We shall now deal with how the left-wing trade unions threw up the challenges to the repressive factory apparatus tacitly supported by the RMS, the recognised union. We shall also discuss how all these challenges got aborted due to the strategic miscalculations on the part of the left or due to the massive repression of the left by the factory administration hand-in-glove with the local state apparatus. Here, often, due to the strategic miscalculations in the face of the state repression, as we shall see, the left-led working class challenges thrown up by the different groups met premature death in the 60s and 70s and later degenerated slowly but definitely into careerist and economistic movements in the 1980s.

Under this title "Left-wing trade unions", we propose to discuss the case histories of the Rourkela chapters of the CITU, AITUC and UTUC. The RMS, an affiliate of the HMS (a socialist group), also claims to be a left-wing trade union. However, we exclude the RMS and include the above mentioned unions within the purview of the present discussion because of the following reasons. The workers call only the CITU, AITUC and UTUC as "lal jhanda" (red flag) unions. This expression is used by a cross section of the workers to describe any of these three unions. Interestingly, the RMS is not referred to as "Lal Jhanda" union, though its flag is also red. In contrast to the claims made by each of these "red" unions, workers however are not bothered about each union's sectarian claim, "ours is only a genuine left union, not theirs".
In an organisational meeting of the UTUC, Sibdas Ghosh, the then SUCI chief, on his first visit to Rourkela in the early 70s is supposed to have remarked that UTUC activists should stay away from the fake red flags of other unions (referring to the CITU & AITUC) and claimed that SUCI-led UTUC was the only genuine communist union. Sardar Mehman Singh, then a militant worker and member of union, openly challenged Sibdas Ghosh’s claims. Singh wondered how could the SUCI chief raise accusing fingers against the "other" red flags when "ours" was also a red flag. The distinction between the fake and the genuine red flag made out by a person commonly believed to be a demigod by the SUCI was unpalatable for even an ordinary worker like Mehman Singh. In our discussion of the case history of the UTUC in Rourkela, we shall see in detail, how Mehman Singh later paid a heavy penalty for this fatal confrontation with a "demi-god". Notwithstanding the sufferings inflicted by a red flag union, Mehman Singh has not as yet lost the spirit and vision of 'red-flag' on which basis he challenged Sibdas Ghosh, the then chief of 'the genuine communist party of India'.

The more important point, however, is that Mehman Singh is not alone in articulating this vision of red flag. There are many workers across different ethnic and political groupings, who treat the three unions as "red flag unions". Some workers either admire them or despise them for having "red flags", though, it must be remembered, their hatred of the red flags does not seem to be as pathological as that of the "white" trade union leaders or the RSP management. We shall soon elaborate all these issues in greater detail. For the present moment, it must be remembered that in view of the importance of the above issues, we propose to examine the
role of the CITU, AITUC and UTUC in Rourkela under a common label: the left-wing trade unions. However, the politics of the left-wing trade unions today have been reduced to the level of mere "trade unionism", thereby completely losing sight of the progressive ideals they themselves adhered to in the past. We shall examine these issues in the following sections.

The first, second and third sections respectively deal with the case histories of the AITUC, CITU and UTUC in Rourkela. In all these sections, an attempt is made to demonstrate how the RSP management has lumped them together as its "common enemies" whereas these unions have more often than not challenged the management even on their on various divisive bases. We shall also discuss here how each of these left-wing trade unions has slowly but definitely graduated into careerist and typical trade unionist bodies, thereby losing sight of the long-term visions of labour politics.

I

The AITUC:

In 1957, Nitya Nand Panda and Bata Panda who were then working as trade unionists in the Hirakud industries were sent by the state leadership of the AITUC to form its Rourkela branch. Their main task was to work among the construction workers, factory workers and miners of the Rourkela Steel Plant.

The construction work of the Plant and the captive mines had just begun. At the beginning, there were only Muster Roll employees and a few clerical staff engaged in the construction of road, railway, buildings, bridges, site formation, etc., undertaken by the Hindustan Steel Limited. Thus, the AITUC leadership
decided to unite the miners with factory workers. They formed a union called Rourkela Steel and Mines Mazdoor Congress (henceforth RSMMC).

In 1958, about 1000 Muster Roll employees were retrenched. The RSMMC organised these employees and led their movement demanding regularisation in the RSP which had then just begun to recruit regular employees for the production units. The DGM (Personnel) Amar Singh was gheraoed for a day by the Rezas and other Muster Roll employees. The gherao was successful. About 7000 Muster Roll employees were regularised. In the same year, the AITUC led a movement of about 400 Passed Out Trainees (POT, trained in TISCO) protesting against their low pay scale in the RSP. The RSP management in collaboration with the state police intimidated the agitating diploma holders and suppressed their agitation. At the end of 1958, the AITUC therefore received a setback at a time when it was just beginning to entrench itself in Rourkela, especially after the success of the Muster Roll employees' movement. Added to this defeat, Bata Panda, one of the founding members of the union migrated to the INTUC in 1958. Though this split did not affect the numerical strength of the union, it meant the loss of a key organiser of the factory side workers.

In the immediate aftermath of the split, the union was reorganised. The mines unit of the union was separated, with official recognition being accorded to it in the Barsuan mines. Nityananda Panda who used to mainly organise the miners till then shifted now to the steel town. The union was renamed and re-registered as the Rourkela Steel Mazdoor Union (henceforth RSMU) and has been operating under this registration since 1958.
During 1958-62, the AITUC under the leadership of Nityananda Panda expanded its base in the core units of the Works Department such as the Blast Furnace, Coke Ovens, etc. In 1962, 10 workers were retrenched in the Blast Furnace. The union gave a indefinite strike call in the Blast Furnace. As a result, the entire plant got paralysed. On the fourth day of the strike, the RSP management came down heavily and declared lock out in the Blast Furnace, suspended 8 activists and dismissed 4 workers belonging to the AITUC. One of them, Ajit Roy, a key organiser of the strike and member of the Executive Committee of the union, was dismissed under the clause 31 (B) of the Standing Order, i.e., under the "pleasure" of the General Manager of the RSP. When the union challenged this issue in the Supreme Court, the union position was defeated. As a worker activist recounted, in one of the most reactionary judgments which could be comparable only to the judgment on the Golak Nath Case, the Court approved the dismissal of Ajit Roy under the "pleasure" of the General Manager of the RSP.

When the border hostilities broke out between India and China at the end of 1962, it had an interesting impact on the communist movement in the steel town. Since 1957 the RSP management was looking for a major pretext to suppress the influence of the communists among the permanent workers. The Indo-China war of 1962 offered them the essential pretext to hound out the communists in Rourkela. Many important union leaders including Nityananda Panda, the then General Secretary, were arrested under the Defence of India Rules (DIR) which was actually formulated by the Central Government in November, 1962 in order to undertake preventive arrests of the communist leaders who, the Government argued, might extend underground support to the communist government in China.
The Government strategy was also to discredit the communists as "anti-nationals". In Rourkela, this strategy pursued by the RSP in collaboration with the state administration had massive repercussions on a left wing challenge, growing among the permanent workers of the key units such as the Blast Furnace and Coke Ovens, from where the union had been able to dictate terms to the entire Plant. All the Communist Party workers went underground. The open office of the AITUC/CPI was closed for two years 1962-64. This repressive policy caused a major setback to the initial challenges posed by a left-wing trade union. It also left the field open for the newly emerging RMS leadership.

When the AITUC reopened its office in 1964, after a gap of 2 years, the RMS (the socialist trade union) had already won over the support of the factory workers. Before 1962, the RMS did not possess any strength in the Works Department. Under Bastia's leadership it had significant followings in the Town Administration only. By mid-1964, however, it had expanded its strength in the factory side, thanks to the leadership vacuum during 1962-64 which was effectively utilised by the RMS leadership. Although the reorganisation of the AITUC did take place later under the leadership of Nityananda Panda, the pre-62 phase of the union strength could not be restored.

Many national events took place thereafter and influenced the course of the union’s functioning in Rourkela. The central leadership of the AITUC with S.A.Dange as its President favoured that wage negotiations be centrally evolved and implemented in all the public sector steel plants. In its all-India convention held in Calcutta in 1969, the position of the Central leadership was endorsed by the AITUC. Following this, the pressure was put on the
SAIL authorities to form a bipartite central body to evolve a time-bound wage policy for all the steel plants. And so it happened. The issues of incentive and promotion were, however, left to be decided by the concerned departments of each steel plant. But all other issues were entrusted to a bi-partite system involving the representatives from the management and workers of the steel plants. These wage negotiations subsequently incorporated the Central Government as an arbitrator and a tripartite system was evolved now known as the National Joint Committee for the Steel Industry (NJCS). In 1970, as the information on new wage negotiations poured in, the AITUC in Rourkela tried to disseminate all such informations among the steel workers. The bulletins, Prachira Patra (Pamphlets) and booklets prepared by the central leadership of the union were brought to Rourkela and distributed. This became an important means for the union to contact the workers, regain their confidence and enroll their membership. It indeed paid some dividends in the Coke Ovens and Blast Furnace. About 700 workers of the pre-1962 phase rejoined the AITUC on the issue of the union's role in the central wage negotiations and helped in diffusion of its information in Rourkela.

