CHAPTER-I

THE WORKING CLASS AND POLITICAL MOBILISATION: TOWARDS A MARXIST FRAMEWORK

The present study is concerned with the mobilisation of the working class at a micro level in a particular industry, by a Communist Party. The Party in question, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] as we shall see later primarily mobilises the workers through its trade union wing, the BCMU in the industry affiliated to the CITU. The BCMU mobilises the class in question around the grievances of the workers which are mostly economic in nature. It seldom uses political issues as we shall see in the course of our discussion for political mobilisation. It must be stated here that the ultimate weapon which the BCMU uses for the purpose of redressal of the economic grievances of the workers is the industrywide strikes which also helps the workers to solidify and rally strongly behind the CITU and the BCMU. The second strategy which it had employed since 1977 is the strategy of mobilisation from above. 1977 is an important year in the history of the CPI(M) in West Bengal because it was able to come to political power at the State level after two unsuccessful attempts in the 1960s and 1970. Coming to power meant that the State level parliamentary institutions were at its disposal and limited control. The control over these institutions is not complete, because of several reasons which shall be discussed later in the course of our study. Thus, the CPI(M) have attempted to use this institutions for the purpose of mobilisation in a limited manner after 1977. This kind of mobilisation from the "above" or from the "top" was to facilitate mobilisation from below for the party.

In order to understand this mobilisation efforts of the party among the workers in the concerned industry, an understanding of several important theoretical questions are necessary. And since it is a Communist party which adheres to "Marxism" and "Leninism" hence a proper discussion of certain "ideas", "concepts" and "categories" in the Marxian framework is necessary. The theoretical questions which we shall try to answer first are the following:

(a) What do Marxist mean by the term working class?

(b) What strategy or strategies the Communist party should use to mobilise the working class?
(c) What role should mass organisations to be more specific trade unions play in the mobilisation of the working class?
(d) How can the bourgeoisie Parliaments and democracies be used by Communist parties for the purpose of propaganda and mobilisation?
(e) What are the limitations faced by the Communist parties in mobilising the working class through trade unions and bourgeois democracies and Parliament?

These are the first set of theoretical questions which we shall try to answer and then move on to more specific questions concerning the CPI(M), CITU and BCMU. The specific questions shall be the following:

(a) How does the CPI(M) seek to mobilise the working class?
(b) What role the CITU plays in the mobilisation efforts of the Party?
(c) How the BCMU seeks to mobilise the working class in the concerned industry?

These are the theoretical questions which we shall attempt to answer in the course of our discussion in this chapter. The whole chapter for the discussion shall be divided in several sections and in each of these sections, an attempt will be made to answer one specific theoretical question.

I

THE WORKING CLASS IN MARXISM

In this section we shall discuss the question, who are those that form the working class? To put the question in other words, what set of workers can be included under the category of the working class to the Marxists.

When we turn to Marx for our answer we find that despite the fact that Marx was concerned so much with class and class conflict, but, nowhere he had systematically laid any coherent theory of the term 'working class'. There is only one unfinished chapter in the Capital, Vol.III. Hence one has to look for his voluminous account to arrive at his understanding of the term 'working class'. In The German Ideology, Communist Manifesto, in his analyses of The Class Struggles in France and in his theoretical works as the Grundrisse and Capital, we find his understanding on the subject.

In his unfinished chapter in the Capital, Vol.III, after making a comment, "The owners merely of labour power, owners of capital and land owners, whose respective sources of income
are wages, profit and ground rent, in other words, wage labourers, capitalists and land owners, constitute the three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production". He comes to the question what constitutes a class? And answers by saying, "the reply to this follows naturally from the reply to another question, namely: What makes wage labourers, capitalists and landlords constitute the three great social classes?" Though he attempts to provide an answer but after a few lines he ends the chapter abruptly. Marx talked about an oppressed class in capitalism which is related to the means of production in an inferior way in the sense that they do not possess the means of production but simply are hired by the oppressor against wage payment. Hence it is the relation of a particular individual to the means of production which determines one's class position in the society. Here, he is determining the class, particularly the working class very simply. Given the time in which he was writing, when the development of capitalism in Europe was not so significant as it is today, perhaps he meant by the working class, the factory labourers. Hunt's comment can be accepted that "from Marx through to Lenin the concept of the 'working class' was relatively non-problematic. The working class was identified as the industrial or factory proletariat."

The problem of identification of the 'working class' or limiting 'the boundaries of the working class' came to the forefront after the Russian revolution of 1917. This became important because it had important implications on the political strategy to be adopted by the Communist parties in different countries. Keeping in mind our purpose of research, a review of the works is not so important for us, hence we will limit our discussion to Poulantzas in brief.

The problematic of Poulantzas is limiting the boundary of the working class, since to him capitalism had led to the growth of a 'New petty bourgeoisie', which to him is a "separate class and not categories that can exist outside class". Poulantzas here rejects the notion that social classes are defined purely at the level of economic. "...a social class is defined by its place in the ensemble of social practices, i.e. by its place in the social division of labour as a whole. This

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1 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III
includes political and ideological relations. Thus the social division of labour has political, ideological and economic components.

A brief summary of his idea can be given in the following way:

1. Only those who are engaged in productive labour are to be treated as a member of the working class, "the working class in the capitalist mode of production is that which performs the productive labour of that mode of production." He arrives at this conclusion because to Marxism 'productive labour' in the capitalist mode designates the place of exploited labour within capitalist relations of production. To him only workers those who produce surplus value are exploited in the strict sense.

2. On the other hand, to him productive labour is not a sufficient criteria for being a member of the working class. The supervisors, engineers, low level managers, engineers, technicians, etc. who also belong to the category of productive labour, but not all of them are members of the working class. It is here he is differentiating 'mental' and manual labourer for admission to the community of the working class. "Thus he argues that the 'supports of mental labour' within the collective worker do not form part of the working class. The agents who perform mental labour occupy a place in the social division of labour which is antagonistic to the proletariat, since the whole apparatus of 'mental labour' functions to exclude the workers from 'knowledge'."

For Poulantzas, the division between 'mental' and 'manual' labour is not only an ideological criteria of class membership but to him it also has a class aspect. Some of the supporters for him the foreman and the supervisor, etc., are at the same time agents of political domination.

Thus, Poulantzas had a very narrow definition of the working class as contrast to Marx, other than to him, we have other modern Marxist writings of Olin Wright, Carchedi and others, who in one way or the other are drawing lines of class demarcation within the ranks of wage and salary earning employees. Wright had stressed on 'property relations' in the definition of classes.

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6 A. Cottrell, Social Classes in Marxist Theory, p. 60.
whereas Carchedi relies on the "function of labour/function of capital" dichotomy. Here, it is not necessary for us to provide a criticism of Poulantzas and a discussion of Olin Wright and Carchedi; hence, we end our discussion here. The specific question which emerges here after our discussion is who are the workers in the jute industry of West Bengal. How to identify this working class for the purpose of our study? A related question would be, what is the condition of the working class in the concerned industry? We shall discuss these questions later on in our study.

