the West Bengal Government instead of putting pressure on the mill magnates shamelessly supported them and acted openly against the interest of the workers. Thirdly, it was the INTUC which let the workers down though it was primarily responsible for the strike. The INTUC along with the AITUC, HMS and NFITU decided to call off the strike, though the workers could have continued the struggle for some more time.55 Thus, when unity was most required, the INTUC along with the Congress Government brought disruption in the movement. After this strike of 1975, the industry was not to see any major strike for long till 1979.

The 38th annual conference of the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU) which was held in December 1976 when the country was under the grip of emergency, the General Secretary, Kamal Sarkar presenting his annual report highlighted “the increasingly varied type of attacks being launched by the millowners to shift the burden of the recession on to the jute workers.” And pointed out to the hardships which the workers were bearing. With this he “stressed the need for united and joint movement, for the development of political consciousness of workers and for building up organisation capable of resisting all forms of attacks.”56 Despite this emphasis and felt need, the BCMU, the largest union in the jute industry, then was unable to organise any powerful movement for resisting the attack of the mill owners. The millowners offensive went unopposed for some time. The emergency restricted the activities of the BCMU. The BCMU also had in mind the fiasco of January-February 1975, when the industry wide strike failed.

54 Ibid.
The CITU at the State level was also finding it difficult to organise movements, despite the fact that in early 1977 it had expressed concern over the “continuation of the emergency for more than one and half years.” The CITU could not do much except demanding for withdrawal of emergency and scrapping of MISA and DIR and restoration of trade union rights. The convention held at this time at the initiative of the CITU and other trade unions decided to launch a campaign to popularise the 10-point demand of the workers. The 10-point demand included among other things, withdrawal of emergency and MISA, release of political prisoners, restoration of democratic and trade union rights. The convention “appealed to all the trade unions, mass organisations and democratic people to participate in this united movement irrespective of affiliations.” Hence, neither the CITU at the State level nor the BCMU at the industry level was in a position to launch powerful movements despite the fact that in enjoyed considerable support among the workers in the State and in the industry respectively.

The BCMU and the other unions took only some time after the emergency and organised one day token strike in July 1977. Movement had become necessary because, “since the emergency there have been incessant lockouts, layoffs, retrenchment affecting lakhs of workers”. The strike call was given by the BCMU and five other Central trade unions to “protest against the inhuman anti worker policies adopted by the millowners and in support of their urgent demands”. The demands included “8.33 per cent minimum bonus, refund of CDS money, reinstatement of retrenched workers, reopening of closed mills, withdrawal of additional workload...” Thus, immediately after the emergency at this point of time the BCMU was mobilising the workers on the issues which were mostly economic in nature. The CITU operating at the State level was also at this juncture mobilising workers on these issues. The CITU representatives along with some of the representatives of other Central trade unions, the INTUC, AITUC, UTUC, UTUC (Lenin Sarani) met the new Labour Minister and raised various issues like the issue “of 8.33 per cent minimum bonus, reintroduction of the system of collective bargaining, reopening of closed mills, reinstatement of workers victimised since 1970”.

58 This was demanded by the CITU along with other central trade unions, The Working Class, February, 1977, p. 1.
60 As reported in The Working Class, August, 1977, p.13.
It was only in late 1977 that, the BCMU demanded an "immediate settlement of the charter of demands and called upon all trade unions to come together in a mighty united movement to realise these demands". The demands included withdrawal of MISA, 42nd Amendment and Article 352 of the Constitution, nationalisation of the jute industry, withdrawal of all victimisation since 1970, reopening of closed mills, and reinstatement of retrenched workers.

And as a follow up to this decision, the BCMU by the end of March, 1978 was organising demonstrations along with other trade unions in the industry. The working class reported:

Jute workers in most of the 62 jute mills in West Bengal held demonstrations and submitted memorandums to the respective mill managements on 28th March last. As a result, work in these mills stopped for about 2 hours on that day. The demonstration was held to protest against the callous indifference of the mill owners to the 10-point charter submitted by them on 2nd February by the Left Trade Unions including the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union.

The trade unions further decided to observe a one day token strike and then go for continuous strike if the demands were not met. In accordance with the decision, it decided to observe a one day token strike on 27th April. On the day of the strike, demonstrations were held in front of the IJMA office in Calcutta and a rally was organised. The main resolution adopted "condemned the attitude of the employers who refuse to start negotiation for a settlement of the charter of demands". The resolution demanded a meaningful dialogue and requested the Left Front Government to take immediate steps to make the IJMA see reason.

The response of the IJMA to the demands was obvious. It was for the first time that the IJMA submitted a memorandum to the Labour Minister. In the memorandum, the employers not only refused to accept the demands but placed some demands which included the demand for reduction of two days paid holiday (Republic Day and Gandhi's Birthday), reduction of working complement, linking of wage to productivity, etc. The tripartite meeting which was held on 10.5.1978 in the presence of the Labour Minister, Mr. Krishnapada Ghosh failed because of the adamant attitude of the millowners. The talks were inconclusive and the BCMU asked the jute workers to get ready for a continuous strike to protest against the millowners' indifferent attitude to their 10-point charter of demands. Meanwhile, the festival season approached and the jute

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workers prepared for the bonus struggle. Under the initiative of the BCMU, the jute workers observed a bonus day on the 9th August by holding demonstrations at their respective mill gates and demanded immediate declaration of a minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent. The BCMU's claim was, bonus should be treated as deferred wage and should have no upper limit. The memorandum which the BCMU submitted along with other unions also stated that the workers were preparing for a continuous strike to realise their charter of demands.

At the all India level, the CITU supported the struggles of the jute workers. The General Council congratulated them “for the heroic struggles waged by them against the tyrannies of the jute millowners in the face of all odds.” Thus, the BCMU had the support of the CITU on the issues and started preparing for the continuous industrywide strikes. The Central Executive Committee of the BCMU at its meeting held on 2nd November, 1978 asked the workers to get themselves prepared to launch continuous strike from December 1978 or latest by January, 1979 if no honourable settlement is met. The BCMU also took a decision to hold joint consultation with other trade unions working in the industry, irrespective of its affiliation. The meeting also gave a call for raising of a strike fund of Rs. 1 lakh, raising of volunteers, forming of strike committees, campaigns through posterising, demonstrations and meetings. The call for negotiating with the other unions was not new in the industry. The unions have given joint calls since long in support of the demands of the workers. One important point should be noted here. The BCMU is clearly the leading trade union organisation in the industry, though in one or the other factory, some other organisation may be more strong. Hence, the BCMU have always given the call for movements and led movements throughout the industry. The other unions have always followed the BCMU, though they have differed with the BCMU on several issues before and during movements.