No sooner did the union activists think that the union was gradually regaining the confidence of its erstwhile supporters in the Blast Furnace and Coke Ovens, the two nerve centers of the factory, there surfaced two major setbacks in 1971. The union was split twice in 1971. First, N.Panda, the then General Secretary, his brother and three other workers moved to the INTUC. In another split in 1971, four active members of the Rourkela branch of the AITUC joined the newly formed CITU following a major break-up of the AITUC at the national level. Vikram Chowdhury, then a skilled
worker and now a supervisor in the RSP, was one of them. As stated in the next section, Vikram Choudhury soon became one of the key organisers of the CITU led contract workers' movement in 1973. As Nityananda Panda's migration to the INTUC created a leadership vacuum and demoralised the workers, so also Vikram Choudhury's migration to the CITU was a major loss of an activist. After this, no assistance from the state committee of the AITUC was forthcoming until mid-1987 when the state leadership decided to send its representative Prabir Palit as adviser to the Rourkela unit. Only Naresh Dutt from the central unit of the AITUC used to visit Rourkela to boost the union's morale.

The Nityananda Panda's group soon found themselves alienated within the INTUC and returned to the AITUC in 1972. Taking advantage of the Emergency rule during 1975-77, the RSP management reduced the bonus of the steel workers from 8.33 per cent to 4.00 per cent of the wages. The AITUC led a protest agitation for a day. Three workers of the union were suspended for three months. About 100 personal files of the workers belonging to the AITUC were taken out by the RSP management. A game plan was apparently afoot to throw them out. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's intervention was sought against this game plan of the RSP management. Following her intervention the suspension orders were withdrawn and no further disciplinary action was taken against the workers of the AITUC. Just before the Emergency period, however, the reunification took place. Vikram Choudhury was persuaded by Nityananda Panda to rejoin the union. For his involvement in the CITU - led contract workers' movement in 1973, Choudhury was arrested under the DIR and the RSP authorities were planning to dismiss him. When he was in jail, Nityananda Panda promised him to use the good offices of the
Congress Chief Minister Nandini Satapathy in order to put pressure on the RSP and withdraw all cases against Choudhury. It would be important to remember that this was a period when the CPI supported Mrs. Indira Gandhi's "progressive" government at the Centre and also the party was a coalition partner of the Congress Government in Orissa. In the pre-Emergency period 1973-74, it was this bargaining strength which helped the union in Rourkela to win over some ex-members and help in re-unification of the union. Vikram Choudhury and the four contract workers returned to the fold of the AITUC.

However, in the post-Emergency period the union got split once more at the end of 1980. When S.A. Dange and Rosa Despande (Dange's daughter) formed the All India Communist Party (AICP) the event created quite a stir in the Rourkela branch of the AITUC. In 1980, Dange and his daughter landed up in Rourkela to break the union and form an affiliate of the AICP. Reflecting on this episode a worker activist of the union said, "all those years we used to shout slogans 'Dange Zindabad' 'Union Zindabad', etc., without being able to have even a glimpse of Dange. To our utter amazement, the same person landed up in Rourkela to break the union. All our past slogans vanished into thin air." All the office bearers of the union stayed with Dange group and retained the registration of the union RSMU. A small group of activists owning allegiance to the CPI opposed the Dange line and formed a separate union called the Rourkela Steel Labour Union (RSLU). However, the tragic story of this small band of workers owning allegiance to the CPI was that they were neither guided by the state leadership nor by the central leadership of the Party. Naresh Dutt from the central unit also stopped visiting the CPI- led union. In the next NJCS meetings for
the wage negotiations, the AITUC could not carry out any significant campaign among the workers in Rourkela because there was no body from the centre or state levels to inform the union activists about the wage negotiations and results of the NJCS proceedings. The same fate overtook AITUC unions in Bhilai and Durgapur. Around this time, the CITU was able to circulate massive literature concerning the NJCS among the steel plant workers and enroll nearly 1,000 regular employees in 1983. The CITU however did not subsequently put in any effort in building them as regular cadres of the union.

In 1987, Homidaji came from the central unit to establish reunification of the RSMU and RSLU which were working separately since 1980. Though the reunification was successful, it was not possible to revive the united strength of the organisation as existed prior to the Blast Furnace strike in 1962 or during 1973-74.

In the 80s, however, the union tried to organise the workers individually and jointly. In January 1986, the union participated in a jointly organised token strike by all non-INTUC unions against the privatisation policy of the central government. The strike was a complete success. In the same month, in the Captive Power Plant (II), the AITUC organised the contract workers in a strike for 42 days demanding the implementation of the General Charter of Demands. This resulted in a lock-out at the construction company, the Western India Establishment (Erectors). Nearly 450 contract workers actively participated in the strike. Some of them declared fast-unto-death during the last six days of the strike. The factory management requested the ADM to intervene. The strike was banned and the fasting workers were lifted into jail
by the ADM. The key demands such as the bonus hike of 15 per cent, the height allowance of 14 per cent, etc., were referred to the Tribunal by the DLC. And, these issues have not been resolved as yet. D.C. Mohanty, the State President of the AITUC, visited Rourkela for conciliation in the DLC's office. The suspension of 10 contract workers was withdrawn and an advance of one month salary was granted to the contract workers. In March 1988, the union also participated in an all India strike for three days jointly called by all the non-INTUC trade unions against the Trade Union Bill 1987 which was being piloted by the Rajiv Government.

In 1988-89, the union was found conducting a mass signature campaign against the cluster promotion policy in the Sintering Plant. Since 1987, the central unit has assigned a state cadre activist Prabir Palit, a Cuttack based High Court advocate, to guide the union in Rourkela. Such a step has been taken after a long lapse of communication between the local unit and the state unit of the AITUC. Also, two full time activists have been receiving Rs. 500 per month as their allowances since 1987.

It once again faced setbacks in its leadership in January 1989. Two important office bearers, General Secretary and Secretary, were promoted from their position as supervisor to the executive grade (E-O) which was created in 1988 to promote some senior supervisors to the Executive rank. This official strategy already paid considerable political dividends. Both the office bearers of the union had to surrender their union activities and the union once more experienced a vacuum in its leadership positions. It would be also interesting to note that when this research scholar contacted the ex-General Secretary of the AITUC, recently promoted to E-O grade, he declined to give any interview.
because, he said, he now held an executive post. His personal considerations outweighed any "private" discussion of the history of his erstwhile union which made him its leader.

As the "Dange Line" now and then dominated the union's politics, during 1960-80, it weakened the working class struggles in the public sector unit. The "Dange Line" emphasised the "pressure-compromise-pressure" (P-C-P) strategy of labour vis-a-vis the management in the public sector units so that the management, it assumed, would not adopt a blatantly hostile attitude to the workers. This strategy, however, did not pay dividends because the management ruthlessly adopted "discipline and punish" measures against the working class, as stated in Chapter 1 onwards. The union's recalcitrant attitude towards undertaking militant struggles in the public sector considerably harmed its own growth as a popular militant trade union body. The "Dange Line" as it existed until 1980 was crystallised in Rourkela especially after the suppression of the union following the Indo-China war in 1962. The union's above history clearly demonstrates its reliance on the P-C-P strategy for its organisational expansion in the 1970s rather than the militant organisation of the working class. Ironically the RSP management on its own did not abandon its policy of suppression of a "red flag" union as was indicated in its moves to "punish" 100 workers belonging to the union during the Emergency period. The union, however, saved its face by compromising with the Emergency rule of the "progressive" Congress Government.

Another very crucial problem the union faced during the 60s and the 70s was concerning the character of the working class in Rourkela. Many of the workers, for example, from the villages of the Ganjam district were protagonists of the CPI in their villages
but supporters of the RMS (a socialist group) in Rourkela. This was largely due to their half-peasant and half-worker character. The AITUC could not evolve a political strategy to overcome this political ambivalence on the part of the Rourkela steel workers.

The above problems were aggravated by the lack of coordination between the Rourkela branch and the state leadership. From 1973 till 1987, the state leadership of the AITUC stayed away from the group conflicts or splits that took place frequently in the local unit. The state leaders did not bother about its organisational weaknesses, its reunification, its programmes of action, etc. The central leadership stayed away after the split in 1980. We have already stated how the absence of the interrelationship between local unit on the one hand and central or state units on the other almost paralysed the capacity of the union to mobilise the workers on the issues like the propaganda of the NJCS's wage policy.