II

THE PARTY IN MARXISM

Communists throughout the world had depended on the organisation, i.e. Party in their task of liquidating capitalism and bringing socialism. They have derived their inspiration on this issue if not from Marx and Engels but from Lenin. It would be fairly wrong to say that Marx and Engels were against a political party of the working class though they emphasised on the point that the working class must emancipate themselves by their own efforts. There are enough instances to show that they have felt the need of an organisation, though they were unable to develop a theory of an organisation. They believed that the downfall of capitalism was inevitable, but class struggles cannot be relied upon to this end. The workers must form themselves a separate political party. Marx in his address to the Central Council of the Communist League gave a definite program for the organisation of the workers' party in Germany. Engels wrote later:

For the Proletariat to be strong enough to conquer as the day of decision, it is necessary, and this view Marx and Lenin had upheld since 1847, that it should form its own party, separated from all others and opposed to them, a class conscious, class party.

There are many such comments on the need of a political party in the writings of Marx as well as Engels. Let us not go into the details of this, it must be suffice to say that in Marx or in Engels, there was a notion of a party, but nowhere in details. It was Lenin who developed a theory of the

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9 As quoted in H.B. Mayo, ibid., p. 133.
party in details and the success of the party which he formed in Russia had led to its acceptance elsewhere in the world by the Communists. To Liebman:

\[\text{It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Lenin's chief contribution to the political reality of our time was his creation of the Bolshevik Party, of a tool to make revolutions with - indeed the tool for making revolutions.}\]

Similarly, Henry B. Mayo had commented:

\[\text{Yet, even after making all due allowance, one sees that Lenin's new theory of the party was a break within the Marxist tradition. It is a clue to the understanding of many other of his adaptations.}\]

Generally, it is accepted that Lenin's "What is to be done?", is the most important document on the Party. One other pamphlet has also attracted the Communists that is, "one step forward two steps back", written after the famous split between the Bolsheviks and the Menshiviks in 1903. There is no doubt that these two pamphlets contained the initial theory of party organisation but Lenin had felt the need of a party even earlier in the first half of 1880s. In his first ever important work, what the "friends of the people" are written in 1894. He declared that "organising a socialist workers party" was a "direct task of the Russian revolutionary movement. In 1904 he said that "in its struggle for power, the Proletariat has no other weapon but organisation". One year later during the movement of 1905, he affirmed "unless the masses have organised, the Proletariat is nothing. Organised it is everything".

There were several objections to Lenin's theory of organisation. His contemporaries, two outstanding revolutionaries, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky opposed him for several years. Martov and Plekhanov also differed sharply on organisation. We will come to these discussions later. Let us look at the context at which Lenin was formulating his theory of organisation. Firstly, at that point of time there was no revolutionary workers party in Russia. Hence, Lenin felt the need of an organisation much more than Marx or Engels. The party to him was required so that the effectiveness of the revolutionary action of the working class do not become mild. Secondly as Norman Geras has pointed out that Lenin in his "What is to be done?", had a particular ideological target and that target was economism.

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11 H.B. Mayo, n.8, p. 135.
Lenin to Norma: Geras stressed the importance of theory. This is what was being done for the first time. To him:

Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement ... the role of a vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory."^14

Norman Geras had referred to this point in simple words:

Lenin in other words made the point dignified with other names that the workers movement needs knowledge, it needs science, to guide its political struggles and this do not flow automatically ...^15

The whole argument to Geras starts "from the assumption which goes back to Marx that the dominant ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class". Secondly to Geras was the crucial distinction between trade union politics and socialist politics. It is this which brings us to the question of spontaneity and consciousness. Let us discuss the theme in Lenin which is the very heart of Lenin's argument in "What is to be done?". In brief, Lenin meant that the working class by their own effort could only develop trade union consciousness, which is economism and not social democratic consciousness. Social democratic consciousness or socialist consciousness can only be imported to them by the party. Thus, it is the party which was to provide socialist consciousness to the workers because left to themselves they will develop only trade union consciousness and trade union consciousness contains an element of spontaneity. Therefore, the party was to lead the working class in the democratic revolution. The necessity of the party was not to be denied. What form would the party take? To Maclellan, "such an organisation for Lenin would also have the attributes of secrecy, centralisation, specialisation and exclusivity". The party would consist of professional revolutionaries. They would be professional in two senses. They would devote themselves full time to party work and they will be fully trained.^16 He asserted:

The struggle against the political police requires special qualities; it requires special revolutionaries.^17

It appears that Lenin was against a party which had a mass membership. It is on this point and other issues on the structure of the organisation and class and party that Lenin was assailed and a debate ensured. Trotsky was sure that the Proletariat could not do without the party. Trotsky was opposed to, as Milliband has put it, "he had no wish whatsoever to create a party that was small,

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^14 Ibid.
^15 Ibid.
self-contained and inward looking." Rosa Luxemburg opposed Lenin on her contribution in "organisational question of social democracy" which was also published in 1904. Luxemburg's attack was on Lenin's 'ultra centralism' and argued that:

Social democratic centralism cannot be based on the mechanical subordination and blind obedience of the party membership to the leading party centre.\textsuperscript{18}

Let us not discuss the whole debate between Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky but a few remarks on the debate on party and class. The most important issue on this subject was "the representativeness of working class parties". Luxemburg feared that the kind of organisation which Lenin was prescribing may not reflect the expression of the revolutionary working class and some form of "substitutism" may arise. Trotsky's opposition was on similar grounds, though he abandoned his ideas and agreed with Lenin in 1917 and joined the Bolshevik party. We would end the entire discussion by agreeing with Norman Geras according to whom:

In thinking to reject elitism, what Luxemburg and Trotsky were actually doing were rejecting the necessity for an organisation of the proletarian vanguard, in favour of a social democratic model of organisation. They were rejecting the sort of organisation without which - the October revolution showed positively and a string of failed revolutions had shown negatively - the revolutionary situations that recur periodically cannot be consummated in successful revolutions.\textsuperscript{19}

The kind of political party to which Lenin had referred and the Bolshevik party which he created had more or less been the model for all the Communist party throughout the world. These parties were to mobilise the workers and these parties were to play an important role in making the working class politically conscious.

III

TRADE UNIONS IN MARXISM

If the party was to play such an important role in the mobilisation of the Proletariat and in the struggle of the working class, what role should the trade unions play in the general struggle of the proletariat. This will bring us to another related question what potentiality do the trade unions have in bringing the downfall of capitalism.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} N. Geras, n. 13, pp. 184-185.
Marx And Engels

On the potentiality of trade unions and the role which it should play under capitalism we begin with Marx. Bank’s assessment that, “in view of the many thousand of words he wrote about capitalism, it is surprising that Marx never undertook any detailed analysis of the place of trade unions in such a society, or of the part they would play in the transition to socialism” can hardly be contested.  

We find his words on trade unions in “Poverty of philosophy”, in “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in “Wage, labour and capital”, in the inaugural address of the Working men’s International Association (1864), in “Wages, Prices and Profits” and in the instructions for the delegates of the Provincial General Council composed at the end of August, 1866. But this poverty of words do not in any way prevent him from being consistent in his attitude towards associations (unions), though Moses has argued that there are gaps in his statements which is primarily responsible for conflicting interpretations by his followers, including Lenin.