In the Annual Conference held in December, 1978, the decision of a continuous industrywide strike was ratified. It warned “the jute millowners that the workers are determined to continue the strike till a honourable settlement is arrived”. It also decided to form a strike committee in each mill, raise volunteers in each mill with representatives of all workers irrespective of affiliation. The CITU President B.T. Ranadive assured the workers and the BCMU that the “CITU whole heartedly supported their demands and will try to mobilise all India support

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for the strike". The Labour Minister of West Bengal Mr. Krishnapada Ghosh who was also present assured them "that the Left Front Government will always side with the workers in their fight against the exploitation by their employers". 68

After all attempts for a negotiated settlement failed, the strike commenced from the 5th of January, 1979. The strike continued for 50 days and a settlement was reached on the 22nd February. Commenting on the agreement, the President and the General Secretary reported:

The victory was a historic one, and obtained for the workers, the rights they had lost as well as earned new rights and privileges.... This general strike has been a superb demonstration of the rock like unity and discipline of the workers, rebuffing all attempts of disruption and undermine their faith in ultimate victory. 69

The victory resulted in an increase of the monthly wages of the workmen by Rs.65.25 including a house rent allowance. But the most important achievement was the grades and scales of pay which were to be introduced for all categories of workmen in the jute industry. 70 For this purpose, an expert committee was to be appointed by the State Labour Minister. The second most important achievement was with regard to workload. It was agreed that the issue of pre-emergency workload and the then existing facilities and privileges would be referred to an expert committee appointed by the Government which would submit its report to the Government within 6 months of its formation. This was a very important gain for the BCMU because "it reverses the firmly held irreversible stand of the employers that once higher workload has been imposed with all its consequences, it can never be questioned". 71 The other agreements were on the working complement, abolition of the Bhagwalla system, gratuity, etc. On the working complement, it was agreed that the complement would be maintained at 90 per cent permanent and 20 per cent special budlies; thus there was an increase of 5 per cent in the special budlies. One important issue was not clinched, the issue was the Raghunath Reddy Award on "work or allowance" for budlie workers. The BCMU felt that:

The strike would have to be continued for another 30 days at least, i.e., 80 days instead of 50 days to compel the IJMA to yield to this issue. 72

68 Reported in The Working Class, January 1979, p.3.
69 BCMU, 50 day strike of Jute workers : Memorandum of Settlement, 1979, pp.2-3.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid, p.4.
72 Ibid, p.5.
Though the BCMU claimed that it was a historic victory, a section of the trade unionists who had sponsored the strike and have also signed the agreement alleged that it was a settlement on the employers' charter of demand.” The Statesman reported:

...however the INTUC, UTUCC (Lenin Sarani), BMS, NFTIU, HMS and clerical staff association expressed discontentment at the manner in which the settlement was reached. They were unhappy that the demand relating to the "Raghunath Reddy Award" as "budlie workers" was dropped along with those for the restoration of pre-emergency workload and curtailed facilities which they claimed were vital issues. They felt that the agreement "fell short of the workers' expectations", and claimed that they signed the agreement solely for the sake of "workers unity".  

Similar criticisms were not uncommon in academic journals. Timir Basu wrote in the Economic and Political Weekly:

The tripartite agreement of February 2, 1979...in the industry was a patch work affair that left many things unsettled. One of the most important questions left unsettled was workload.

Whatever may be the criticisms the strike was a landmark because of three important reasons. Firstly, it was for the first time the JJMA accepted the demand for setting up of committees for the assessment of work load and agreed in principle to the main demand, the demand for introduction of grades and scales for the workers. Secondly, it was a unified movement by all the unions and the workers which was not to be found during the strike of 1974 and 1975. Thirdly and most importantly the state government threw its strength on the side of the workers. This point will be discussed in details in the next chapter.

Though the BCMU regarded the agreement as a historic victory, but the President and the General Secretary reminded the workers that "a continuous fight has got to be waged to see that the above points of agreement are fully implemented. And also all facts related to increase of work load in each mill and curtailment of facilities and privileges have got to be collected swiftly so that our cause does not go by default in the committee on workload." Therefore, even after the agreement the vital questions were not settled immediately.

The BCMU in the meantime was engaging itself to the task of building an all-India organisation of jute workers for the first time. This had become necessary because a number of

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73 The Statesman, February 23, 1979, p. 147.
75 BCMU, 50 days strike of jute workers: Memorandum of Settlement, 1979, p. 5.
jute mills have come into being in other states and was employing a large work force. The CITU was active in these states. *The Working Class* reported:

Apart from unions affiliated to other central trade unions, CITU has organised jute workers' unions in all these states with a total membership of 1,27,975 excluding membership figures of Assam, Tripura and Nagaland. Although there is one union in Madhya Pradesh affiliated to AITUC, workers belonging to CITU are active in this Union.\(^{76}\)

In spite of this large membership in all the states the CITU was unable to form an all-India organisation though it has mooted the idea in the seventies, but could not take up seriously because of the conditions of the emergency. Kamal Sarkar, General Secretary of the BCMU, was very active and in the All-India Jute Workers' Convention in 1972 said that the awards and assurances (by the government) still remain on paper only, and an All-India Jute Workers organisation could force the agreement to implement its assurances. The Convention decided to form an "All India Jute Workers Federation" and reelected an organising committee which was also formed in 1972. Kamal Sarkar, General Secretary of BCMU was appointed the Convenor. The All-India Jute Workers Federation was formed in September, 1979 with the leaders of the BCMU being the important office bearers of the Federation.

The BCMU at the State level after the strike was building the movement on the issue of bonus, as the festive season was drawing near. The demand was, 20 per cent bonus. In the meantime, the settlement of 1979 was not implemented by the millowners. The BCMU General Secretary, Kamal Sarkar in September, 1979 wrote to the Indian Jute Mills Association that, "if the just demands of the workers not conceded, the workers will be free to launch an industrywide movement". As a follow up, the executive committee of the BCMU on September 28, decided to launch the "third stage" of the jute workers movement to realise their just demands. Mass deputations were submitted to the mill authorities in the second week of October and daily gate meetings were held.\(^{77}\) But apart from this, nothing much was to follow till the mid of 1982. Biren Roy wrote in the Economic and Political Weekly:

Employers in the jute industry have been mounting in a systematic offensive against the workers and this offensive has been gradually intensified...

United resistance against the offensive of the employers has been, therefore, a necessity for a long time. But the absence of any movement is conspicuous...

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\(^{76}\) *The Working Class*, September, 1979, p. 7.

The development of struggle among the jute workers depends to a great extent on the CITU affiliated union, Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU), which is the largest union among the jute workers. But unfortunately, the BCMU has so far taken few steps to develop a united struggle among the workers. No movement worth the name was attempted against the jute owners' refusal to implement the Labour Minister's award. Similarly, bonus was boycotted, no Central movement was organised to realise a higher bonus as demanded by the workers. No serious protest movement was organised against the series of lockouts declared by the owners.