In the course of the field work, it was found that the rivalry between the CITU and AITUC in commanding the support of the contract workers was very acute. In January 1989, there was a big fight between these two unions. A group of CITU activists first threatened the contract workers belonging to the AITUC to quit the construction works in the modernisation plant of the RSP. Their purpose was to replace them by the CITU workers. When they failed the first time, the CITU activist returned a few days later with iron rods, cycle chains and revolvers. On this occasion, 4 AITUC workers were severely beaten up and were seriously injured. Their thighs and hands were badly cut. So, the AITUC filed a FIR against 19 CITU activists and six of them were arrested. Above all, Bikram Choudhury, an ex-CITU activist and now the General Secretary of the Contract Workers Union (AITUC), was also arrested. The AITUC
activists argued that the contractors of the modernisation plant instigated the CITU activists to attach the AITUC-led workers working under them because these workers were agitating for the regular wage payments.

The moot point of the above episode is that the left unions are completely oblivious of the fact that their rivalries divide the contract workers into sectarian political groups. Their conflicts then express the desires to control the contract workers and expand the numerical strength of the union. Instead of fighting for jobs for the retrenched contract workers these unions, professing the radical development of the workers, try hard to replace one group by another group of contract workers in the work process because the groups belong to two "different" unions. Thus, the interests of the retrenched or in-service workers are subjugated to the union's interests which lie precisely in the numerical expansion of its membership. This politics is essentially a number game which is practised at the cost of the ideological education of the workers. The politics of number game predominates at a time when, as described in these sections, the ideological struggles necessary to unite the workers have been abandoned for several years. No wonder, since the left wing trade unions are obsessed with parliamentary politics and P-C-P strategy adopted by their parent parties, the politics of number game surfaces to predominate their everyday practice. In this scenario ideological education vanishes into thin air.
The CITU:

The Steel Employees Trade Union (henceforth SETU) which is the RSP chapter of the CITU, an affiliate of the CPI(M), was born in the course of a worker's movement in the Traffic Department in 1971. About 1,000 workers of the Traffic Department went on a week-long strike and demanded proper job evaluation. Actually where 5 workers were needed only 3 workers had been employed. The workers were naturally overburdened. So proper manning was demanded by the strikers. The strike was led by K.C. Mohanty who was then working as a supervisor in the Traffic Department. During the course of this strike SETU was formed under the guidance of a CPI(M) veteran Laxmidhar Biswal who was earlier a militant trade unionist in Birla's Kesoram Jute Mills (Howrah). He was deputed by the Eastern Zonal Committee of CPI(M) at Calcutta to establish the CPI(M) bases in the Sundargarh district of the Western Orissa. Biswal was a very good organiser and could develop an emotional rapport with the cadres in a short time. He was well versed in the ideological differences between the CPI and CPI(M). These were his positive qualities which helped him grow into a position of leadership, no sooner had he established a branch of the CPI(M) in the Sundargarh district in 1969. When the pro-CPI(M) group broke away from the AITUC and finally formed the CITU in 1971, L.Biswal quickly persuaded the leaders of the Traffic workers' movement of 1971 to form the steel plant branch of the CITU. That was how SETU was born.
K.C. Mohanty, the leader of the Traffic movement became SETU's first General Secretary. As a matter of principle, in the SETU only worker of the RSP can become its General Secretary. Shivaji Patnaik being the President of the state unit of the CITU became the President of the Rourkela branch. Surendra Mudali and Laxmidhar Biswal were the two Vice-Presidents and S.P. Swain its Secretary. Surendra Mudali, still with the CITU, is now a well-known advocate in Rourkela. Three key activists, S.K. Dasgupta, V.P. Mukherjee, S.B. Singh broke away from the AITUC and joined the new union. The union got formally registered in 1973.

Within six months of the Traffic Strike, K.C. Mohanty, the first General Secretary of the SETU, was displeased with the organisation. K.C. Mohanty who was then a supervisor in the Traffic was removed from the service by the RSP management for his involvement in organising the Traffic movement. As he ceased to be a worker, the union also decided to replace him in the post of the General Secretary by Vikram Choudhury, another worker activist of the union. Apart from the organisational criteria that only a worker could remain as General Secretary, there were also perhaps other important considerations in his removal. Mohanty was a very militant and independent minded activist. His outlook seemed a potential threat to L. Biswal the then Vice-President, who was de facto asserting himself as supremo of the SETU. Biswal also being the founder of the Sundargarh district unit of the CPI(M) and CITU was all set to greater control in the union's decision-making process. Moreover, he was somehow inclined to believe in individual leadership as against collective leadership within the organisation. In concrete practice, this belief meant that the organisation would evolve around him. Also, he was inclined to
treat the union as the Party's "cell" in the RSP. As a result, the union in practice ceased to be an autonomous mass front, though that was how it was supposed to be in theory. K.C. Mohanty's advocacy of militant methods challenged all these underlying assumptions. For his approach, Mohanty was also branded as a "Naxalite" by the RSP. Actually, however, Mohanty did not have any relationship with the ongoing Naxalite movement of Bengal. That was merely a convenient label to justify his removal.

Mohanty's case of removal from the RSP did not seem of particular concern to the CPI(M) leadership especially by Shivaji Patnaik (the state President). In the 1973 Assembly election, Mohanty was denied a MLA ticket for the Rourkela assembly constituency. Instead, Manmohan Misra, one of the veteran leftist poets and trade union activists of the Biramitrapur mines (which falls outside the zone of Rourkela Assembly constituency) was supported as an Independent candidate from a joint platform. This event considerably dampened Mohanty. He felt that though the CPI(M) was fighting a losing battle, the leadership had opted to field and support an independent candidate who had no organisational base in the Rourkela townships. The leadership could have as well put him as the party candidate and tested the party's strength. K.C. Mohanty was so displeased and since he was branded as "Naxalite" by his organisation as well, he stayed away from the union as well as the Party Organisation. On the other hand, the union leadership was increasingly becoming oblivious of the fact that he was dismissed from the RSP primarily due to "the CPI(M)" label he carried during the Traffic strike in 1971.
Another remarkable event took place in the RSP in 1971. About 12 workers were labelled as "naxalites" and thrown out of the RSP. Their photos, as recounted in Chapter 1, were put upon the main gate and the workers were asked by the management to excommunicate them or else face their own dismissals. Two of the CITU activists, viz., Radha Das and S. Sen Gupta were removed from services under the 31(B) standing order of the RSP, i.e., under the "pleasure" of the General Manager/M.D., without conducting any domestic inquiry. Since then the word "naxalite" has acquired a derogatory sense in the history of the labour movement in Rourkela, and the spectre of "naxalism" has been haunting not merely the RSP management but also the left-wing trade unions like the CITU and AITUC. K.C. Mohanty became one of the first victims of this haunting spectre.

In 1972-73 when Jeevan Roy was the CITU President an interim relief of Rs.33 for the steel workers was obtained. The AITUC President S.A. Dange proposed Rs.30 as interim relief whereas the CITU counterpart proposed Rs.35. After negotiations the interim relief was fixed at Rs.33, which was 3 rupees more than Dange's proposal. This achievement helped the CITU campaign among the steel workers that the CITU could finally obtain Rs.33 as interim relief because Dange's figure happened to be three rupees less than what the workers could finally get as relief through negotiations. There is an unwritten belief that during the negotiations no bargaining group ever earns more than what it aims for. This event was an important political victory for the union in its formative years in Rourkela.
However, the SETU shot into prominence in Rourkela only when it organised a massive demonstration and strike action of about 90 per cent of the contract workers of the RSP in the summer of 1973. There was no organisation of the contract workers as late as the early 70s. The RMS was contended with its base among the permanent workers. Indeed, the RMS's recorded history of organising the contract workers begins from 1974 onwards against that of the permanent workers beginning from 1957. As late as the early 70s, there were about 10,000 contract workers. But their strength grew up rapidly from 1968 onwards. In 1968, there were about 4,000 contract workers. There was however no uniform minimum wage for them. They were getting paid Rs. 3 per day or Rs. 90 per month as compared with Rs. 200 per month of the lowest paid regular employees. The contract workers were also denied of dearness allowance, medical facilities (E.S.I.), housing allowance, retrenchment benefits, etc. The work place rules were not properly implemented in their case. Working in many hazardous jobs without gloves, safety shoes, etc., they were faced with very difficult situations in a public sector plant which for many years had been calling itself as a Model Employer.