In the “Poverty of philosophy” which contained an assessment of the French socialist Proudhon, Marx repudiated among other things the former’s argument that “every upward movement in wages can have no other effect then in the rise of the price of corn, wine, etc. that is the effect of a dearth”. On the basis of this, Proudhon reached the conclusion that there was no point for trade union economism. Hence, trade union activity and combinations were to him meaningless. Reacting to it, Marx demonstrated that increase in wages do not lead to an increase in prices. He asserted:

The rise and fall of profits and wages express merely the proportion in which capitalists and workers share in the product of a day’s work, without influencing in most instances the price of the product. But that strikes followed by an increase in wages culminate in a general rise in prices, in a dearth even these are notions which can blossom only in the brain of a poet who has not been understood.

Trade unions to Marx served as bull work for the workers in their struggle with the employers. They had a dual function to perform - economic function and the larger political function of overthrowing the system of capitalism. In “Wages, Prices and Profits” which were in fact two analytical lectures delivered by Marx to the General Council of the International Working

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20 Banks, J.A., Marxist Sociology in Action,  
22 Ibid.
Men’s Association in London in the mid of 1865, we find that Marx was also sceptical about the political role of unions. His argument was that, trade unions work well as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organised forces as a lever for the fine emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wage system”.

It was not only that Marx saw an ‘economic’ function of unions but he believed that it had an important political function. The destruction of bourgeois order was the primary concern for Marx. The bourgeoisie though “it has been the first to show what a man’s activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders for surpassing Egyptian Pyramids, Roman Aqueducts and Gothic Cathedrals, it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former exoduses of nations and crusades”. But it was only a passing phenomenon since it contained the seeds of its own destruction. This is what historical materialism had taught Marx. Though the destruction of the order was inevitable and only a matter of time but it will be thrown away by the working class. Since the ‘emancipation of the working class is the abolition of all classes. It is to this political effort trade unions will cater. And the unions are the first “attempts of workers to associate among themselves”. He stated further:

Large scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance-combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combination at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations, which in the eyes of this economists, are established solely in favour of wages. In this struggle - a veritable civil war - all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character.

Marx at times showed some amount of scepticism regarding the political role of unions.

He could conceive that at times it is possible that the unions may be “too exclusively bent upon the

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23 K. Marx, Wages, Prices and Profit.
local and immediate struggles with capital". In 1866 in the form of instructions to the delegates of the General Council, he recognised that "trade unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wage slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements." His advice was therefore, "they must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction."

Thus it becomes clear to us that Marx had conceived trade unions as essential in the struggle of the working class against capitalism. Firstly, they resist any encroachment by capital on the wages of labour and secondly they act as organising centres of the working class for its complete emancipation, which is the broader interest of the working class. Marx therefore had considered a positive role of the trade unions which Hyman had argued as "the optimistic interpretation of trade unionism".

It is not wise to treat Engels separately from Marx but we find that Engels was also optimistic about the role of trade unions. Engels was clear that trade unions have a special role to play in a given capitalist set up though he did not overlook the limitation of unionism. In "the condition of the working class in England", he points out that "...the revolt of the workers began soon after the first industrial development, and has passed through several stages." And one of the stages which the workers reach is the stage when they combine to form associations, realising that individual protests like crime were useless because "the whole might of society was brought to bear upon each criminal, and crushed him with his immense superiority." Theft to him "was the most primitive form of protest, and for the reason, it never became the universal expression of the public opinion of the working men, however much they might approve of it in silence." Though unions came into existence because of the realisation that individual action was useless, but commenting on the history of trade unionism in England, Engels was sure that "the history of this unions is a long series of defeats of the working men, interrupted by a few isolated victories." They were only isolated victories because the efforts of the working men naturally...

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
cannot alter the economic laws under capitalism where the wages are determined by the relation between supply and demand in the labour market. Hence activity and power of the unions fail to influence the relation between supply and demand in the labour market and as a consequence there are only few possibilities of increasing wages through political action of the unions.

Now if unionism fails to raise wages for the workers then what is the raison d'être for its existence. Here, Engels provides us with economic as well as political justification. Engels believed that under capitalism there is a competition between manufacturers. If the manufacturer do not anticipate union pressure then definitely he will try to reduce wages and it is here the working men's opposition through unions under average conditions restricts any reduction. But that is not the sole function of unions. Engels recognises that:

the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly upon the competition of the workers among themselves; i.e. upon their want of cohesion. It is through the unions the competition among the workers is abolished or reduced and hence it directly against the vital nerve of the social order. The working men cannot attack the bourgeoisie, and with it the whole existing order of society at any other sorer point than this. If the competition of the workers among themselves is destroyed, if all determine not to be further exploited by the bourgeoisie, the rule of property is at an end.31

When we turn to Lenin we find that at the core of his understanding was that, the working class by its own effort cannot acquire social democratic consciousness. "It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc."32 It is from this understanding Lenin developed his own argument as to the role of trade unions under capitalism.

He was in complete agreement with Marx and Engels that working class activity within the factory (trade) develops naturally in reaction against the employers exploitation which was spontaneous. But he was sure that 'spontaneity' lacks 'consciousness'. Spontaneous movement of the working class was pure economism and hence it is bourgeoisie consciousness since it helps in enslaving ideologically the working class to the bourgeoisie. Lenin wrote:

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
The spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism...and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{33}

Here, Lenin never intended to denigrate trade unionism, but was pointing out to its radical limitations, since working class action through trade unions was not enough to bring about a radical transformation of the society because trade unionism to him lacks social democratic consciousness.

It has been at times argued that Lenin represents a ‘pessimistic’ tradition about the potentiality of trade unions. This is argued on the basis of his inflexible position in “What is to be done?” Here, it should be noted that it is not proper to evaluate Lenin on the basis of only one writing. It can hardly be contested that to Lenin it was sure that trade unionism was pure economism, and can never bring about genuine political consciousness. To him:

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, learns 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 fully clear theoretical understanding - or rather, not so much with a theoretical, as with a practical, understanding of the relationship between all the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life.\textsuperscript{34}

Though he points out to limitations which were radical in nature, but he never intended to degrade the economism of trade unionism. It was spontaneous to him. In his draft programme for the Russian Social Democratic Party, written in 1895-96, and in his article on “strikes” he showed his trust on trade union activity.

In “on strikes” (1899) he contended:

Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker’s mind. A strike teaches workers to understand what the strength of the employers and what the strength of the workers consists in; it teaches them not to think of their own employer alone and not of their own immediate workmates along but of all the employers, the whole class of capitalists and the whole class of workers....