To him, the reason for this lack of initiative by the BCMU was because of:

...the policy of the CITU not to encourage class struggle even in the private sector in West Bengal since the Left Front came to power in 1977.78

It was only in July 1982 that at the initiative of the BCMU, a meeting of all the unions among jute workers was held. But in all, unity could not be achieved on the question of organising a immediate strike. The unions; SUC led UTUC, BMS and others favoured a immediate strike, the BCMU, the union belonging to AITUC and other Left unions along with the INTUC decided against it and favoured a token strike on August 10. The argument of the BCMU was that a general industrywide strike would harm the jute growers. The basis for a united movement was thus laid. And according to the decision, workers in the jute industry in West Bengal struck work on August 10, demanding implementation of grades and scales of pay award. The August 10 strike was only a warning, but no major action after that was launched.79

It was only in mid-1983 in the Working Committee meeting of the All-India Jute Workers' Federation held in Calcutta, it was decided to prepare for a country wide indefinite strike at the end of the year. A phased programme was also adopted in which continuous agitations were to be mounted in the forms of joint conventions, joint demonstrations, gate meetings and deputations to the managements and to the governments, both centre and the states. Several trade unions issued a statement on November 10, at the Calcutta Press Club that they will go on a continuous united strike from January, the 16th, 1984.

Niren Ghosh, the President of the BCMU in a press conference on December 12, 1983 explained the reasons for the jute strike in the following words:

The 1979 tripartite agreement reached after 50 days of strike was thrown into the waste paper basket on three vital important points, viz., the jute barons have refused to implement the grades and scales obligations on them after the State

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79 For a discussion of these developments see, B. Roy, "Owners offensive goes unopposed", Economic and Political Weekly, August 7, 1982, pp. 1265-66.
Labour Minister's finalisation as per the agreement. Secondly, the workload committee appointed by the Labour Minister submitted its recommendations... As per the agreement the jute monopolists are to reabsorb or compensate them. On both these counts, the jute barons went to court...

Thirdly, the 1979 agreement stipulated the status quo in respect of the workload must be preserved. But a further workload has been imposed to such an extent that old workers are leaving en masse, unable to bear the workload.... For one and a half years, 15 to 20 jute mills were locked out on a rotational basis as a matter of policy, for a period extending upto 15 months.... Thus it is that the die has been cast for a life and death struggle, to commence on January 16, 1984.  

The strike was to be an All-India strike. Some of the pertinent demands of the strike were put forward in the People's Democracy in the following words:

1. The entire jute industry from purchase of raw jute to internal and external trade must be nationalised forthwith....
2. Grades and scales must be implemented with retrospective effect.
3. Recommendations of the workload committee must be honoured.
4. The new barbarious work load imposed since 1979 violating the agreement, must be immediately undone....
5. Wage increase, i.e., a living wage.
6. D.A. neutralisation must be on the basis of Rs.2 a point....

If one looks at the demands of the strike, which were mooted by the BCMU and accepted by other unions, one finds that it was a continuation of the 50-day strike of 1979. The main allegation was that the employers had gone back on their commitment, to implement the recommendations on wages and scales and workload made by two committees appointed by the Government of West Bengal.

The strike continued for 84 days and ended with the agreement of April 17. The strike which was the longest in the history of the jute industry ended with some success for the workers. Mohammed Amin, General Secretary, BCMU, congratulated the workers in the following words:

The valiant jute workers deserve congratulation for their heroic 84-day strike which was concluded after the endorsement of the tripartite agreement by a rally of the jute workers at Sahid Miner Maidan, Calcutta, on April 8, 1984.  

The terms of settlement included a wage rise of Rs.65/- and increase of Dearness allowance by Rs. 5.60 along with one increment after fitment to all categories of workmen, an introduction of grades

80 The Press statement was published in The People's Democracy, December, 1983.
81 People's Democracy, December, 1983.
and scales of pay for all categories of workmen with immediate effect (which for the BCMU was the most significant victory for which trade union movement has been fighting for two decades), the maintenance of a work complement of 90 per cent permanent and 20 per cent special budlie. 83 Regarding opening up of closed mills the trade union representatives pleaded for their opening and the employers agreed to consider the matter as far as possible. The economic achievements of the workers were modest. The General Secretary of the BCMU expressed his satisfaction over the terms of the agreement in the following words:

A close examination of all aspects of this agreement will help to arrive at the conclusion that this is the maximum benefits that can be had under the present circumstances and particularly, in view of the fact that the strike continued for 84 days which placed the endurance of the workers in the most difficult trial of their life. The patience, unity, determination and fighting spirit shown by the two lakh workers will be remembered and recorded in golden letters in the history of the trade union movement of our country. 84

There were critics even to this agreement. Representatives of several unions, including the UTUC (Lenin Sarani), the BMS and the IFTU condemned the agreement as "anti-labour" and walked out of the meeting. The Statesman reported:

In a statement issued during the day, Mr. Fatik Ghosh (UTUC) alleged that the agreement had "bartered" away the workers' demand on the work load and grades and scales for a settlement money of Rs.100 only....He described the agreement as "a conspiracy between the government and the IJMA to betray the jute workers". Mr. Ghosh along with Rashbihari Moitra (BMS) and Mr. Hafiz Ali (IFTU), however, called on the workers to resume duty to avoid division among the employees. 85

Mr. Fatik Ghosh of UTUCC (Lenin Sarani) also reportedly described the agreement as a "black agreement" and a black chapter in the history of trade union movement. Most of the central trade unions to him had succumbed to pressure from the jute millowners. 86 Despite this criticism the BCMU in December 1984 was convincing its comrades that this "agreement have paved the way for future struggles on the question of wages and work load". Apart from this, the agreement had provided moral boost for the workers outside West Bengal in their struggle for just demands. 87

83 For a detailed account of the settlement, see among others (i) IJMA, Industry wise tripartite settlements, 1984; (ii) BCMU, Jute workers marching ahead: memorandum of settlement in jute industry of 9.4.1984.
86 Ibid.
87 Resolution adopted in the 46th Annual Conference of the BCMU, see, BCMU, Resolutions (adopted in the 46th Conference, 1984).
The industry wide strike and the agreement of 1984 was though a continuation of the 1979 strike and settlement, but it was a major one in the industry. The industry was not to see any major strike for another eight years, till 1992. After the strike many new developments took place. There were violations of the agreement, as usual. The working complement was further reduced. The IJMA splitted, the mill owners outside the IJMA refused to pay wages in terms of the agreement of 1984. According to one source around eight mills paid less wages. Thus, the offensive of the mill owners on the workers continued even after 1984. What was the reaction of the BCMU and other unions to this renewed offensive? The BCMU and other unions protested against this offensive through one day token strikes which was not to yield the desired results.

The most important issue for the BCMU and the CITU in the State was the opening up of the closed and locked out mills. Lockout and closures were the offensives which the mill owners were using very frequently in the State. In 1985, more than fifteen jute mills were under lockout at different periods of time. There were three mills, which were under closure. The mills locked out started reopening after the intervention of the Labour Department. Thus opening up of locked out mills became an issue for the BCMU in the industry. The CITU, the parent body, also was mainly concerned with the same issue. In a joint move, the CITU, the BPTUC, UTUC, along with the TUCC, BCMU, FCMU issued a statement to the press on February 22, 1985, demanding among other things:

Mills must work all the days and there should not be any stoppage of production affecting wage cut and retrenchment of workers reducing the working days/shifts or closing down the mills. We also demand of the employers and their Association, IJMA, full implementation of Tripartite Agreement of April, 1984.

But nothing much was arranged by the trade unions as a follow up action. It was on September 10, the same year under the initiative of the BCMU the workers observed a demand day on their 6-point charter of demands out of which the principal demands were: nationalisation of the entire jute industry and immediate take over of all closed mills.