When the CITU activists moved from basti to basti with appeals to struggle for, among other things, a uniform minimum wage for the contract workers, they received an overwhelming response in April 1973. The union first gave a call for a one-day general strike and there was spontaneous support from about 90 per cent of the contract workers. All of them participated in a huge procession stretching from the RSP Administrative building to the DLC office where the procession was ultimately headed to place its General Charter of Demands. The procession was little more than 3
kms long. The key demand was that the minimum wage of Rs. 200 per month that had been made available to the contract labourers of the Durgapur Steel Plant (DSP) should be immediately implemented in Rourkela. There were also other demands like demands for bonus, safety measures, leave, wages etc. After receiving the enthusiastic support of 90 per cent of the contract labourers on the first day of the strike, the union extended the strike for two more days and later on, declared a continuous strike for 6 days. On each day of the striking period, the union activists would visit the bastis in the early hours and bring the workers in batches to gather near the Administrative building (popularly known as the Satatala, a seven storeyed building). The workers would receive the activists in their bastis by sometimes garlanding them or by blowing on the cronchshells, thereby suggesting that good days were at last arriving in their lives. The workers also entertained hopes of regularisation, even though the union leadership did not give a call to this effect. The leaders, however, did not try to regulate such hopes and aspirations of the workers. Precisely because of this, the RMS (the recognised union) in league with the Jharkhand Party raised the slogan of their regularisation on the third day of the strike period.

The RMS slogan came at a time when Laxmidhar Biswal and Lambodar Nayak, the two key SETU leaders of the movements, were insistent that the RSP management take a decision in a day's time. N.K. Panda, the then Deputy General Manager, (an IAS cadre personnel on deputation from the State Government to work as mediator in all such conflicting issues in the RSP) asked for some more time in order to find out the conditions of the contract workers of the DSP and decide accordingly. This proposal was
turned down by Laxmidhar Biswal. An occasion for the "negotiations" and also for an introspective assessment of this mammoth spontaneous struggle was consequently lost for ever. The RSP authorities took the help of the state government machinery (the guardians of law and order) of the ADM and SP in Rourkela. Before the 6th day of the strike expired, about 100 activist workers were arrested in a swoop. The key CPI(M) leaders and union activists like Lambodar Nayak (full time), Yagnya Mohapatro (an advocate), Surendra Mudali (an advocate), Bishnu Mohanty (now advocate) were arrested on framed-up charges, under the Maintenance of Indian Security Act (MISA) and Defence of India Rules (DIR). The RMS and Jharkhand Party actively supported the state repression and involved ethnic divisions to break the solidarity among the workers. However, Laxmidhar Biswal, the Vice-President of the union and key organiser of the movement went underground. He was not to be seen in the vicinity. The leaders and activists were all terrorised. Since the chief organiser of the strike had fled, the workers too were demoralised. As a result of all these factors, the movement collapsed.

Ironically, the suppressed movement also produced certain positive results for the contract workers. The spontaneous support of 90 per cent of contract workers for the CITU-led strike and the fluttering of the red flags shook the RSP management and the RMS, the recognised union. In December 1973 they decided to enter into a tripartite agreement, the first of its kind where the contract labourers were concerned. Their wage was hiked from Rs.3 per day to Rs.5 per day, i.e., from Rs.90 to Rs.150 per month. The RSP authorities also regularised contract workers through the Employment Exchange by filling up about 700 permanent jobs where
the contract workers were previously deployed. The most active segment from within the contract workers who were with the SETU were thus absorbed in the RSP. No sooner had the union shot into pre-eminence, it reeled under the factory and state repression ably backed up by the RMS and Jharkhand Party. After this, it took the union nearly a decade's efforts to regain a semblance of its strength gained in the summer of 1973. For the historians as also for the present day union activists, the 1973 summer however left behind a rich repository of events that signalled a watershed in the left-wing politics of the steel workers of Rourkela. A new chapter was opened in the history of the contract workers' politics in the RSP. Yet, as we shall soon see, it did not mark any changes in the nature and functions of a repressive state apparatus. The management relied on the new rules of the MISA and DIR to suppress a left challenge.

After this "failure" the SETU has never called for a general strike. It has preferred to rely on partial departmental action just as the RMS. Its partial successes following this new strategy have caused it to rely on the partial strategic action rather than the general strike.

In 1974 when incentives were paid to the drivers only, the conductors were left out. The conductors went for a strike under the SETU leadership. The strike was successful. The conductors were paid incentive bonus with effect from a prospective date. Before the Emergency, during 1974-75, the SETU had very good followings among the workers of the Transport Department. In 1975, in the Central Repair Shop (CRS), a strike was declared for 11 days for incentive award, one of the major events organised by the SETU.
One of its executive committee members J. Ram along with the 6 other workers were suspended for organising the strike in the CRS.

The Emergency, 1975-77:

Just as the union was limping ahead with the regular employees of the Transport department, CRS etc., the Emergency was imposed in June 1975. It became a major weapon of the RSP management which, as it were, was waiting for such a chance to suppress the growing influence of the union among the permanent workers. The RSP authorities in collaboration with the state government machinery (the ADM and SP), as an activist said, launched full scale "terrorism" in the factory side as well as on the outside leadership of the union. The entire leadership was arrested for 19 months. Large-scale victimisation of the contract workers took place. Sarat Patro, a crane operator and an E.C. member of the SETU and Bikram Chaudhury (its General Secretary) were suspended by the RSP authorities. Jadu Mohapatro, a union secretary and Madhu Mudali, a worker activist of the Fertiliser Department were sacked. The entire union was terrorised and rendered weak.

In order to recover some of the lost ground, Laxmidhar Biswal, with the active support of the state leadership of the CITU, returned to Rourkela in 1976, after almost three years of exile. Biswal, however, continued his "cell" politics on the basis of his individual leadership. As a result, factionalism grew and challenges to his style of functioning were ensued. During the Emergency period the central directive was to operate a secret cell on the one hand and have an open office on the other. The purpose of maintaining an open office was to receive grievances of the victims of Emergency rule. But the open office was not
maintained at all. Laxmidhar Biswal constantly discouraged Hemant Patro, one of the leaders of the contract workers' movement in 1973 from doing so. Patro was constantly challenging the domineering character of Biswal who wanted the entire organisation to function under his dictate bypassing the greater involvement of the others in the decision-making. The sectarian conflicts and failure to maintain an open office of the union disengaged the attention of the activists and also the aggrieved workers.

Meanwhile, N.K. Mohanty who later became the General Secretary of the union was transferred to the RSP from the Barasuan mines in 1975. Mohanty is a ministerial employee of the RSP. He was introduced to the CPI(M)'s ideology by Laxmidhar Biswal in 1969. Prior to that he was introduced to the Marxist thought by the late Nityananda Panda, the then AITUC veteran and founder of the AITUC in the Sundargarh district. But he was persuaded by Biswal to distinguish the CPI(M) from the CPI. After going through the party literature of both the organisations, Mohanty joined the CPI(M) and later on the CITU while he was working as ministerial employee in the RSP's Barasuan mines. When he was transferred to the RSP in 1975, he found that his union was in total disarray. They key activities like Hemant Patro were already feeling isolated by the leadership of Biswal. The contract workers with whom Patro was still popular because of his role in the summer agitations of 1973 were losing interest in the union politics. So, during 1975-77 Mohanty sincerely began his efforts to put an end to the sectarian bickering and the policy of isolationism pursued by the leadership. Perhaps, for the first time the union experienced unity due to efforts by some of its members.

Another important event took place in the union's short
carrier. Its General Secretary Vikram Choudhary, under suspension from the RSP, was persuaded by the AITUC veteran Nityananda Panda to switch over to the AITUC. Following this, his suspension order was immediately revoked. It should be remembered that Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency was supported by the CPI and its affiliate bodies. In Orissa, the CPI was a coalition partner of the ruling Congress under Mrs. Nandini Satapathy's Chief Ministership. So the revoking of a suspension order was a smooth task for the AITUC.

The Period of Reorganisation 1977-1982:

When the Emergency rule was finally revoked in 1977, SETU had to choose its General Secretary. Consequent to Mohanty's unity efforts during 1975-77, N.K. Mohanty, himself a RSP employee, was now elected as the new General Secretary of the union and also chosen as a member of the Sundargarh district committee of the CITU. Laxmidhar Biswal, the then Vice-President of the union, was an admirer of Mohanty's ability to persuade the workers. Biswal however only grudgingly accepted Mohanty's success because he was not happy with Mohanty's emphasis on the collective leadership and also his help for activists like Hemant Patro whom Biswal disliked for having expressed dissent in the union. During the 1977 elections, the activists came out of their underground hideouts. The union selected seven of its activists who participated in the election campaigns of the Janata candidates, Devang Mahato and Ignesh Majhi for the MLA (open seat) and MP (reserved for ST) elections respectively.