A strike, moreover, opens the eyes of the workers to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of government and the laws as well....Strikes, therefore,
teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalist only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes “a school of war”, a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital. 35

Lenin was not even against mass organisations. In the same “What is to be done?”, he wrote:

We must have such circles, trade unions and organisations everywhere in as large a number as possible and with the widest variety of functions; but it would be absurd and harmful to confound them with the organisations of revolutionaries, to efface the border line between them, to make till more busy the all too faint recognition of the fact that in order to ‘serve’ the mass movement we must have people who will devote themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries. 36

Marx and Engels at best were vague on the question of what relation should the party have with trade unions. In the Manifesto of the Communist Party, the statement that “This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the worker themselves”, 37 leaves a lot of space for diverse interpretations. Here, Lenin was clear about the role of the party in guiding trade union activity and helping to bring about social democratic consciousness among the workers which otherwise trade unions are not capable of bringing. This is the conclusion which one reaches on the basis of his arguments in “What is to be done?”. 38

Lenin in his work attacked the economists for denying the role of the party as the vanguard of the social democratic movement. Here, he emphasised the importance of revolutionary consciousness in any social democratic movement, which to him was not contained in spontaneous working class movement. “There cannot be a revolutionary movement without a revolutionary thing.” And, he was sure that the party alone consisting of professional revolutionaries does possess the required consciousness and hence it should guide and combat the spontaneous working class movement. Left to themselves the workers are “capable of attaining to

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35 As quoted from Lenin, R. Hyman, “Marxism and Sociology of Trade Unions”, in Tom Clarke and Laurie Clements (ed.), n.25, p. 387.
36 As quoted by D. Mclellan, n.16.
37 Karl Marx and F. Engels, The Communist Manifesto,
consciousness of the fundamental opposition between their class as a whole and the existing social system.38

Thus, it was not that Lenin was ‘pessimistic’ about the role of unionism but he was against economism which helps the ideological enslavement of the proletariat to the bourgeoisie. The working class by themselves were unable to acquire revolutionary consciousness, at best they acquire trade union consciousness which was bourgeoisie consciousness to him. It is this belief which made him feel that the action of the working class through trade unions must be guided and combated by a party which contained within it professional revolutionaries well equipped with theoretical consciousness.

Rosa Luxemburg

Luxemburg’s ideas on trade unions can be found in her frontal attacks to Bernstein and in some other works. Luxemburg saw in trade unionism, a great hindrance in mobilising the working class to political activism. Particularly she made an attack of the trade union behaviour. Her attack was on trade union bureaucratism, which for Luxemburg was the “labour of Sisyphus” (the expenditure of effort without any positive result) and to her trade unions were hindering the natural revolutionary energy of the proletariat from expressing itself against the oppressive “class state”. Thus, Luxembourg’s criticism of trade unionism clearly sets her apart from Marx, Engels and Lenin one another point also be noted that to Luxemburg trade unions had no real autonomy. They were only a temporary aspect of the overall labour movement, which had to be oriented towards the future and not to day-to-day trivial issues. This is the reason why she feels that the socialist party must exercise a primacy over the trade unions.39

Gramsci

Gramsci was of the opinion that trade unions were “types of proletarian organisation specific to the historical period dominated by capital. It can be maintained that they are in a certain sense an integral part of capitalist society, and have a function which is inherent in the regime of private property”.40 Again in one of his criticism of syndicalism he maintained:

It assumes that the present form and functions of the trade unions are permanent and represent the perennial form of the principle of combination, when, in fact.

38 D. Mclellan, n.16.
40 Quoted in P. Anderson, “'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action”, in Tom Clark and Laurie Clements (ed.), n.25, p. 344.
they have been imposed on the unions and not proposed by them, and so cannot have a constant and predictable line of development. Syndicalism while presenting itself as the imitator of a ‘spontanist’ liberation tradition, was in fact one of the many disguises of the Jacobean and the abstract spirit.

Gramsci was commenting on unions at a time when they were “considered by many workers - particularly in the big metallurgical works of Turin - to be much too moderate and out of touch with grassroots opposition”. Apart from owning its existence to the capitalist system and being an integral part of it he was also critical about its bureaucratic and elitist character:

“The workers feel that the complex of ‘their’ organisation, the trade union, has become such an enormous apparatus that it now obeys laws internal to its structure and its complicated functions, but foreign to the masses ... They feel that their will for power is not adequately expressed, in a clear and precise sense, in the present institutional hierarchy ...”

If there were the ugly facts about the unions what is their positive contribution? They help in the “art of concentrating and guiding the workers forces in such a way as to establish a favourable balance between the working class and the power to the capital”. The union obliges the employer to acknowledge certain legality in his dealings with the workers, “a legality that is conditional on his faith in the union’s solvency and its capacity to secure respect for contracted obligations from the working masses”. Nevertheless, he regards the emergence of industrial legality as a quiet victory for the working class but cautions that it is not the ‘ultimate and definitive victory’. Though the industrial legality is a compromise still it serves one purpose, it had improved the standard of the working class. If the officials of the unions regards industrial legality as “necessary but not as permanently necessary compromise” and if they use all their means for strengthening the workers and carry out all the ‘material’ and spiritual preparations which is needed for an offensive against capital then the trade unions is a tool of revolution. If all the above mentioned conditions are fulfilled the discipline of the unions to respect industrial legality is also a revolutionary discipline.

Gramsci thus did not had much faith on trade unions and even if he had it was a qualified one. Perhaps it was this pessimism and because the “factory councils” which had become popular with the workers in Italy during the time he was writing, made him advocate the cause for factory

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
councils. The factory councils for him were very different from trade unions, since they not only aimed to control but ultimately aimed to replace.

The unions were only capable of achieving industrial legality the council whereas stands to destroy it, it leads the working class to the conquest of industrial power and make it the source of industrial power. The trade union guarantees to the worker a continuous supply of work and wages. Trade unions they are bureaucratic in so far as they tend to prevent class war from every occurring whereas the factory councils are revolutionary and tends to spark of class war at any moment. He advocated that the two institutions should be such related “that a capricious impulse as the part of the councils could not result in a set back or defeat by the working class; in other words the council should accept and assimilate the discipline of the union.” The relation should also be such that “the revolutionary character of the council exercises an influence over the trade union, and functions as a reagent dissolving the union’s bureaucracy and bureaucratism.”

Commenting on political parties and trade unions Gramsci had in his early writings had held that “these organisations arise in the sphere of bourgeoisie democracy and political liberty as affirmation and development of this political liberty”. It is from this view point he had held that the ‘councils’ or the ‘unions’ should not be subordinated to the party in any case. After the failure of the Turin Council Movement in late 1920, and as Mclellan had argued that “the acquaintance with the realities of the Soviet Union, and his concern over the rise of Fascism led Gramsci to modify his views.” He became an enthusiastic advocate of forming the Italian Communist Party in 1921. Before the formation he had argued for a “homogeneous cohesive party with its own doctrine, tactics and rigid and implacable discipline”. The Council Movement would doomed to failure without a Communist Party “that could co-ordinate and centralise in its central executive committee the whole of the proletariat’s revolutionary action”. Mccllelan had argued to the extent that Gramsci had in fact felt that the lack of rigid and disciplined Communist Party had been the chief reason for the failure of Turin Council Movement of the 1920s. Gramsci rather illustrated a military description of the Party as containing three levels: the Captains who direct and establish strategy, the Corporals who transmit the views of the Captains and faithful soldiers who lack any
creative spirit or organisational ability. But though he had described a party in this way he was for
a dialectical relationship between leaders and masses. He talked of a 'organic centralism' by
which he meant:

The consensus cannot be passive and indirect, but be active and direct,
it therefore necessitates the participation of individuals even if that brings above
an appearance of disintegration and turmoil. A collective consciousness, a living
organism does not get formed before multiplicity is united by the rubbing
together of the individuals.  