In mid-1986 the BCMU along with other unions gave a call for one day token strike on August 7, 1986. Simultaneously at the call of the left kisan organisations, there was to be a rural

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90 The statement was reproduced in *The Working Class*, April, 1985, p. 17.
Bengal bandh on the same day. The demands were the same as it was earlier. The Left Front on its meeting of July 15, 1986 decided to support the jute strike as well as the rural Bengal bandh. The strike and the bandh was successful. The General Secretary of the BCMU reported to its delegates:

Despite all this discouraging factors, the fighting spirit of the jute workers had not dampened and when a united call by all the Central trade unions was given to observe one day's token strike on 7th August, 1986, the response was magnificent. The token strike coincided with the call of GRAM BANGLA BANDH given by the Kisan organisations and the Left Front.92

The tripartite agreement of 1984 came to an end in April, 1987. The BCMU was to accept that "the year (1986-87), ....the year of extreme hardship for jute mill workers and the cultivators and particularly for the workers of those mills which were placed under lockout for long periods".93 But despite these two factors, the BCMU remained inactive for long in the mills. It was only on July 23, 1987, a one day token strike of all jute mill workers was observed. The BCMU largely remained inactive after that. This passivity of the CITU/BCMU was criticised by a correspondent in the EPW in the following words:

CITU, the trade union wing of the CPI(M) had virtually given up the path of agitation and was instead recommending measures to solve the realisation problem facing the jute industry bourgeoisie. The jute millowners had resorted to unilateral closure or lockout of 26 of West Bengal's 56 jute mills, rendering about 90,000 workers jobless.94

The only movement which the BCMU could launch was the 74 day old strike in the Central public sector mills at the end of the year, on the question of interim relief. There was an agreement for providing interim relief to the workers and employees of the public sector undertaking between the Central trade unions and the Central Government. This interim relief was denied to the nationalised jute, cotton textile and chemical industries of West Bengal. The BCMU and other Central unions demanded that the workers should be paid interim relief and to realise the demand the public sector workers of West Bengal started strike from 14th December, 1987. The strike continued for 74 days and ended after the personal intervention of the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu. According to the terms of the settlement, an ad hoc interim pay increase of Rs.50/- per month was to be paid to

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94 "Jute workers pay the price", Economic and Political Weekly, February 27, 1988, p.393.
the 30,000 workers working in five nationalised jute mills. The amount agreed was half
the amount which was demanded by the workers. 95

The BCMU started preparing for an industrywide strike in December 1987.

The General Secretary in the Golden Jubilee Conference in December reported:

The last tripartite agreement expired on 7th April 1987. We are placing before
the Conference our new charter of demands. Our Union will make all attempts
to launch an united movement along with all other unions in support of this
charter of demands. 96

A fresh charter of demand was submitted by the BCMU and other central trade unions on February 4, 1988. The demand charter included "restructuring of the grades and scales, increase in
minimum wage from Rs.1500/- to Rs.2100/-; annual increment of Rs.55/- instead of Rs.15/-;
keeping 2.5 lakh workers in employment in 18 shifts; pending taking over by the Central
Government; reopening of all the 14 closed mills....and nationalisation of the jute industry
including foreign trade". The strike was to be launched from the 26th of February. The strike was
not to come into effect since a tripartite settlement was reached on the 24th of February and some
of the demands of the workers were conceded. This was for the first time after 1972 that an
agreement was signed without a strike. The workers received an increase of wage of Rs.40/- per
month. 97 This agreement of 1988 was not to solve the problem of the industry and its workers. As
usual, threat of closures and lockout continued to haunt the workers. The BCMU General
Secretary admitted:

During the year (1988-89), the workers had been generally fighting a defensive
struggle under the constant fear of lockout of the mills. 98

The BCMU Secretary in 1989 stressed the need for campaigning among the workers. 99
But nothing much was to come from the BCMU. It was the CITU, the parent body which gave a
call for Bangla bandh along with other Left unions to protest against the problem of lockout,
closures and sickness of industries in the State. In 1990, with the change in the Central
Government and coming up of the National Front Government, the BCMU this time submitted a

95 “Jute workers pay the price", Economic and Political Weekly, February 27, 1988, p.393.
97 B. Ray, “Jute millowners offensive against workers", Economic and Political Weekly,
memorandum to the Central Government demanding among other things the “nationalisation of the jute industry”. The other main demand of the BCMU was:

Immediate reopening of the closed and sick mills and taking over the management of the mills who are paying less wages.\(^{100}\)

The memorandum was submitted with the expectation that the National Front Government at the Centre will take positive steps to protect the entire jute industry. Apart from submission of the memorandum, the BCMU was unable to organise any movement. It was to face a disturbing trend in the industry; the local units were entering into bipartite agreements with the millowners at the plant level without the permission of the Central BCMU. This was harmful to the workers because in most of the cases, the agreements signed were dictated by the millowners.\(^{101}\)

The agreement of 1988 expired in 1991 and in April, 1991, a fresh charter of demand was submitted. The demands included the demand for wage increase and implementation of various clauses of the 1984 and 1988 agreements, the latter became necessary because the provisions were grossly violated by the millowners. It was the BCMU as usual which took the initiative in organising the movement and at the initiative of the BCMU, all the unions chalked out a joint programme. The unions affiliated to the INTUC and the BMS did not agree to a continuous strike from the January 17, 1992. The INTUC was compelled to join because of the enthusiasm of the workers and it is on the insistence of the INTUC the date of the commencement of the strike was shifted to January, 28. Seven jute mills were exempted from the strike out of which five were NJML mills. The strike took place in 48 mills in total since 4 mills were under lockout\(^{102}\)

The CITU extended its support to the strike in the following words:

The centre of Indian Trade Unions expresses its support to the 2.5 lakh jute workers in West Bengal who are forced to go on an indefinite strike from 28\(^{th}\) January demanding immediate wage negotiation....

.....The centre of Indian Trade Unions congratulated the jute workers for the total unity achieved....\(^{103}\)

The strike continued for a period of 50 days and ended with the tripartite agreement of 17\(^{th}\) of March. The strike ended after the Labour Minister and more particularly the Chief Minister

\(^{100}\) Letter was reproduced in *The Working Class*, December, 1990, p.11.

\(^{101}\) The General Secretary of the BCMU in 1989 warned its comrades against signing these kind of agreements. See, BCMU, General Secretary’s Report, 1989.


\(^{103}\) BCMU, General Secretary’s Report (52\(^{nd}\) State Conference, 1992), 1993, p.10.
intervened. The provisions of the agreement was put forward by Biren Roy in the EPW in the following words:

The agreement included a wage increase of Rs.90 per month (for 26 days) for all categories of workmen.... The rate of neutralisation of D.A. would be raised from Rs.1.65 to Rs.1.75 per point over 1000 points. All workers would get an increase of Rs.9.80 in D.A. The agreement also laid down that a tripartite committee would be appointed by the State Government to examine the issues of workers complement and manning having regard to the 1984 agreement.¹⁰⁴

Some of the millowners did not sign the tripartite settlement, hence the strike in those mills continued for more months. This strike was withdrawn without achieving any result. Thus, though the minimum wage of a jute worker increased from Rs.1,665 to Rs.1,950.95 but the increase in wages could not be achieved by all the workers employed in the industry. A considerable section was deprived of the increase.