Once the SETU's open office started functioning, contract workers slowly streamed into its office once again. In 1978-79, some contract workers of the Traffic department came to the union
office and complained that they were being paid a low bonus rate of Rs.30 whereas their counterparts doing similar job in the other departments were receiving a much higher production bonus at the rate of Rs.90. They further complained that the RMS, the only recognised union, was not willing to take up their genuine case. The union agreed to raise the bonus issue concerning about 700 contract workers of the Traffic department. The tripartite negotiation was successful. The contractors agreed to pay a bonus rate of Rs.90.

The union, however, was considerably weak up to 1980. Some contract workers attached with the Richardson and Das contractor in the RSP once approached the SETU General Secretary inside the plant. The Secretary N.K. Mohanty happened to be working inside the plant. They requested him to take up their general grievances against the concerned contractor. A General Charter of Demands was formulated and a procession of about 300 contract workers was organised inside the plant premises. On their way to place the General Charter of Demands, some activists of the main rival union RMS allegedly assaulted Mohanty inside the plant. Worker's sympathy was immediately with SETU and the intimidating tactics of the rival union got exposed. The union’s main endeavour, here, was to present a 'clean image' before the workers and regain their confidence lost after the failure of the contract workers movement in 1973. By 1980, the union re-established itself as reckoning force. It was once again accepted by the RSP for 'conciliation' on its General Charter of Demands placed in the Deputy Labour Commissioner's Office (DLC). During 1980-81, the union mustered the membership of about 800-900 contract workers.

When the construction of the Silicon Plant began in 1980,
there were about 7,000 contract workers engaged in its construction. Most of them were with the RMS, initially. They were engaged by major contractors like the Balbir Singh and Co., ECC, Davies More, Gamon India and others. While the works began in the early 1980, there was no pay hike till the end of the construction work in 1982. The SETU mobilised them on the issues of pay hike and statutory benefits. A sectional strike was encouraged by the union against each contractor's establishment. By 1982 end, about 1,500 contract workers of the Silicon Project became SETU activists.

Properly speaking the years between 1977 and 1982 were actually the period of reorganisation of the union. There was much less room left for the union to opt for general strikes as it initially did during 1971-73. In the aftermath of the state repression, the union opted for departmental partial strikes and tried gradually to consolidate its position. This new strategy helped the union partially regain its foothold among the contract workers as in the Silicon Plant construction area by 1982.

When the Silicon Plant Project however was over in 1982, the contract workers got retrenched. The union membership also dwindled. It was subsequently found that activists who came from the Silicon Project area were not politically educated. They had not been made familiar with party literature. No ideological core group had been formed amongst them. Nor were they properly informed of any review of the struggles conducted by their predecessors in the 70s. Of the total number of 1500 members of the union who came from one project area alone, many of them were from the coastal districts of Orissa. Due to the lack of their politicisation, a chance was lost to develop a radical base among
the Oriya workers of the steel plant. Once the Project work was over, the workers ceased to be workers till they got alternative jobs elsewhere. Once they ceased to be workers, the workplace struggles were also over and they stayed away from the union organisation. The union membership dwindled at once.

Sometime in the early 1983, four contract labourers attached with the contractor Balbir Singh & Co., approached the SETU to take up their cases of suspension. They were suspended due to the following sequence of events. Nearly 150 workers of the contractor concerned were agitating for bonus benefits for that year. Four of them actually took the initiative in raising the issue and organised 150 workers for the agitation. Another 150 workers owing allegiance to the recognised union RMS did not support the issue. This division among the workers weakened the agitation. Subsequently, four of them were suspended from work by the contractor concerned. They approached the General Secretary of the union to take up the issues of withdrawal of their suspension and the sanction of bonus benefit for 1983. Now, the workers owing allegiance to the RMS actively opposed SETU intervention. After a demonstration of 150 workers against the contractor, the DLC called the union for negotiations. The union cited the precedent of the bonus benefit awarded to the contract workers in the Traffic department in 1978-79. Finally, the suspension order was withdrawn and the bonus of Rs.90 for 1983 was awarded to all the workers attached with the contractor.

In 1983, factionalism resurfaced in the SETU. In fact, warring groups were formed. One worker activist of the HSL construction project was transferred to Bhilai as a punishment measure due to his errant behaviour with the Project Director. The
General Secretary (GS) of the union on verification found that the worker actually 'misbehaved' with the Director. The transfer case divided the union leadership. The younger group which basically came to the union politics from within the student movement opposed the stand taken up by the GS. The latter was supported by the senior leaders of the union. A division surfaced in the union. This division, exacerbated by other issues as we shall soon see, led to the factional rivalry and physical violence, to the extent that each group was suspected to have made attempts to liquidate the other.

Meanwhile during 1983-84, the CITU gave a call for a few independent strikes - first, an all-India strike and subsequently, two local strikes - all concerning the issues of the contract workers. In May 1983, the CITU first gave a call for one-day all-India general strike of the contract workers in the steel plants. The Rourkela unit of the CITU extended this strike for two more days. This was the first general strike of the union after 1973. This unit was agitating for (a) the departmentalisation of the contract workers, (b) wage revision and (c) sanction of house rent allowance at 10 per cent of the salary. After the second day of this strike, the recognised union RMS also issued a separate strike call and submitted a General Charter of Demands in the DLC office. The DLC called the two unions separately for conciliation. The RSP management refused to negotiate with the CITU. After few months of dilly-dally tactics deployed by the RSP, it obtained a tripartite agreement with the RMS in November 1983. The minimum wage of the contract workers was raised to Rs.425 per month or Rs.14.16 per day (inclusive of D.A.). The House Rent Allowance was fixed at Rs.15 per month. It was agreed to pay the annual bonus 2 or 3 weeks
before the Durga Puja festival every year. Finally, a list of 54 perennial jobs was prepared where the contract workers were employed. It was agreed "in principle to departmentalise these jobs in phases in consultation with the (recognised) union" (the bracket insertion is mine). The validity of this agreement was challenged by the SETU. A memorandum signed by almost all of them was placed in the DLC office. Following this, three-days long strike of the contract workers from 2nd to 4th January 1984 was successfully organised. The DLC office was gheraoed by them on 4 January 1984.

In retaliation of the SETU's successful strike the very next day about 150 people reportedly from the RMS in a pre-planned effort came in cycles from the Coke Ovens to Captive Power Plant. They covered a distance of about 2 kms armed with cycle chains and iron rods and passed through two security posts inside the plant. Their aim was to murder S.Zuber, a young contract worker and SETU activist. They gheraoed and attacked Zuber and three other SETU activists who were actually trying to contact the contractor's establishment for their re-employment in the Captive Power Plant (II). Zuber was murdered and the other two escaped. Some SETU activists were arrested and non-bail warrant was issued to the RMS activists.

Zuber was from a poor Muslim family in a village in the Sundargarh district. He had been working as a contract worker in the Captive Power Plant (II) (CPP II) since its construction began in 1983. Under Zuber's leadership in the CPP (II), about 5000 workers became CITU members. Due to their militancy, the union achieved height allowance of 10 per cent of the wagen for the works done above 10 meters of height. The contract workers also obtained
a bonus hike from less than 8.33 per cent to 15 per cent of their wages. No wonder, as a CITU leader claimed, Zuber's militancy became a major eye sore for the rival union RMS.

In 1986, the union called for a general strike of the contract workers, demanding a wage hike. Workers picketed before the main gates of the RSP. At about the same time, a strike was also organised against the death incident of a contract worker who died in an accident inside the plant. The union demanded the employment of the wife of the deceased worker. In November 1987, the construction work of the CPP (II) was over. As a result, as many as 2,500 contract workers got retrenched. Interim relief for them was demanded by the CITU. The union issued a call for a continuous strike for three days. In response to the CITU strike, the RMS also gave a call for separately a one-day strike on the same demand. Later on, the RMS extended the strike for three days. As the two different dharnas that faced each other opposite the main gate of the General administration (Satatala) were organised by the CITU and RMS, simultaneously there was almost 100 per cent involvement of the contract workers, even though their strength was politically divided. However, this simultaneous happening of the two dharnas put pressures on the contractors and the RSP authorities. As a result, with effect from October 1986, an Interim Relief of Rs. 80 per month was granted for about 7,000 contract workers. This gave an additional benefit for about 2,500 contract workers who were retrenched in November 1987.