And though Gramsci had favoured a strong party particularly after 1920 but his emphasis
was somewhat different from that of Lenin. It never appears that he emphasised on "consciousness
from outside" or at least in the rigid manner Lenin had emphasised in "What is to be done?" It was
perhaps because Lenin was writing at a time there was a imminence of a revolution and Gramsci
was writing at a time when the possibility seemed less.

Thus to conclude this part of our discussion, one may argue that the Communist parties
must mobilise the proletariat through trade unions and cause it to solidify as a group with a shared
community of economic interest through the tactics of agitation out of economic agitation, or
industrial practice, the recognition of the necessity of political agitation would arise.

IV

BOURGEOIS PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS

Before we turn our attention to the CPI(M) and its theoretical position regarding trade
union mobilisation, let us make a few remarks on bourgeois parliamentary institutions because
these are being used by the CPI(M) in the State of West Bengal and elsewhere for the purpose of
mobilisation. It concerns us more because the CPI(M) along with some other left parties is in
power in the State of West Bengal since 1947 and is using the institutions under its disposal for the
purpose of mobilisation. In what way it uses these institutions, we shall see later in our discussion.

To Marxists, every form of class society is a dictatorship of the ruling class. The form of
the state however varies. In capitalist - that is bourgeois society it may be more or less
democratic; it may allow for parliamentary elections based on universal suffrage; but it is still a
dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Hence the attainment of socialism is only possible when the

48 Ibid.
bourgeois state apparatus is smashed. But at the same time in the struggle against capital the
institutions could be used. When we turn to Marx we find that Marx was in favour of the
democratic institutions and more particularly he believed in democratic reforms; for the widening
of the franchise, for civil liberties and equality before the law. Thus Marx was in favour of
utilising these institutions available to the proletariat, though Marx did not see the maturing of the
parliamentary institutions in the bourgeoisie democracies of Europe. Engels and Lenin were to
accept later that appraisal of democratic institutions at a short run depended on their value in the
revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Engels who outlived Marx felt that the proletariat
benefited from the constitutional methods, from the parliamentary institutions and must make best
use of it for the purpose of mobilisation.

It was left to Lenin to interpret the importance of the parliamentary institutions in a
bourgeois democracy and the use which it could be made use of, for the purpose of mobilisation.
He summarised his views in the following words:

Bourgeois democracy, while is invaluable for educating the proletariat and
training it for struggle, is always narrow, hypocritical, spurious and false; it
always remains democracy for the rich and swindle for the poor. 49

Hence Lenin urged the workers and social democrats to make full use of bourgeois democratic
rights “in the spirit of the most consistent and resolutely revolutionary democracy”, but warned
them that the workers should not suppose that they could win power by parliamentary means. This
was the main issue between him and the revisionists of his day. Commenting on the Berne
International, Lenin wrote:

The dictatorship of the proletariat would be impossible if the majority of the
population did not consist of proletarians and semi-proletarians. Kautsky and
Co. try to falsify this truth by arguing that “the vote of the majority” is required
for the dictatorship of the proletariat to be recognised as ‘valid’. Comical
pedants! They fail to understand that voting within the bounds, institutions and
customs of bourgeois parliamentarism is a part of the bourgeois state machinery
that has to be broken and smashed from top to bottom in order to pass from
bourgeois democracy to proletarian democracy. 50

It follows from the above that to him all attempts to use the apparatus of the bourgeois state, which
serves to protect bourgeois rights, are doomed to failure. He stated:

49 Quoted by Thomson from V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.28, in G. Thomson,
"From Lenin to Mao Tse Tung", in Sweezy, Paul M. and Harry Magdoff (ed.), Lenin
50 Ibid.
It is the greatest delusion, the greatest self-deception, and a deception of the people, to attempt by means of this state apparatus to carry out such reforms as the abolition of landed estates without compensation, or of the grain monopoly, etc. This apparatus...is absolutely incapable of carrying out reforms which would even seriously limit or curtail the rights of capital, the right of "sacred private property", much less abolish those rights.  

Accordingly, therefore, to Lenin the bourgeois state can only be overthrown by force, and the new state which will come into being it can only be a proletarian dictatorship. It was from 1906 the vicissitudes of Russia provided the fuel for this understanding. This belief of Lenin arouse after his experiences with the Russian Duma. The Duma provided the fuel for the quarrels between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The two groups were divided on the issue; what attitude should be adopted towards the parliamentary group of the constitutional-democrats and, on the other, the role to be played by the group of Socialist Deputies in the Duma? “What was ultimately at issue was the definition of a revolutionary policy towards parliamentary institutions”. The Mensheviks, went for increasing moderation and reformism and gave expression to “parliamentarism” that was increasingly dominant in the European socialist movement.  

Lenin throughout the years warned against “constitutional illusions”, and called for the Party to explain to the people the impossibility of achieving political freedom by parliamentary means so long as real power remains in the hands of the Tsarist government and show to the people “the utter uselessness of the Duma”. If this was the fact then what purpose does the Duma serves? The answer which Lenin gave was a general answer. The answer according to Liebman was:  

Participation by socialist in parliamentary activity was to serve first and foremost to amplify the Party’s political agitation among the workers: all the opportunities presented for socialist propaganda either from the rostrum of the Duma or in election campaigns were to be exploited to the full. Declaring that “those seats (in the Duma) are important only because and in so far as they can serve to develop the political consciousness of the masses”. Lenin explained that “the Social Democratic Party wants to use the elections in order again to drive home to the masses the idea of the need for revolution....” The task was, in other words, to participate in the institutions of parliament only so as to carry out a debunking of parliamentarism.  

Lenin was insisting that the Social Democratic Group in Duma should be to carry on work of criticism, propaganda, agitation and organisation. Thus in brief Lenin meant and stressed that bourgeois parliaments and institutions could be used for the purpose of agitation and propaganda.  

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51 Ibid., pp. 116-117.  
The Communist Party in India (Marxist) had accepted this argument of Lenin and have participated in parliamentary elections and institutions in the country to make best use of these institutions for revolutionary activity. And added to this as we shall see later that the Party had formed governments in various States of the Indian Union believing that it could make use of this governments for the purpose of providing relief to the masses and thus bringin; the masses closer to the Party.

THE CPI(M) AND WORKING CLASS MOBILISATION

The CPI(M) was formed in the year 1964. Differences within the CPI had existed since independence on several theoretical issues and strategy but it was only on April 11, 1964, when thirty-two of the sixty-five members of the Party's National Council walked out of the Party meeting in New Delhi, the split in the Communist movement took place. The members organised their own convention at Tenali in Andhra Pradesh and subsequently their own National Congress in Calcutta in October the same year. Since its formation, the CPI(M) had grown in strength and despite several splits which it had faced, it is the largest Communist Party in India in terms of its influence over the country. It claimed to have a membership figure of 5,79,666 in 1991 (at the time of the fourteen party Congress). It is important to note here that the strength of the Party is not uniform throughout the country. West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura are the States where the Party has a strong following and it is in these States of the Indian Union, the Party has been able to capture State power from time to time. In the first of the three States, the Party is in power since 1977, whereas in the other two States the Party has formed the government now and then, and when in opposition it has been able to influence the politics of the State in a very significant way.

In order to understand the CPI(M) it is necessary to answer certain questions relating to its understanding of the nature of the Indian state, its programme and strategy of mobilisation. The

Ibid., p. 71.