This industrywide strike was hailed by the BCMU in the following words:

The way the jute mill workers numbering more than 2 lakhs in West Bengal continued the strike with determination and unity and the victory achieved is a new achievement in the history of trade union movement in this country.¹⁰⁵

The unity which was achieved during the strike was remarkable. All the Central trade unions had gone for the strike and all of them signed the agreement in front of the Labour Minister and the Chief Minister. In terms of the agreement, the committees were appointed by the State Government and which also submitted its report but despite of all these efforts by the Government and the unions, the millowners continue to launch offensives against the workers particularly in the form of closures and lockouts. The economic earnings of the workers to a considerable extent had increased since 1977, but so far as the guarantee of employment to the workers is concerned, the workers remain insecure.

This brings us to some important questions. Has the BCMU through its action in the industry failed to promote the interest of the workers? The answer is in the negative. The BCMU though had not been able to protect the total interest of the workers, but had not failed in its entirety. We have seen earlier in our first Chapter that the scope of trade unions to bring about a fundamental improvement in the living conditions of the workers is only limited. Wages and other economic emoluments in a capitalist society are determined by factors, particularly by the factor of

demand and supply of labour. The unions only to a limited extent can help raise the wages of workers, other emoluments and protect the employment of the workers. Keeping this in view, the BCMU to a limited extent had been successful in improving the living condition of the workers. As the leading union in the industry, it has launched united struggles to protect and promote the interest of the workers and important among its achievement is that the workers had learnt to launch united struggles irrespective of their political affiliations and this can be called as a sign of political maturity. The question how much political maturity and consciousness the workers have gained will be answered elsewhere in this Chapter.

III

THE PROBLEMS IN MOBILIZATION

In this section, an attempt will be made to answer the final question - how far the BCMU, the trade union wing of the CPI(M), operating in the jute industry had been successful in mobilising the workers for the party. This definitely would bring us to the question - what problems do the BCMU confronts in mobilising the workers. The answer to the question will be given in the following sub-section entitled “BCMU and membership”, “BCMU and organisational problems”, “BCMU and labour aristocracy” and “BCMU, jute workers and political consciousness”.

BCMU and Membership

The 38th annual conference of the BCMU was being held in 1976 under the shadow and constraints of emergency. The General Secretary gave the call for the widest possible unity of jute workers and fight back their employers offensive and restore their rights and privileges. But the hard fact to which the BCMU Secretary reminded was the drop in the membership by around 20 thousand in 1975 than in the previous year and held the branches responsible for it. The membership drive to him was not running smoothly and gave the call for building the organisation. This drop in membership was the outcome of two factors. First, the strike which was called in the jute industry by the BCMU along with other Central unions in January 1975 had not yielded the desired result for the workers. The strike which was till then the longest in the history of the jute industry fizzled out with minor economic gains for the workers. Hence,
support for the BCMU was not going to come so easily. Secondly, the imposition of the emergency restricted the operations of the BCMU. The BCMU was finding it difficult to mobilise on economic issues. The CITU and the BCMU made authoritarianism and dictatorship as the major issues which did not appeal to workers.

In 1981 in the 43rd Annual Conference, the General Secretary was again reminding his comrades that in order to conduct "a strike we will have to strengthen our organisation, that is our union. From our past experience, we have realised that no struggle can be conducted without strong and powerful union". The General Secretary pointed out that it can only be possible by:

increase in the membership of the union raising of their standard of political consciousness and building up of the union fund...  

The BCMU leadership expected that the membership and influence of the organisation among the workers would increase after the strike of 1984. But despite an increase in its influence over the workers, the membership of the union did not increase significantly. The call for a total membership of 1.5 lakh was not fulfilled. The General Secretary also pointed out to the poor condition of the fund drive which it had asked for after the strike. Only some of the branches carried on the drive and not all. After five years in 1989 in the 49th Annual Conference of the BCMU, the General Secretary reported that the membership of the organisation have come down and it was only 99,800. The Secretary also pointed out to poor response of the collection of special fund of Rs. 5/- and contended that the failure to collect the fund "was a reflection of our poor activities at the branch level".

This was the poor condition of the membership strength and influence of the organisation. The membership had fluctuated in the early 1980s and after the mid 1980s it had declined, if not significantly but to an alarming extent. The CITU (BCMU) in later years had claimed that its membership have not increased and that the call for new enrolment has remained largely ignored. A closer examination of the membership of the BCMU reveals certain point. The membership and the organisational influence of the BCMU in the industry had declined.
though it is clearly the leading organisation in the industry. It had cast its support to other organisations like the INTUC and other organisations which are willing to go for a more radical form of trade unionism, particularly the former naxalites and the SUC unions. This is because the BCMU had not gone for radical trade unionism in the late 1980s. Secondly, the BCMU’s claim of membership is not total because workers are found to be members of more than one unions.

**BCMU and Organisational Weaknesses**

The special conference of the BCMU was held in October, 1986 in accordance with the directive of the Annual Conference which was held in March the same year. It was called “mainly to discuss the organisational problem of the union as well as to think over the new situation arising out of the harmful policy of the Government of India of facilitating synthetic production...” The General Secretary while reporting the condition of the branches said:

At present we have 52 branches. Some branches function very well and have good amount of reserve funds deposited in banks in the name of the union. The branch functions democratically. There are some branches which functions in a manner far from a working class organisation. Such branches do not have a team of leaders but are dependent on one or two comrades. Some branches have funds but it is kept in banks, in the name of individuals which is not permissible. Repeated reminders from the Centre have fallen on deaf years......

The third group of branches is functioning under deplorable conditions. One or two branches are practically defunct....Some branches are functioning with sharp divisions in the leadership.

He further added:

Allegations and counter allegations are made, doubts are expressed about the honesty and integrity of the individual leaders at the branch level.\(^{10}\)

This was the state of affairs of the organisation, which happened to be the oldest and strongest organisation in the industry. This was the poor condition of the organisation despite repeated emphasis for “building up the organisation”. The General Secretary as far back as in 1976 has emphasised on building up the organisation. He emphasised:

We have talked about this (building up the organisation) in our previous conferences, but the building up the organisation is much more important now than in the previous years...

\(^{10}\) BCMU, General Secretary’s Report in the 49th Annual Conference, 1989, p.13.