The CITU has also conducted some legal battles. In 1983, the union filed a case in the Labour Court (Sambalpur) requesting the court to declare some jobs as departmental jobs and order the RSP to absorb all those contract workers in the departmental jobs of
the Sports Department. The RSP authorities claimed in the Court that the Sports section could not be considered as a "Department". However, in the middle of this case, the management regularised five contract workers of the Sports department. IN 1983, the CITU also filed a case in the Orissa High Court to direct the RSP to hold the Works Committee election in its factory premises according to the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The case was won in September 1988. The High Court ordered the DLC to notify the elections to the Works Committee in the RSP.

Meanwhile, many organisational weaknesses of the union surfaced. Factional rivalry created a wide chasm between the young and old generations of the union activists, though this generational divide was not really on the basis of generational issues. There were also older people supporting the younger lot. In August 1984, the General Secretary reported to the state headquarters that malignancy was growing inside the union. Some key union office bearers, he alleged, were resorting to bribery and other malpractices with regard to the grievances of the contract workers, thus creating a hiatus between the leadership and the workers. The state unit leader who was initially favourably disposed to the younger lot of the union, on the receipt of the report from the Rourkela Office, encouraged the younger leadership to file another report to the state headquarter upholding similar charges against the General Secretary. Instead of resolving the factional rivalry, the state leadership exacerbated it by his active patronage of one group against the other.

Factionalism took a new turn in 1985. In the Assembly elections in March 1985, Bishnu Mohanty, the erstwhile student leader, now an advocate and trade union activist, was the CPI(M)'s
candidate. Mohanty got 7000 odd votes from the Rourkela assembly constituency and lost the elections. The rival group within the CITU, under the active support of the state leadership of the CPI(M), used this as a pretext to label a charge against the General Secretary that he did not properly co-operate in the campaign for the assembly elections. His activity was termed as anti-party activity. K.C. Mohanty was removed from the post of General Secretary in a General Body meeting held in December '86. Since then some senior leaders, the old guards of the union, have been isolated from the union activities. The policy of isolationism pursued by the leadership during the Emergency period has now resurfaced and replaced the unity efforts of the previous leadership. This has interesting bearings on the union's everyday functioning.

The union officers are found to be functioning from separate places. While the new General Secretary and his men operate from the union office, the office bearers are available to the workers in the party office. Except on the occasions of the General Body meeting, they are engaged in routine jobs at the different places apparently because they live in the vicinity of their respective offices. But with regard to the routine activities of receiving grievances of the workers, attending to their issues and formulating redressal mechanisms, etc., the office bearers are not seen operating together from the union office. The reason for this apparent disarray could also be that each group is interested in maintaining its own control over the workers. And also, in such discrete meetings as do take place many insidious forms of control over the workers such as bribery and malpractices are possible as reported by the then General Secretary in his report to the CITU state committee in August 1984.
In the General Body Meeting on 5 January 1989 (the meeting was called to commemorate the fifth death anniversary of M. Zuber who was murdered on 5 January 1984) the CITU activists recounted that the organisational base of the union among the contract workers has been considerably eroded. Some had gone over to the AITUC. But most had left to join the Rourkela Sharmik Sangh (henceforth RSS). The contract workers earlier thought that their problem of regularisation would be solved if they supported the RSS which was fighting their cases in the Supreme Court. But the court in a recent verdict declared that the issue of regularisation of the contract workers was beyond its jurisdiction. As a result, these people realised their mistakes. However, the activists recounted that the "opportunist" leaders would not be accepted back whereas the ordinary workers would be. After the meeting was over, an activist contract worker said in a personal conversation that some workers who left the CITU for the ISS were now falling at "our" feet to take them back. They were even calling "our" members "bhai", "bapa", "babu", etc. But he said that "we" would be careful in dealing with these characters. In the course of the meeting the CITU General Secretary noted that the RSP's cluster promotion policy was being introduced to suppress the CITU only, not other organisations.

The debates between the individualist leadership and collective leadership are going on since the formation of the CITU in Rourkela in 1971. The political wing grew weak whenever the individualist leadership predominated as during the contract workers' movement in 1973, during the Emergency period and also in the mid 80s. The individualist leadership in itself might have been very active in mobilising the workers. But, as described
above, it resulted in isolating many dissenting activists who might have also individualist leadership orientations. In such situations, only collective leadership absorb these different voices as happened in the Post-Emergency period. The union was gradually reorganised to be a reckoning force in this period under the collective leadership. Before that, the union was in terrible shambles following the massive repression launched on it by the factory as well as state apparatus during 1973-77.

The individualistic leadership has acquired greater legitimacy in the CPI(M)'s Party quarters because it has followed the policy of nurturing the union as a party "cell". It has also, for the same reasons, acquired legitimacy among the workers or younger activists who came from the student front. The activists trained in the Party ideology and also with party membership are assigned privileged status in the union. The vocal activists who are not party members are constantly under pressure to enroll themselves as party members or else, are looked on with suspicion. We have stated how anti-party charges were tiraded against the former General Secretary because he did not believe in the individualistic leadership or nurture the union as party cell and also because of his alleged role in the Rourkela assembly elections contested by the CPI(M) party in 1985. In the CITU's theory, however, the union is supposed to be a mass front, not party cell. The mass front requires autonomy in many senses. This does not mean that the mass front should be apolitical in character. Among other things this means that the workers need not be necessarily members of the party and they could follow a democratic line emerging from their own experiences in the factory side and in the steel township, without waiting for the party's approval. In other words, the union needs
to grow as an autonomous factory council without losing a local or national perspective as far as the other oppressed sections of the population are concerned. The Party's burdens, electorate or otherwise, need not be transferred to a mass front. However, as the above descriptions indicate, the split between theory and practice is too deep in the CPI(M)/SETU. There are various reasons for this. One of them is that the union has been too deeply steeped within the politics of economism and parliamentary cretenism, losing sight of the finer aspects of a political line forever, perhaps.

As we noted above, the contract workers got immense economic benefits and statutory facilities throughout the union's politics over time. In fact, due to its two very important agitations, the one in 1973 and the other in 1983, some contract workers were regularised. The RSP was forced to arrive at tripartite agreements with the recognised union RMS. And, out of a total of 370 agreements, till the end of 1987, only two agreements dealt with the contract workers. It must be remembered that these agreements were signed with the RMS, only after the CITU's fluttering of the red flags raised by about 90 per cent of the contract workers on each occasion.

Starting from its inception in 1971 till now the union has been conducting struggles by and large around economic issues. During the periods of its ascendancy in the early 70s and early 80s, it concentrated on the issues like proper manning of regular jobs as in the Traffic department in 1971, uniform minimum wages for the contract workers in 1973 and wage hikes for them in the Silicon Plant in 1982, the bonus benefits for the contract labourers of Traffic in 1978-79 and for the ones attached with
Balbir Singh and Company in 1983, and for contract labourers of the CPP (II) in 1983. The union organised the contract workers of all the steel industries for regularisation, wage revision, house rent, etc., in 1983. It also fought for allowances such as bonus, height allowance, interim relief for the contract workers during 1983-86. Thus the contract workers of the steel plant(s) got many statutory benefits and also departmental jobs in the course of their struggles guided by the local leadership as well as the central leadership of the CITU. However, in Rourkela no political commitment grew from among the contract workers led by the CITU. So the union membership rose or fell according to the waves of statutory benefits the organisation could marshal for the workers. Also, once they were out of the jobs, the contract workers were also out of the sights of the union politics, as it happened on the completion of the construction works of the CPP (II) in 1987. It is clear that the politics of the union has only concerned itself with immediate questions arising out of the work places, and not really concerned itself with larger issues.

While explaining the trends in rise and fall of the union membership, one union office bearer argued that the current low membership was due to the fact that once the project works were over, the contract workers were left with no employment. So the struggles at the work places ceased. He said that the low membership of the union had no relationship with the politics espoused by union. Implicit in this sort of explanation is the attempt to wish away the possibility of politicisation of the workers which also would set in motion a durable process of political commitment among them. During the periods of CITU's ascendancy, there were chances for the union to exercise such a
possibility of political education of the workers. Except for a
few feeble attempts by Jangya Mohapatra to educate the workers
staying in the jhopsis inside the plant these chances were by and
large few and soon lost forever. We have already described above
how these chances were unutilised in the course of the struggles of
contract works in the early 70s and early 80s.

Moreover, no review of the past and present struggles of
the workers has been ever made. Proper lessons have not been
learnt from the major struggles which have led to the defeats of
the crucial left-wing challenges, consequently leading to the
imposition of immense hardships on the workers. That is the main
reason why the individualist leadership and its policy of
isolationism has re-surfaced in the CITU's recent past. No
wonder, its debilitating effects on the working class movement in
the past are not commonly known to the present generation of
workers and activists. Indeed, a senior level activist could trace
the union's history to the post-Emergency days, not to the pre-
Emergency period. This policy has also affected the method of
functioning inside the organisation.