CPI(M) considers the Indian state as the "organ of the class rule of the bourgeoisie and landlord, led by the big bourgeoisie, who are increasingly collaborating with foreign finance capital in pursuit of the capitalist path of development." 56

As a result of this path of development, which the ruling classes are pursuing "disillusionment and discontent" is growing rapidly among the people. Life itself teaches them that there is no hope of emancipation from backwardness, poverty, hunger and exploitation under the present bourgeoisie-landlord rule." Hence, the CPI(M) "firmly adheres to its aim of building socialism and communism." 57 To this aim the Party takes into consideration "the degree of the political-ideological maturity of the working class and its organisation, places before the people as the immediate objective, the establishment of People's Democracy based on the coalition of all genuine anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces headed by the working class. This demands first and the foremost the replacement of the present bourgeois-landlord state and government by a state of people's democracy and a government led by the working class on the basis of a firm worker-peasant alliance." 58 This establishment of the people's democracy is necessary because this "alone can quickly and thoroughly complete the unfinished basic democratic task of the Indian revolution and paved the way to putting the country on the road of socialism." 59

Hence the immediate task which the CPI(M) has is the overthrow of the bourgeoisie-landlord state and replace it with a state of people's democracy. The Government was to be a government led by the working class. The question of overthrowing the existing state apparatus and establishing a new one brings the Party to the question of mobilising those sections which will help bring the necessary change. Here comes the concept of "people's democratic Front" which will constitute all the sections which is anti-imperialist and anti-feudal, but it will be a front led by the working class on the basis of workers-peasant alliance. The "people's democratic revolution" will be "organised and led under the hegemony of the working class." The emphasis is so much on

56 Programme adopted at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of India in 1964, CPI(M), Delhi, 1989, pp. 22-23.
57 Ibid., pp. 31-33.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
the working class because"...historically no other class in modern society except the working class is destined to play this role..."\(^{60}\)

For the purpose of mobilisation, the Party is also of the opinion that it will utilise the institutions which is available to it including forming Governments so that it can carry out "modest programme of giving immediate relief to the people."\(^{61}\) This formation of governments it believes will give "great fillip to the revolutionary movement" and will help the formation and building of the people's democratic front. However, it felt that participating in parliamentary democracy and forming of governments "would not solve the economic and political problems of the nation in any fundamental manner."\(^{62}\) Hence it emphasised that with forming of governments it "will continue to educate the mass of the people on the need for replacing the present bourgeois-landlord State and government-headed by the big bourgeoisie even while utilising all opportunities for forming such governments of a transitional character which give immediate relief to the people and thus strengthen the mass movement."\(^{63}\)

The programme further states:

The Communist parties of India strives to achieve the establishment of people's democracy and socialist transformation through peaceful means. By developing a powerful mass revolutionary movement by combining parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of struggle, the working class and its allies will try their utmost to overcome the resistance of the forces of reaction and to bring about these transformation through peaceful means.\(^{64}\)

If the main components of the People's Democratic Front was to be the workers and the peasants then how this class or classes were to be mobilised? Here the concept of the "mass organisations" is important. It is felt by the Party that mass organisations "fulfil the role of rousing the elementary consciousness of the sections which they organise" and it is these organisations which link the backward masses with the activities of the Party.\(^{65}\) But why mass organisations are essential. They are required because "the Party's direct slogans of basic change - revolution, capture of power, etc. are unable to rouse the mass immediately. The wide masses are attracted immediately on the basis of partial demands, immediate demands, which are or appear to be,

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 43.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Ibid.
\(^{64}\) Ibid.
\(^{65}\) "On mass organisations" adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India - Marxist, CPI(M), Delhi, 1981, p. 1.
possible of achievement without a complete overhaul of the social order. The education and experience gained in these struggles train the masses under the guidance of the Party, and direct it in revolutionary channels.\textsuperscript{66}

It is because of this attachment of importance, the Party had formed its own mass organisations such as the All India Kisan Sabha, the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU), the Democratic Youth Federation of India, etc. The Party recognises Lenin's emphasis that it is unhealthy to have separate organisation but it has a responsibility to function it as a "broad base organisation" and had stressed on united action with mass organisations led by other parties. This appeals to the CPI(M) are part of its "tactics to win over the majority of the masses".\textsuperscript{67}

Party in the Kisan Front

Before we come to the mobilisation of the workers by the CPI(M) through its trade union organisation, the CITU, which is of primary importance to us, let us look at the position of the CPI(M) in the peasant front. The Central Committee in 1966 identified many of the reformist tendencies prevalent in the Party regarding the role of the Kisan movement and maintained that "the Party had failed in giving a correct class orientation to the work on the peasant front" and advised that Party members should work in mass organisations including the Kisan Sabha. And ten years later the Party held that "the Kisan movement led by our Party, while projecting the land seizure of landlord's land and its redistribution slogan as the central propaganda slogan, and while organising struggles for waste lands, forest lands and the so called surplus lands under the ceiling acts, will have to channelise many other agrarian currents, like the question of wages for the rural workers, the issue of rent reduction, the abolition or scaling down of peasant indebtedness, fair price for agricultural produce, the police zoolum, against corruption, etc. so that all these currents might be harnessed into one big agrarian stream. Otherwise, the maximum peasant unity, isolating the handful of landlords and their hirelings cannot be achieved."\textsuperscript{68} Despite all this emphasis by the Party, the membership of the Kisan Sabha rose to 23 lakhs during the time of the Salkia Plenum in 1978. And the major weakness of the Sabha was that 55 per cent of the total membership came from the State of West Bengal, and West Bengal and Kerala contributed 75 per cent of the

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p.2.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{68} Review of the work on Kisan Front and future tasks adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1993, Delhi, 1993, pp. 4-5.
membership. This unevenness in the membership figures is directly related to the uneven influence of the Party throughout the country. The AIKS claims that its situation had improved particularly after the 23rd Conference of AIKS in 1979. The Party document reviewing the work on kisan front and future tasks held:

After the new orientation adopted by the CC in 1976 and after the 23rd Conference of the AIKS in Varanasi we have been trying to build the unity of the peasantry centering around agricultural workers and poor peasants. 69

According to one party document the membership of the Kisan Sabha was 1,17,63,811 in 1990-91 and the membership of the All India Agricultural Workers' Union” increased from 7,90,420 in 1980 (at the time of the foundation conference) to 18,90,488 in 1991. 70

VI

CITU AND THE WORKING CLASS

We have seen that the immediate objective of the Party is replacing the bourgeois landlord state with the state of people’s democracy. And for this task it intends to form a broad based “People’s Democratic Front” in which the working class will be the leading element. Since the working class was to be the leading element, hence the Party sought to organise and mobilise them. The tactics of the CPI(M) according to the Central Committee, “...aim at organising a disciplined working class with revolutionary socialist consciousness, drawing it near the Party, with its best elements joining the Party in hundreds, enabling the class as a whole to play its historic political role in the revolutionary struggle.” 71

To this aim of mobilising and organising the Party formed its own trade union, the CITU in 1970. The CITU was formed when 150 important members of the AITUC came out and as per the decision of the Convention of AITUC General and State Committee members at Goa in April, the All India Trade Union Conference was held in Calcutta in May the same year. The members have come out because they felt that it was “no longer possible to work inside the AITUC dominated by the Dange leadership, for working class unity, for class struggle, for defence of the daily interests of the working class.” The CITU was formed in order to “promote the unity of the

69 Ibid., p. 15.
70 Report on organisation and tasks, Ibid., pp. 52-53.
working class" which demanded "that the initiative should no longer be surrendered to the Dange Group, to the reformist group in the AITUC but should be taken by the militant unions, by the workers themselves." Hence the CPI(M) regarded the reformist leadership of the AITUC which was marked by "opportunism" and "economism" as the real enemy of the working class movement.