\(^{10}\) BCMU, General Secretary’s Report in the Special Conference, 1986, p.10.
We want an organisation which can keep contact with the worker in every department. By organisation we mean an organisation which will be politically conscious.\textsuperscript{111}

In 1981, the General Secretary again emphasised this point. This time the BCMU was planning an industrywide strike. The Secretary said:

\begin{quote}
In order to prepare for strike we have to strengthen our organisation, that is our union. From our past experiences, we have realised that no struggle could be conducted without a strong and a powerful nation.
\end{quote}

But the question was how to strengthen the organisation? The General Secretary answered the question in the following words:

\begin{quote}
It is through increase in the membership of the union raising of their standard of political consciousness and building up of the Union Fund that we have to strengthen the organisation.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

One point must be noted here that the Secretary did not emphasise on the democratic functioning of the Union and the branches. It was only in 1984 in the Annual Conference, the Secretary insisted on democratic functioning which to him was absent in many of the branches. The Secretary complained that:

\begin{quote}
the day-to-day functioning of the branches had not improved. In many branches the BCMU is signing bipartite agreements without discussing with the BCMU Central Office.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

Just before the Special Conference, the Annual Conference which was held in March 1986 in which the Secretary categorically stated:

\begin{quote}
Except in abnormal conditions the branches must hold their Annual Conferences regularly.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

The Secretary also emphasised on democratic functioning of the branches. Despite repeated reminders the condition of the branches appears to be similar to what was stated in the Annual Conference in 1987. This author after interview with several trade union leaders found that in many of the branches there was absence of proper democratic functioning. Decisions ultimately is taken by a group of leaders without the consultation of the members of the organisation. Decisions on several important issues like strikes, etc., are taken and then conveyed to its members through gate meetings. The functioning of many of the branches depends on one or

\textsuperscript{111} BCMU, General Secretary's Report in the 38\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conference, 1976, pp.15-16.
\textsuperscript{112} BCMU, General Secretary's Report in the 43\textsuperscript{rd} Annual Conference, 1981, pp. 19-20.
\textsuperscript{113} BCMU, General Secretary's Report in the 46\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conference (in Bangla), 1984, pp. 24-25.
two leaders who are overworked. In these cases, there is no proper attempt to identify and prepare potential leaders. Some of the branches was found to be not maintaining proper records. Maintenance of records, membership figures are essential for trade union functioning. Some branches had suffered from factionalism. This author during his field tours in the mid-1990s found that in some of the mills there is a official CITU and unofficial CITU in the Howrah region. Differences within the organisation of the branch level was strong and this had resulted in factionalism. In 1986 in the Uluberia region of Howrah district, the BCMU unit split into BCMU and Uluberia Chattkal Mazdoor Union. And the cause of the split, according to disgruntled members was the undemocratic nature of functioning of the BCMU leadership.

**BCMU and Labour Aristocracy**

Before we come to a discussion of labour aristocracy in the BCMU let us briefly examine the concept in Marxist writings.

**The Concept of Labour Aristocracy**

The concept of labour aristocracy is to be found in the writings of Engels and mainly in the writings of Lenin. As early as in 1858 Engels noted:

> The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat....

In 1892 Engels changed his position slightly when he wrote:

> The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly, the English working class have to, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the privilege minority pocketed most but even the great mass had, at least a temporary share now and then....

Engels felt that aristocracy of labour was made possible by the industrial world monopoly of Britain, and by implication he meant that it would disappear with the end of this monopoly. Lenin began his writings on political and economic questions more or less at the same time as Engels. Lenin also connects labour aristocracy to imperialism. He wrote:

> The European proletariat partly finds himself in a position where it is not his labour of the practically enslaved natives in the colonies, that maintains the whole of the society. The British bourgeoisie, for example, derives more


\[116\] Ibid., p. 93.
profit from the many millions of the population of India and other colonies than from the British workers.  

Thus labour aristocracy in classical Marxist writings is a phenomenon of the stage of monopoly capitalism. Now the question which comes to the mind is what are the general characteristics of labour aristocracy? How the growth of a labour aristocracy is possible in monopoly capitalism? Engels wrote:

they are the organisation of those trades in which the labour of grown up men predominates....Here the competition neither of women and children nor of machinery so far has weakened their organised strength....They form an aristocracy among the working class; they have succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final.¹¹⁸

Thus, “labour aristocracy” is a miniature ‘empire’ of workers within a larger empire of capitalists. These “groups are not merely the prisoners of bourgeoisie ideology”, they have in Lenin’s words, “deserted to the bourgeoisie”. Such a aristocracy is quite strong and have great determination and militance when its own particular interests are threatened. “It advances its own interests as the interests of the class, and the class interests of its own.” It is as Lenin called it “the bourgeoisie leadership of the working class.”¹¹⁹ The labour aristocracy is the principal social support of the bourgeoisie and right wing socialist parties. Lenin pointed out that they are “the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working class movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class.”¹²⁰ They have influence in the working masses, therefore they are potentially dangerous to the labour movement in particular and revolutionary movement in general.

Now coming to the second question how “labour aristocracy” comes about? The answer is:

the relatively thin and usually highly skilled upper crust of the working class in imperialist countries...is bribed by the monopoly bourgeoisie with a share of the super profits obtained through the heightened exploitation of the working people in their own countries and the ruthless exploitation of the colonial and economically less developed peoples. The bribery takes several forms such as higher wages for individual workers, improved living conditions for them, cozy jobs in the state administration, war industry enterprises, reactionary trade unions, co-operatives and other organisations; shares of capitalist companies are sold to them at lower rates, etc.¹²¹

Labour Aristocracy in the Jute Industry and BCMU

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 94-95.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 97.
¹²¹ M.I. Volkov, A Dictionary of Political Economy, Moscow, 1985, p. 185.
Interviews with workers and union leaders during field tours revealed that labour aristocracy is prevailing in the industry and labour aristocrats have good control over the workers. Labour leaders commonly known as dalalas (middlemen) of the millowners exists in the industry and form part of all the trade unions including the BCMU. This was admitted by union leaders belonging to all shades and was more vehemently admitted by the BCMU leaders even by those who are important party functionaries. BCMU leaders and party leaders belonging to the industrial area admitted that corrupt leaders owing allegiance to the BCMU and to the party exists at the plant level who often keep good relations with the management for some kind of privileges from the millowners.

The form of labour aristocracy is significantly different from that we have discussed above. Labour aristocracy in England, from which the whole material for the theory was collected by Engels and Lenin was in the period of monopoly capitalism when the capitalists were in a position to share their profits, loots from the colonial countries with a section of the working class who constituted an empire within the working class. In the industry concerned a part of trade union leadership at the local level get concessions from the management on some matters. The millowners also try hard to promote this, so that opposition to capital remains mild and gentle. The mill owners issue some gate passes, allots them less work, places them in a department where the work load is not heavy. Issuing of gate passes mean that some workers particularly budlie and contract labour are provided work. Relatives and known persons of the leaders are provided with gate passes and employment. Thus the mill managements try to bribe the union leaders in this form and not in the form of providing higher wages and better living conditions. Why this has arisen in the industry? The answer was given by a local trade union leader in the Chengail Jute mill area:

This is mostly because of two reasons. Firstly, local unemployed youth put pressure on the leaders. Secondly, local level leaders accept bribe in the form of privileges because of the fear that there may be lock out or suspension of work by the mill owners. They are also threatened by the mill owners of suspension and termination of service. This gives birth to some form of opportunism.\(^{122}\)

\(^{122}\) Interview with a former prominent BCMU leader in the Uluberia region of Howrah. (Interview dated 17.11.1996).
A BCMU leader in the Chengail region of Howrah who works in a jute mill in Chengail and is an important party functionary admitted:

A section of the CITU leaders corrupt. They try to take advantage. They work less. They keep good relations with the management for their own benefits. The maliks (owners) also try to keep them in their own hands and thus provide them benefits.