Undemocratic method in formulating the General Charter of
Demands (GCD) has been experienced. There were occasions when some
workers challenged the validity of the GCD formulated by the
leadership that had not consulted them. No detailed discussion of
the class character of demands was ever organised. In the absence
of such discussions on the GCD, illusions or false hopes were
generated as in the course of the contract workers' movement in
1973 and 1983-84. When the union was demanding uniform wages or
higher wage, the workers entertained hopes of regularisation. Such
illusions were also responsible for the debacle of the political
wing of the union. Thus, the policy of economism has its inherent political limits.

As the above discussions show the electioneering, another very important political process, has affected the union's organisational structure. In the 1973 Assembly elections, the then General Secretary was denied the Party ticket. Among the other things, this issue contributed to his alienation from the union. Following the 1985 Assembly elections, the then General Secretary was charged with anti-party activities for allegedly soft-peddling his involvement in the electoral campaign of the Party candidate. So he was removed from the post and subsequently isolated by the Union office bearers. The CPI(M)'s electoral considerations have affected the CITU's politics, thus undermining the mass front character of the trade union body. We have highlighted this point earlier as well. These facts also indicate how the electoral considerations have emerged to predominate the union's strategic thinking. Because of electoral considerations the activists could be given pre-eminence or remain isolated for ever. And the union is geared to function only as the Party's instrument during the election campaign. The union activists are isolated when the party is defeated in the elections. Instead of being a mass front of the workers, the union has been converted to a Party cell. Instead of emphasising the pre-eminence of the union's organisational unity, necessary for the non-electoral struggles of the working class, the electoral considerations have been accorded primary status. As a result, key activists could be isolated for ever on the electoral issues, without the union showing any respect to their track records in maintaining the organisational unity necessary to build the working class movement. Thus, the elections, a mere a tactical
issue, have become more important than the movement and have been fetishised as if they were strategically important.

Explaining the above process, a veteran socialist leader L.N. Behera said that in the past a few eminent communist leaders like Prananath Patnaik used to emphasise that the masses and the mass fronts must be considered more important than the Party. But gradually this perspective has been replaced by the Party fetishism which has converted the masses and their fronts into appendices of the/a Communist Party. As a result, the elections have become more important than the struggles leading to a considerable weakening of struggles and affecting the organisational unity of the party. What is considered a tactic in theory has indeed become a strategy in practice. The above discussions of the CITU have amply demonstrated the manifest practice of parliamentary cretenism.

III

The UTUC (Lenin-Sarani):

The United Trade Union Congress (Lenin Sarani) (henceforth, UTUC), the trade union wing of the "genuine" Communist Party, the Socialist Unit Centre of India (henceforth SUCI) was formed in Rourkela in 1956. The Rourkela branch of the UTUC is known as the Rourkela Workers Union (RWU) registered in May 1957. In the beginning its leadership was chiefly constituted by Bengali refugees. People like Tapas Dutt and Sukomal Sen established the union. There were also few leaders from the local area. In the entire history of the union formation and working class movement in Rourkela, this is the only union which has had a local adivasi
Samuel Toppo as one of its key leaders since its establishment. Also, as we shall see, in the course of its history, few semi-skilled workers like Sheikh Kasim have graduated from the local leadership to the state leadership of the union. One of its founders Tapas Dutt has now moved to the central committee of the union. So this union's history is, in some senses, significantly tied up with the intellectual formation of the working class in Rourkela. It is thus necessary to examine its political history in some details.

The union formation began with a massive demonstration of the displaced communities. In 1956 when Prime Minister Nehru visited Rourkela, the union and party together organised a huge protest rally of about ten thousand people affected by the industrialisation in the Rourkela region. The rally stretched out over about 7 kms long from Bandamunda to Raghunath Palli in Rourkela. Their main demands were land and jobs for the displaced communities. Samuel Toppo emerged as a major organiser of the displaced adivasis. Even though in the public meeting Nehru promised the local displaced people that their demands would be met, the rally was not allowed to proceed to the middle of the steel town where Nehru was to hold his public meeting. The official meeting place was about 7 kms away from the location where the protest rally was held up by the military police.

During the construction phase of the steel plant 1956–59, the union organised many strikes of the contract workers against the construction companies like the Hot Strip India, Gamon India, Larson and Tubro, East and West Co., Uttam Singh Duggal, Auto India, Sindri Fertilizer Co., Rourkela Construction Co. etc. The main demands at that time were concerned with the implementation of
the Factory Act, Industrial Disputes Act, Compensation Act, etc., which were being openly flouted by these construction merchants. The seven days long strike by 17,000 contract workers against the Hot Strip India in 1958 was particularly remarkable. The strike was successful. A tripartite agreement with Hot Strip India was achieved on the issues of the implementation of different labour laws. This was the first major success of the union.

Following this, the union participated in a joint movement of the Passed Out Trainees (trained in the TISCO and recruited in the RSP as foremen) for their stipend and hostel facilities. The AITUC and RMS also participated in this agitation. Because of the united strength of the movement, this too was successful.

In the early 60s, the union had a few remarkable successes in the Fertilizer Plant of the RSP. There were about 7000 workers in the Fertilizer Plant. By organising the workers on the basis of sectional demands pertaining to the implementation of labour laws, the union could muster the support of about 4000 workers of the Fertilizer Plant. However, just when the union was trying to consolidate its strength among the permanent workers of the RSP, a fatal event took place in the union's short career in 1964. Under the impact of massive communal riots in 1964, the union however lost its entire base in the Fertilizer Plant (see Chapter 1). When the riots broke out in October 1964, about 400 worker activists of the union actively participated in the riots and subsequently pleaded before the union leadership to rescue them from the clutches of the police cases. The workers thought that since they defended the "cause" of Bengali refugees of the 60s and the union leadership was constitutive of the Bengali refugees of the 40s, the union leaders would come to their rescue. On the other hand, some
union leaders being Bengali refugees, the local police thought they had encouraged the rioting and put them in the police custody for their alleged involvement in instigating the union workers to participate in the riots. Tapas Dutt, the General Secretary of the union was arrested and kept in the policy custody. He was released only after Malati Choudhury and Nabakrushna Choudhury (the former Chief Minister), two most respected socialist couple in Orissa, intervened. A peace committee was soon convened by Tapas Dutt. Both the Choudhurys joined the peace committee. They moved from one village to another — Bonal, Lathikata, Chandiposa, Dungripara — and conducted relief operations in all the villages and Rourkela townships. However, the secularist campaign against the communal riots jointly engineered by the RSS and Gurudwar was not effective. In the aftermath of this holocaust in the Rourkela region, the union found that its major base built over the years during 1959-64 among 4000 workers of the RSP was altogether liquidated in October 1964.

The union slowly tried to recover from this cultural shock. During 1969-71 when N.Jena, a local advocate, was its General Secretary the union conducted some important movements in and around the RSP. In 1971, it participated jointly with the AITUC in the Traffic movement demanding better manning (the details of this famous strike are given above in our profile of the CITU, for the CITU was actually formed from within this movement in 1971). Though the traffic movement failed, and its leader K.C.Mohanty (later joined the CITU) was dismissed from the service, the movement helped reestablish the militant image of the UTVC (LS) and regain the confidence of the workers after that massive demoralising effect in 1964. In 1971, the union also organised a
strike for about 6 days demanding the wage revision of regular employees in the Prabhat Iron Foundry, a small scale private industry in Rourkela. On the sixth day of the strike, the management in collusion with the local police ordered firing on the workers sitting in dharna. Dharma Ram and Aminulla Khan, two worker activists were killed on the spot and S.P.Tripathy, the present General Secretary, was injured on his legs. Tripathy was dismissed from the service in 1971 and has been working on a full time basis since then.

The story of the union, however, is not simply struggle, sacrifice and defeat since 1964. During 1971-75, before the Emergency the SUCI embarked on a cadre-building campaign. In 1972 in the Cold Rolling Mill (CRM), the union conducted a bonus movement demanding production per month for the CRM workers. A successful political campaign was conducted and the RSP management conceded the bonus rate. Following this, the process of cadre building began. Discussion of party literature especially the weekly "Proletarian Era" was conducted in the study circles among the CRM workers. This sort of sustained campaign paid political dividends in the 4th elections to the Works Committee in 1972. Abhiram Routray, the Union’s present Vice-President was elected from the CRM as its representative to the fourth Works Committee.

On the eve of the Emergency in June 1975, the union organised a "canteen movement" protesting against the low quality of the food served in the canteens. The RSP management came down heavily on this movement by dismissing R.L.Gavani, an union activist and employee in the Canteen division of the steel plant.