Since the formation of the CITU it has been the mass organisation of the CPI(M) which has been mobilising and organising the working class. But the situation was not too well during the time of the Salkia Plenum in 1978, the membership figure was only around 10 lakhs. Four years later the Party in its political resolution stated:

The CITU and mass organisation of employees led by us now embrace vast section and act as a powerful force in the country's trade union movement.

And ten years later the "Report on Organisation and Tasks" adopted by the Central Committee held:

Due to the work of the Party members there has been good progress in the development and expansion of unions and all India federations of middle-class employees. The development of the CITU unions and membership is not commensurate to the work and influence gained.

The membership of the CITU union in 1989 stood at 23 lakhs as compared to around 10 lakhs at the time of Salkia. But here one thing must be noted that though there was an increase in the membership figure at an all India level but the influence of the CITU throughout the country just like the CPI(M) is not even. There is a direct link between the strength of the CPI(M) across various regions and states and that of the CITU. Here too the CITU have a maximum membership in the two most strongholds of the CPI(M), Kerala and West Bengal.

Apart from the strength of the CITU certain other theoretical questions need to be answered in order to have a proper understanding of trade union mobilisation by the CPI(M). These questions are:

- How does the CPI(M) intend to mobilise the working class through its trade union organisation, the CITU?

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73 Report on Organisation and Tasks, Ibid., pp. 24-25.
What is the understanding of the Party regarding trade unions?

Does the Party realises the limitations of trade union activity?

What is the relation of the Party with that of the CITU?

The first two questions are of importance and the last two are related to the second. The statement of policy adopted by the Communist Party of India in 1951, which was accepted by the CPI(M) in the Eighth Party Congress states:

The Party has to build the unity of the working class and make it conscious of its tasks in relation to our entire people. The existing split in the working class movement which hampers the development of working class struggles must be overcome at all cost in the short possible time and united mass organisations of the working class built.

The class has also to be made politically conscious. Only a united and politically conscious working class can fulfil the role of the leadership of the people....All these tasks call for the most intense, patient and daily work among the masses, continuous agitation on our basic programme and immediate, simple demands of the people concrete working out of such demands for every section of the people according to general and local conditions, practical leadership of mass struggles, a combination of various form of struggles and systematic building up of a network of mass organisations.74

This imperative of building up of a network of mass organisations had led to the formation of the CITU. The understanding of the Party on the problem of mobilising and organising the working class through its trade unions is contained in two important documents, “Our Tasks In The Trade Union Front” of 1967 and 1983. It is also contained in several other documents of the Party including the “Report on Organisation and Tasks, Political Resolution of the Central Committee, etc.

All these documents point out to certain immediate tasks which is pure ‘economism’ and then it spells out the long term objective which it has of raising the political consciousness through education and constant propaganda. Economism takes the form of fight against unemployment, for better wages, for better retirement facilities and so on. And an important component of it is the fight against the economic policies of the Government because the conditions of the “workers, employers and the people depends upon the budgetary policies, policy on prices of commodities, fiscal policy, import and export policy...of the government. It not only affects the workers and the employees but also the whole nation. At times these policies are important keeping in view the

future of the country's economic sovereignty and political independence." These day-to-day economic demands of the Party is to raise the elementary consciousness of the working class and help the working class come closer to the activities of the Party.

The long term task which the Party spells out is that trade union struggles only help in raising the elementary consciousness of the working class and the Party members working within the trade unions should help educate them and raise their consciousness and direct it in revolutionary channels. This position is somewhat similar to the position of Lenin in "what is to be done?", which we have discussed in our previous chapter. Lenin was of the view that trade unions are the organisation of the workers for economic struggle, it is a spontaneous activity of the working class and it is only through Party's active guidance the necessary political consciousness among the workers can be brought. Hence the Party spells out the immediate tasks for the CITU which purely is "economism" and only helps in raising elementary consciousness of the workers and then it states that party members working within the organisation must direct it in such a way that the working class acquire class and revolutionary consciousness, which trade unions are incapable of imparting them.

The second question regarding the relation of the Party with that of the mass organisations in general and trade union in particular is also important. The Central Committee document "on mass organisation" of 1981 begins by refuting the belief of a section of the Party members, that mass organisations do not have any separate identity and it is only a "mere platform for the Party and has hardly any separate existence". It refuted the notion by stating that this is all "wrong and erroneous and does violence to the Party's understanding on the role of mass organisations in the revolutionary struggle." The Party's role is to guide "raising the consciousness of the concerned sections without shutting the organisation to the continuous inflow of backward sections. Otherwise the organisation will be an organisation of the militants nearest to the Party and, in spite of its strength in numbers, will be isolated from the main mass and unable to activise it." Thus to the Party mass organisations in general and trade unions in particular are separate identities, functioning among the backward masses and helps raise their elementary consciousness but under

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75  Tasks on our trade union front, CPI(M). Ibid., pp. 41-42.
77  Ibid.
the guidance of the Party. This position of the Party concerning the relationship of the Party with the trade unions is near to the position of Lenin but the CPI(M) is not for subjecting the mass organisations to the Party.

After a discussion "on the role of trade unions" as perceived by the CPI(M) and the relationship which the Party should have with trade unions the question now arise is how the Party has been able to put theory into practice at the national level. The Central Committee document on "Our Tasks In The Trade Union Front" of 1983 begins by admitting that the tasks which was accepted by the Party in 1967 in the trade union front had not been performed completely till now. Dealing with the relationship of the Party and trade unions, the Salkia Plenum of 1978 stated:

"...It cannot be said that the Party and the Party members are working in these organisations are working like Communists... The Party and Party members had not been able to convert the consciousness acquired through trade union struggles into socialist consciousness."

The document of 1983 accepted that though trade unions in India had to wage constant struggles against the government but it also accepted that the Party and Party members failed to raise the consciousness of the workers and include them into the Party. Even the document by the Central Committee, "Report on Organisation and Tasks" (1992) accepted that "Party members are not doing Communist style of work on the trade union front", and that the functioning of "trade unions is still dominated by and large by economism". Party building in many unions and industrial centres is not given priority by Party Committees. Party propaganda is still confused with trade union situation." Similar remarks are found even in the documents published later on by the Party and the trade union wing, the CITU. Hence though membership figures of the CITU, had grown from a modest beginning but still the Party's main aim of transforming the working class's economic consciousness into political consciousness needed for the purpose of overthrowing the bourgeois-landlord state had not materialised to the extent desired.