He further added:

We are fighting against them. Whenever corruption charges, etc. comes to our notice we take action against them.123

A former BCMU leader admitted:

labour aristocracy exists in the jute industry. Some BCMU leaders are also under the influence of labour aristocracy. Labour aristocracy in India is different from that of Europe. In Europe, there is a difference of wages. But in India the payment is the same. No wage difference exists. But there are other differences. They get some other form of concessions in the industry, they work less, they manage in getting jobs for their friends, relatives, etc.124

A CPI (M) activist related to the CITU in the Uluberia region said:

Some union leaders (including CITU) leaders are corrupt. Some of them have involved in petty dalali. They have provided job to their relatives and have indulged in many practices of this kind. How can they face the management if they have benefited from them.125

The existence of "labour aristocracy" in the BCMU is suggested by two important developments. One in the functioning of the organisation itself and secondly in the growth of bipartite agreements at the plant level. In the 46th Annual Conference in 1984 the General Secretary noted:

The BCMU is signing bipartite agreements without discussing the matter with the Central BCMU.126

In the Golden Jubilee Conference of 1987, the General Secretary reminded again:

The signing of agreements at the plant level have undermined the prestige of the BCMU and the CITU. Such activities must be stopped immediately.127

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123 Interview with Gopal Biswas, a prominent BCMU and CITU leader in the Chengail, Bauria region of Howrah (Interview dated 18.11.1996).
124 Interview with a former prominent BCMU and CITU leader in the Uluberia region (Interview dated 17.11.1996).
125 Informal interview with Jahar Midday, member of the CPI(M) (Interview dated 17.11.1996).
The bipartite settlements, signed by the BCMU at the plant level without consulting the central leadership and that too accepting some of the derogatory conditions laid down by the mill owners is possible only when the BCMU leadership at the plant level is closely related to the management.

The Special Conference of the BCMU in 1986 pointed out harshly to the style of functioning of the BCMU leaders at the plant level. The General Secretary reported:

There are some branches which function in a manner far from a working class organisation. Such branches do not have a team of leaders but are dependent on one or two comrades. Some branches have funds but it is kept in banks, in the name of individuals which is not permissible.

Some branches are functioning with sharp division in leadership. Allegations and counter-allegations are made, doubts are expressed about the honesty and integrity of the individual leaders at the branch level. Depositing Union funds in individual accounts, questioning of integrity of individual leaders of the BCMU at the branch level all these indicates that there is corruption however low may be among the union leaders at the plant level. Corruption, close relationship with the management would mean the prevalence of labour aristocracy among the BCMU leadership.

BCMU, Jute Workers and Political Consciousness

The 38th Annual Conference of the BCMU which was being held in the years of the emergency in 1976 asked the workers to struggle for democratic rights. Niren Ghosh delivering the Presidential address reminded the working class, that they must lead the worker peasant alliance, and along with their struggle for economic demands must also struggle for realisation of their ultimate goal of transformation of the society. What was required from this working class, for the realisation of the later, was “political consciousness” and Kamal Sarkar, the General Secretary was rightly insisting on the development of political consciousness of the jute workers. The jute workers which had a long history of struggles on economic demands were clearly lagging behind in the much needed area of “political consciousness”. Not only that the jute workers under the BCMU were lagging behind, but the working class throughout the country which to a considerable extent were mobilised by the CITU lacked on this point. Hence, B.T. Ranadive the President of the CITU in August 1997 laid great emphasis on the task of

128 BCMU, General Secretary’s Report in the Special Conference in 1986, p. 10.
129 BCMU, General Secretary’s Report in the 38th Annual Conference (in Bangla), pp. 15-16.
raising the political consciousness of the working class. To him the CITU has played a significant role in building up broadest possible unity...but so long it has confined only to their economic demands. It to him had failed to extricate the working class from the pursuit of economism and raise their political consciousness.130

Political consciousness was absent among the workers under the CITU and that was the reason why the CITU failed to mobilise the working class during the emergency in a significant way in fighting against the forces of authoritarianism. Hence, immediately after the emergency, neither the BCMU nor the CITU were in a position to call their workers politically conscious who had been mobilised earlier on economic issues.

The 39th Annual Conference of BCMU which was held after the emergency in November 1977 also called for the development of political consciousness of the workers. B.T. Ranadive while inaugurating the Conference called upon the trade union movement to raise the political consciousness of the working class and mobilise the class not merely for their economic demands, but also for political demands for the basic task of liquidating feudalism and capitalism and ushering in socialism.131 In the same year the West Bengal Council of CITU meeting was held and the General Secretary of the State Unit of CITU also in his report emphasised the point that the trade union movement was to be freed from the mire of economism and political consciousness has to be imported among the working class. The monthly organ of the CITU reported his views in the following words:

The trade union movement has to address itself to the task of raising the political consciousness of the working class, to the task of functioning trade unions on democratic basis and of increasing the number of active worker cadres.132

The BCMU Conference of 1978 also emphasised on the importance of educating the working class politically and to inspire them in socialist consciousness. In the West Bengal CITU Conference of 1980 the General Secretary of the CITU also stressed on the need to take rigorous steps to raise the political consciousness of the workers and build up CITU as a strong

132 The Working Class, January, 1978, p.8
and militant organisation.  In November 1980 while presenting the annual report, the General Secretary of the BCMU called upon the delegates to develop the political consciousness of the workers into socialist consciousness.  The General Secretary was perhaps assuming that the workers political consciousness had reached the level when it could be converted into political consciousness. Hence in the next Conference, the General Secretary was urging its delegates among other things to “raise the standard of their political consciousness”. The emphasis continued even in 1984. This time it delegated responsibilities to the branches. The Secretary asked:

The branches will have to take responsibilities in providing political education. To the extent possible adult education programmes has to be adopted so that the workers learn through their mother tongue. These tasks are a part of daily routine work of trade unions.

In 1986 the BCMU decided to hold a special conference for discussing some of the problems of the organisation and in accordance with the decision the Special Conference was held in October 1986. The General Secretary Mohd. Amin though expressed satisfaction over the increase in the membership by 5 thousand over the years but was harsh on the organisation and the branches. The General Secretary reported:

...These developments amply indicate that we have failed to educate the workers and the leaders including ourselves politically. We seem to be in the grip of old and non-working class ideas and conceptions. We forget that we have to organise the working class to change the capitalist society in order to abolish the atrocious system of exploitation of man by man and class by class. This state of affairs is causing demoralisation among a good section of old and young cadres who have been in the forefront of the trade union movement for a long time.