The union has also organised democratic mass movement(s)
outside the factory system. Such issues are not directly related to the industrial relations of the RSP. Nonetheless, these issues are linked to the lived experiences of the steel workers and the general public of the steel township. In 1969, the union participated in a joint movement popularly known as Talcher-Bimalagarh rail link agitation. In 1970, the union participated in another joint movement with the PSP, SP and non-Congress parties demanding a second steel plant in Orissa. In 1973 when the steel plant management began the construction work of a swimming pool in the Sector 8 of the steel town, the union organised a dharna exposing the culture of nudism and obscenity which might spread due to the swimming pool inside the steel township. In 1978, the union organised an independent mass movement involving the workers and students demanding that coke be supplied at the doorstep of the worker's quarters. The dharna was organised before the Administrative Building of the RSP. At that time, coal used to be collected from the central depot. Very often, the housewives of the employees working on shift duty used to visit the depot to fetch coal and face all kinds of harassment. As a sequel to an alleged molestation case in the Depot, the union organised the dharna. At one moment of the dharna, the CISF cordon near the main gate of the Administrative Building was broken by the activists who were charged with emotional issues such as the security of the women. The RSP authorities immediately conceded to the system of home delivery of coke as demanded by the union.

The union has also tried to reinforce a democratic culture in the steel town. In 1971, the union resisted the enacting of a drama called "Byavichhar" (Injustice) at the civic centre of the town. There were several vulgar posters being displayed throughout
the town. Paradoxically, the ADM (Rourkela) was acting in the
drama. After the protests, the posters were withdrawn. On the
previous two occasions in 1969 and 1971, there were ethnic tensions
between Oriyas and Bengalis in Rourkela. Anti-Bengali sentiments
were invoked by "Nilachakra", an Oriya chauvinist organisation (See
Chapter 1). The union along with other progressive organisations
had opposed such divisive efforts. In November 1984 when anti-
Sikh sentiments became pervasive following the assassination of
Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the union organised communal harmony conventions
and peace committees. In order to protect the Sikhs from the
assaults in the nights, the union organised Night Guards in the
steel town.

At the time of our field investigation, the union was busy
organising Department Committees opposing the Cluster Promotion
Policy of the RSP. It was discussing the character of this policy
in the different department committees. Apart from these specific
issues on which the union conducts study circles time to time, it
also organises Sunday study circles as part of its education
programme for the workers/activists. In such study circles, the
party literature especially its weekly newspaper Proletarian Era
(a Calcutta publication) is usually discussed. As a result, the
union has been able to evolve a leadership from the steel workers
of various categories including the lower grades. Initially it
produced an adivasi leader like Samuel Toppo. It has helped a
semi-skilled worker Sheik Kasim, a local Muslim peasant, to
graduate into the state leadership. After his dismissal from the
RSP, Kasim has been working as a full timer. After removal from
the factory service, S.P. Tripathy, also a local person, was
absorbed as a full timer. Now Tripathy, earlier a skilled worker,
has graduated to be the General Secretary of the union. Tapas Dutt who established the local unit in 1957 has now moved to the central committee of the union (at Calcutta). However, the union's record in preparing the workers/activists for intellectual/political leadership is very badly tarnished in the case of what turns out to be the most astounding victimisation of Sardar Mehman Singh who was forced to work as a "bonded labour" of the RSP simple because he fluttered the red flag of the union in the early 60s and ironically the same union abandoned his case after briefly pursuing it till 1971.

We have already elaborated the circumstances in which Mehman Singh was put to suffer by the RSP (see Chapter 1). We have also discussed why the union abandoned his case after his courageous challenge to Sibdas Ghosh, the "demi-god" of the SUCI (see the Chapter beginning). Mehman Singh who has even now sympathies for all "red-flags" was branded as "naxalite" by his union in the early 70s. As long as B.Jena, the then General Secretary, was alive he was sympathetic towards Mehman Singh's case. After his death in 1971, the new leadership discovered that the Sardar had connections with a few young "naxal" boys of the Regional Engineering College, Rourkela. After a warning, he was abandoned by the union for ever. Mehman Singh argued how could he disassociate from these boys who were eager to know about "communism" and the working class movement in Rourkela. However, a culture of deafness had already engulfed the union especially after his "fatal" confrontation with Sibdas Ghosh. So the union did not listen to his pleas. Mehman Singh's case amply demonstrates a classic case of betrayal of a worker simply because he proved to be a dissenting voice within the union. His case also shows how the "spectre" of naxalism haunted the UTUC (LS) as well.
The above discussions of the three leftwing trade unions show that these unions have been treated as the "common enemy" by the RSP management. There has been massive repression of their "legitimate" industrial actions such as the strike for higher wages, higher bonus or reorganisation of the work place or manning. The RSP management in collision with the local state power, the ADM office and SP office, frequently framed "lal Jhanda" activists under the MISA and DIR and paralysed their political pursuits. Many of them were often branded as naxalites because of their militancy. The workers were warned by the RSP against any association with them. Thus the RSP authorities following a repressive policy did not discriminate between the "lal jhanda" unions because they all professed "communism". However, as against the RSP's uniform treatment of the "lal jhanda" unions, their union leaders responded with the sectarian modes of struggle. They were more bothered about their own bases in order to strengthen the positions of their respective parent communist parties. For they essentially worked as "party cells" rather than as "mass fronts". So the interests of these workers were substituted by party interests. That was why all the "lal jhandha" union leaders admitted that there were not enough joint action programmes among them.

Interestingly, as the above discussions show, the left unions fought for similar issues such as minimum wage hikes, manning, bonus and also adopted the similar organisational methods like strike, demonstration, gherao. And they appealed to the same sections of the workers. Yet they divided the worker's struggles under the different "banners" simply because these unions belonged
to the different parties. As a result, under the increasing repression by the factory and state apparata, the left unions meekly succumbed. They never really possessed the united strength of their followers much to the chagrin of the workers like Mehman Singh (of the UTUC) or N.K.Mohanty (of the CITU) or S.K.Kabi (of the AITUC). Their lack of united strength on the other proved to be a source of strength for the RSP management which celebrated its victory in conceding to some interests of the workers, after ruthlessly suppressing the agitations led by these unions as in the early 60s, 70s and 80s.

There is another dimension, viz., the individualist leadership of these unions which has weakened their inner strength. As stated in the previous sections, the individualist leadership as it emerged in the CITU and the UTUC failed to absorb the dissenting voices and fostered acute factionalism within the CITU. As a result of this individualist leadership, whenever the concerned leaders shifted their union base, the unions grew weak. When Nityananda Panda and his group migrated from the AITUC to the INTUC, the left union experienced a vacuum in its leadership. During the brief spell of a collective leadership of the CITU in the aftermath of the Emergency rule, the union could reorganise itself and hold together the different factions. However, this did not last long, for the collective leadership was emphasised by an individual leader! Once the concerned leader was replaced, factional rivalry resurfaced in the most acute form possible, with threats of physical liquidation of the factionalists.

Due to the absolute lack of political education of both the leaders and the workers of these unions, they lacked a broad political vision. Moreover, some senior leaders are not even fully
aware of the entire history of their respective organisations. Or else they wish to forget the unpleasant past. One senior worker leader of the CITU could trace the union's history beginning from the post-Emergency period because he found it convenient to narrate the union's "achievements" during this period. In the pre-Emergency period, the union's history is full of failures, not achievements. So he conveniently underplayed this past simply because of the lack of knowledge that even the "failures", as Rosa Luxemberg said, have political value. This aspect was however underlined very neatly in the narrative of the CITU given by the other activists like N.K. Mohanty. Mohanty incidentally has been marginalised by the organisation, thus blocking the transmission of valuable political knowledge down the generations.

The present General Secretary A.C. Roy (CITU) in a General Body meeting attended by about 50 workers and activists said that the cluster promotion policy was being introduced to suppress the CITU, and not the other unions. This sort of assessment of management policy ignores the fact that the opposition to the cluster policy was emerging from the quarters of the workers belonging to the AITUC, UTUC and even the RMS which was a party to the agreement as far as this policy was concerned. His speech thus smacked of a terrible sectarian outlook. One middle aged contract worker belonging to the union said that all those contract workers who earlier left for the AITUC and were now "begging" to be taken back, should fall at "our" feet after which they would be taken back in "our" union. This sort of consciousness underlines the fact that due to the lack of political education the workers also exhibit sectarian loyalties. They thus simply forget that the contract workers belonging to the AITUC are also their colleagues in the
same work process controlled by the one and the same RSP management which, as shown above, does not in any case discriminate between the CITU and AITUC. However, in the exceptional cases of the worker activists like Mehman Singh, the red flags have only one and the same good sense: communism. For the RSP management on the other the red flags have the only one and the same bad sense: communism.