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78 Ibid., p. 4.
79 As quoted in Tasks in the Trade Union Front, adopted by the Central Committee in 1983, pp. 3-4.
VII

THE BENGAL CHATKAL MAZDOOR UNION

After a discussion of the objective of the CPI(M) and its theoretical understanding on several important questions on trade union mobilisation, let us turn our attention to the “Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (affiliated to the CITU) it is the trade union wing of the Party which mobilises the workers in the concerned industry for the CPI(M). The Union was formed in the 1920s and was registered in 1939. For a long time it was the only organisation of the jute workers in Bengal. It is surprising that though the first jute mill in Bengal was established in 1855 but the workers took so many decades to organise themselves under unions. The conditions for the formation of unions were favourable; the close proximity of the mills, a large homogeneous work force, the attacks from the owners of jute mills who were organised under the banner of IJMA; still we do not find any attempt by labour to organise themselves. The reasons for this failure will be dealt with in the next chapter with adequate emphasis. What needs to be mentioned here is that there was no organisation of the jute mill workers till the 1920. This doesn’t suggest that there was no protest from the workers against Capital. Labour had raised their voice against Capital since the 1880s, whatever the form of this struggle had been. This may not be discussed in detail here since it is part of history but a few words may be noted.

The BCMU though was formed in the 1920, but was a weak organisation even after a decade of independence. There are studies, which suggest that “unions of jute mill labour were never organisations based on a relatively disciplined body of workers subject to such institutional control as membership rise and obligations, subscription rolls, union constitutions, or even regular meetings”.

Unions mushroomed during the strikes of 1929 and 1937 and then more or less disappeared. Even after independence in 1952, 95% of the work force were not organised under unions. The General Secretary of the Communist Party led BCMU disclosed this fact in a Convention in 1952 of the All-India Trade Union Congress in Calcutta.

Despite all its weaknesses particularly its membership strength in the early decades after independence, the BCMU is the largest trade union organisation of the workers in the jute industry.

81 See, D. Chakraborty, Rethinking Working Class History. New Delhi, 1989, p. 135.
The Union is affiliated to the CITU and thus organises and mobilises the jute workers for the CPI(M). The constitution of the union states its objectives as:

a) To secure effective and complete organisation of labourers working in the jute industries of Bengal;

b) To affiliate and to be affiliated to other institutions connected with labour and having the kindred objects;

c) To obtain a fair scale of wages, reasonable hours of work, and generally to ameliorate in every way the position of members of the union and in pursuance of these objectives to provide such benefits as funds and conditions may permit;

d) To foster the interest of labour in general and of the jute workers in particular, in matters like economic, social, cultural and political;

e) To participate in the regulation of the economic life of the country in the control of production and distribution of goods in the fixing of wage rates, hours of work, etc. and in working out schemes of employment, old age and other social insurance;

f) To make all necessary arrangements for the efficient conduct and satisfactory and speedy conclusion of strikes, authorised by the union, and to provide against lockouts by the employers;

g) To make arrangements for prosecution or defence of any legal proceedings to which the union or any member thereof, if a party, when such prosecution or defence is undertaken for the purpose of securing or protecting any rights of the union or rights arising out of the relations of any member with his employer;

h) To create branch offices in different jute mill areas whenever the executive committee deems it necessary in the light of the local conditions.

The objective of the BCMU is thus clear, it not only has an objective which can be called as "economism" but a general objective in the interest of the labour at large, of the country. How far the BCMU, as a trade union organisation has been able to organise the working class in the industry and how far it has been able to realise its objectives, both short and long term will be analysed later on in this study. The attainment of these objectives, economic and political, requires

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organising the work force and then mobilising them. What are the purposes for which the BCMU mobilises and what are the strategies which are adopted for this purpose, will be dealt with in the next chapter. What is essential to point out at this moment is that the BCMU is the largest organisation of workers in this industry with around one lakh members at the moment. It is difficult to come to a figure keeping in view that the union records are not too reliable and many of the workers have double or triple union membership.

VIII

THE LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT IN WEST BENGAL

No account of the CPI(M)'s strategy of mobilisation in West Bengal after 1977 will be complete without a discussion of the Left Front Government. The CPI(M) after two experiences in the late sixties was able to come to power in the State in 1977. This time all the Left parties other than the CPI secured a comfortable majority with 230 out of the 293 assembly seats. The CPI(M) which was the biggest front partner secured 177 seats. In the 1982, 1987 and 1991 elections the Left Front was again elected to power which reflected their electoral popularity within Bengal. Though the support base of the CPI(M) is both urban and rural, the Party in recent times is much stronger in rural areas than the urban centres. Generally it is argued that this is because of the CPI(M)'s pro-rural policies, particularly because of its land reform measures. It is not essential here to make an in-depth analysis of the Left Front Government’s policies which we shall do later. What is required at the moment is to look into as to how the CPI(M) intends to utilise democratic institutions, particularly provincial governments in the federal set up for mobilisation of masses in general and the working class in particular and the limitations which it confronts.

The Left Front Government in general and the CPI(M) in particular realises that given the nature of Indian federal polity nothing much can be done for the masses. Big changes in the state were considered impossible by the Party because it realises that “the State Governments under the present set up have neither real autonomy nor adequate powers to undertake any radical and really

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83 This figure was taken from R. Sen, “Jute Industry” in Sarath Davala, Employment and Unionisation in Indian Industry p. 59.
84 For a discussion of the Left Front policies, see among others, A. Kohli, State and Poverty in India; T.J. Nossiter, Marxist State Governments in India; G.K. Lieten,
effective measures of relief and reform." 85 Hence the Party has regarded the CPI(M) governments as "instruments of struggle in the hands of the people more than as governments that actually possess adequate power, that can materially and substantially give relief to the people." 86 The leadership of the CPI(M) in West Bengal also accepts the limitations. The Chief Minister in an interview to Atul Kohili argued that "we recognise that within the larger constraint we are operating under, we cannot bring about fundamental change". 87 The same opinion was echoed even by the then Finance Minister Ashok Mitra, "There is no question of a people's republic of any kind being installed there in splendid isolation of the rest of the Indian reality. This much is well understood". 88 Apart from this limitations accepted by the party and its leadership, the Left Front also functions under a broad limitation of a bourgeois economic and social set up. The most fundamental economic reality in this country is that the State in India is pursuing a capitalist path of development. Hence, functioning in an economic set up such as this always limits the Government in question. Moreover, development of capitalism had resulted in over-centralisation of the polity, and the Left Front Government had to face the constant wrath of a over-centralised federal system. One more practical limitation may also contribute to the conditioning of the attitude of the Left Front Government toward the masses, which may contribute in the ultimate analysis to its policies and attempts of mobilisation. This practical limitation is the need of maintaining a moderate economic growth in the State.

It is important to point out here is that the CPI(M) in West Bengal intends to utilise the democratic institutions which is under its limited control for the purpose of mobilisation of all sections of the society including the working class. Hence the CITU or the BCMU as trade unions working in West Bengal in general and the jute industry in particular depend upon the government for its task of mobilisation. Mobilisation from the top was thus to facilitate mobilisation from below. It needs to be pointed out here that the practical performance of the Left Front, in the economic front, contributes to the image of the Party trying to mobilise.

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86 Ibid., p. 171.
87 As quoted by Kohili in. A. Kohili, State and Poverty in India, p.98.
88 A. Mitra, "This opportunity has to be converted into a challenge...", Social Scientist, n.d. p.4.