Thus in late 1986 in the Special Conference, the BCMU Secretary, was accepting the fact that the organisation and the trade union movement in the industry had failed to impact political consciousness among the workers. Mobilisation was restricted to economic demands. What is more startling that the General Secretary reported that the BCMU leaders were even under the grip of non-working class ideas and conceptions. This was the state of affairs for the parts not

Ibid., July, 1980, p.3.
Reported in the Working Class, December, 1980, p.5.
BCMU, General Secretary’s Report in the Special Conference of 1986, pp. 10-11.
only in the industry but throughout the State. Jyoti Basu, the State Chief Minister and the Vice President of the CITU stressed the need for raising political consciousness of the workers while carrying on economic struggles. "The working class" reported his views in the following words:

He said, without making the working class conscious about their ultimate goal of ending capitalism and feudalism and building of a new society, the main purpose of TU movement was found to fail. He urged the delegates to make the working class conscious about the political significance of the Left Front Government in the State as well as its limitations under a bourgeoisie landlord set up.¹³⁸

Thus, it is clear that the task which the CITU and the BCMU had adopted in the 1970s, the task of educating the working class and making the working class politically more conscious was far from complete in the late 1980s. Two questions come to the mind - one a theoretical one and the other a question related to practice. The theoretical question is why should trade unions and the workers require political consciousness and the other question is how to measure the level of consciousness among the jute workers which the BCMU have mobilised. Let us first answer the theoretical question which we to some extent have discussed in our first Chapter. A trade union affiliated to a Communist party needs to inculcate political consciousness because the primary task of a Communist party is to liquidate the existing social order based on class and to replace it by a socialist society. This consciousness has to be brought to them from without.

Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter what class is affected. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class consciousness, unless the workers learn from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical and political life...those who concentrate the attention, observation and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not social democrats; for the self knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a full clear theoretical understanding - or rather, not so much with theoretical, as with a practical understanding of the relationships between all the various classes of the modern society, acquired through the experience of political life.¹³⁹

Thus, for Lenin, working class consciousness is must, it is necessary, and it has to be brought from without, since working class by their own efforts can only develop trade union consciousness which is bourgeoisie consciousness and not social democratic (socialist) consciousness. Lenin thus suggests to judge the political consciousness of the workers by asking

a question whether the workers respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression and violence and abuse or not.

Modern Marxists have even stressed on the importance of political consciousness of the working class. James and Grace Boggs writes:

In addition to mobilising this mass social force around its own grievances, the revolutionary party must then be ready to fulfil two additional tasks: (1) it must be able to project the vision of a new society which will solve this grievances by destroying the system that has created the domination of man over man, thus making life more human for everybody; and (2) It must have developed cadres of leaders with whom the masses can identify and programs of struggle that will take the masses stage by stage to even higher levels of political struggle, political consciousness, and actual control of facets (or bases) or power.140

The answer to the question “why political consciousness?” is simply because without political consciousness the working class cannot throw away the existing system which perpetuates the domination of man by man, the exploitation of man by man. This consciousness clearly has to brought from outside since working class by its own effort is only capable of developing trade union consciousness. Now coming to the question of whether the CPI(M) through its trade union organisation has been able to provide political consciousness to the workers in the industry. We assume here that the important functionaries or the leaders of the BCMU are the members of the party, since it is through the trade unions the party tries to mobilise the workers in general and the jute workers in particular.

A closer examination of the indexes of political consciousness among the workers reveal that the party has failed to inculcate the much needed consciousness to a vast section of the workers even under its own influence. The total membership of the BCMU is quite impressive. It claims to have a membership figure of around 1 lakh, that is nearly half of the workers employed in the industry. It has also claimed that the influence of the organisation is much more than its membership. But it had failed to mobilise them except around economic issues. This is what was admitted by the General Secretary in 1986 in the Special Conference of the BCMU. It is worth quoting the report of the General Secretary once again:

139 V.I. Lenin, What is to be done? n.d.
These developments amply indicate that we have failed to educate the workers and the leaders including ourselves politically. We seem to be in the grip of old and non-working class ideas and conceptions.\textsuperscript{141}

The developments to which the General Secretary was referring to was the undemocratic functioning of the branches, the division in the leadership of the branches, etc., which we have discussed earlier. The General Secretary also referred to a phenomenon which also reveals the lack of political consciousness among the workers in the industry:

\begin{quote}
A large number of jute workers is under the political influence of the Congress Party. They join in united struggle but at the time of elections for the State Assembly or for the Lok Sabha they staunchly and demonstratively support the Congress.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

The General Secretary hence emphasised:

\begin{quote}
The problem has to be tackled by sustained ideological campaign and paying more attention to political education and multifarious activities.\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

This point is important which clearly indicates the lack of political consciousness among the workers and commitment to the party. This author also found the same trend among the workers in the industry. Interviews with trade union leaders in the Chengail, Bauria, Sankrail regions of Howrah district, Budge Budge area of 24 Pargana district, Sreerampore area of Hooghly district and Titagarh area of 24 Parganas district revealed that workers, particularly belonging to the Hindi speaking states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh rally behind the BCMU in their economic struggles but during elections they vote for Congress and other non-Left parties. This is not something peculiar to the workers in the industry as such. Hindi-speaking workers throughout the State vote against the Left Front candidates in general. In 1984 many of the important leaders of the Left Front were defeated in the industrial belt of the State dominated by migrant workers. In the 1989 Lok Sabha elections the Left Front contested 41 seats out of which it won 36. The State Committee of the CPI(M) reviewed the elections and felt that the Party has succeeded in West Bengal in pushing back the Congress (I) to its 1980 position. It held that the seats lost to the Congress-I in 1984 in the industrial belts had been restored. The Party organ the \textit{People's Democracy} reported the review with the following words:

\begin{quote}
The vote of the working class and of unorganised workers went to the Left Front to a greater extent than before....There was no anti-Congress (I) wave amongst the Hindi-speaking voters as in 1977 or as in Bihar and U.P. this
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{141} BCMU, General Secretary's report in the Special Conference in 1986, pp. 10-11.\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
time. Though there is a small increase in vote of the Hindi-speaking people in
favour of the Left Front, this segment of the population generally voted against
the Left Front.\footnote{People's Democracy, n.d.}

What can be the possible explanation for this type of political and voting behaviour of
this category of workers. The reason is that their semi-proletariat nature. They are not totally
uprooted workers, but they continue to have good links with their respective villages. As a
result they continue to be influenced by the politics of their own state. Parties other than the left,
particularly the Congress-I have a strong presence in their respective states of Uttar Pradesh and
Bihar, hence during elections a good section invariably vote for the Congress, though a large
section rally behind the CITU and the BCMU for economic demands.

The state of affairs therefore is that a large section of the jute workers are out of the
political reach of the CPI(M). Though the Party had been able to mobilise the vast number of
workers around their economic grievances but have failed to mobilise them politically. This is
more the case with the semi-proletariat workers particularly the workers from the Hindi-speaking
States of Bihar and U.P. Workers had been mobilised, strikes being the principal weapon but
mostly on economic issues like wage rise, neutralisation of D.A., for better living conditions but
the Party have failed to educate them politically except partially. BCMU leaders interviewed
during field trips in Howrah, 24 Parganas and Hooghly accepted this lacuna that they have failed to
reach let alone developing political consciousness, the non-Bengali workers, particularly workers
from Bihar and U.P.