CHAPTER 3

Political Parties and Trade Unions

Labour movement in India has been greatly influenced by and closely associated with the freedom movement. Leaders of the independence movement have also been the leaders of the labour movement and have done pioneering work in establishing trade unions. Till the achievement of independence, trade unions were almost completely dominated by the political movement. At present, although some inside leadership has emerged, yet a majority of the unions continue to be dominated by outsiders, who are, more often than not, political workers. The trade unions are bound to be interested in politics as many of their demands can be achieved only through political support. Issues involved may have therefore, to be brought to the attention of political parties and attempts made, from within these parties, to secure their support. The success with which they can do so is largely dependent on their relationship with the political parties.

I. DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE

As stated above, the Indian trade union movement has been strongly influenced by the national political leaders. This influence has been one of the determining factors in shaping the course of the trade union movement in Delhi area. Delhi's leaders of national fame, particularly Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. Ansari, Swami Shradhanand and Mr. Asaf Ali always attracted large number of workers to their meetings and enlisted the support of many of these for their political work. But the organizational aspect of the labour movement did not receive their attention. This fell to the lot of secondary level of leadership. Since the Socialist and Communist parties functioned within the Indian National Congress and maintained a 'United Front' till the late thirties, labour organisation was formally undertaken by them on behalf of the Congress. Separate organization of unions was started by the Communist Party in 1942, after 'the removal of the Congress leadership from the field, during 'Quit India' movement. The Communists developed unions in different
industries and maintained their hold on them throughout the Second World War. On their release from prison, after the war, the Congress and Socialist leaders became active in the field and soon won over municipal employees' unions. A bitter struggle for leadership followed in the C.P.W.D. Worker's Union, but the Communists were successful in retaining their hold. Unions in textile industry were organized by the Congress Socialist leaders, who on secession of the Socialist Party from the Congress got their unions affiliated to the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Subsequently, a split occurred in the Socialist ranks and a big majority of their following went over to the Communist unions. The Congress leaders, organized unions on behalf of the INTUC. By 1953, Delhi had Congress, Communist and Socialist dominated unions. This pattern continues till today.

The Congress leadership in the thirties and the early forties comprised of men and women who could be divided in two distinct groups. One group comprised of senior men who enjoyed national fame and status. They belonged to well-to-do urban families and were of very high intellectual calibre. They had considerable mass appeal, but cared little for organizational work. The other group consisted of a band of young leaders who came from rural Delhi or from lower middle class urban families. They had average education and were only locally known. They carried the full burden of organising, promoting and running the Congress Party machinery in Delhi. For all the work that they did, they received little recognition from their senior leaders. This gave rise to dissatisfaction amongst these workers who formed themselves into a group in 1946, in order to strengthen their position. They divided the work of organisation of unions amongst themselves. This group, later on, secured a complete hold on different sectors of the Congress organisation in Delhi.

Gradually, the situation changed. Some of the senior leaders died, while others took offices with the Central Government of two leaders on the labour front, one went over to the Praja Socialist Party and the other to the Communist Party. They carried most of their following with them. Those who remained in the Congress, became party bosses, took offices with the government and were also aligned with
new colleagues for work on the labour front. Thus, some members of the 'old group' changed political faith but retained their personal loyalties to one another. Some of the developments in the sphere of politics and trade unionism in the last ten years in the city can be understood only in the context of these personal loyalties. Thus the move to organise the local branch of the INTUC was opposed by the local Congress chief as he thought that this might weaken the position of his former colleagues who were now working in rival trade union organizations. When the branch was eventually organized, mainly, due to the efforts of national leaders, a bitter struggle within the party followed. It still continues. There has been a heavy turn-over in the leadership of the local INTUC. In contrast to this, the Communist leadership has been stable and continuous. The workers stuck to the unions that organised and in most of the cases, they still continue to be with them.

The principal national political parties, namely, the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India, the Praja Socialist Party, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh and Bhartiya Janata Party have the national headquarters and regional offices in Delhi. Each one of these political parties is known to be closely associated with a national federation of trade unions; the Congress with the INTUC, the Communist Party with the AITUC, the Praja Socialist Party with the HMS and the Jan Sangh with the Rashtrya Mill Mazdoor Sangh. The UTUC, another federation of trade unions, also maintains its regional offices in Delhi. The INTUC and AITUC their central offices in Delhi. The plethora of offices of Political parties and trade unions has resulted in a heavy concentration of political and trade union leaders in Delhi. The relationships between fraternal 'parties' and 'unions' are channelized through these offices and leaders.

II. PARTY-UNION RELATIONSHIPS

The types of relationships found to be existing between the trade unions and the political parties could be classified into three main groups. The differences between these are only of degree and not of kind. Firstly, there are the 'dependent
unions’, that are completely dominated by the political parties. Such unions accept
the leadership of their parent political parties in matters of policy and function as
labour wings of the parties concerned. The second type comprises of those unions
that function within the ‘sphere of influence’ of the political parties. Unions of this type
are semi-independent, but they lean heavily on parties for guidance in all important
matters. Finally, there are ‘independent unions’ that maintain close relationship with
political parties. This relationship is characterized by mutual understanding and non-
interference.

III. DEPENDENT UNIONS

As stated earlier, the unions of this type function as, labour wings of the
parties whose leadership they accept. These unions are organised by the political
parties either directly, or through one of the trade unions dominated by them. The
organisation of these unions is always by persons from outside the ranks of workers.
Political workers hold key positions in the unions and control the administration and
finance of the unions. One of the rank and file members may be elected as the union
president, but real power is retained by the union secretary who is a party man. Party
workers are also given other key positions in the union. Apparently, the members of
the union have a right to free speech, but this does not mean much as all vital
information on union matters is withheld from them. Such unions often claim that
they are most democratic. Theoretically this is true. The supreme authority is
generally vested in the ‘General Body’ or ‘Delegates’ Council’ which is constituted of
delegates elected by the members. Usually, it is a large body and meets once or
twice a year. The party controlled administrative machinery of the unions makes
available to the members, carefully screened information and only information
approved by the party reaches the hands of the delegates. The policy decisions are
taken beforehand in the party office by the top leaders of the party. A formal approval
of the union members is obtained on these decisions by carefully manoeuvring them
through the general body of the union. Thus, the participation of members in policy-
making is limited and chances of my opposition developing within the organisation.
are greatly reduced. Party leaders continue to hold offices in these unions for long periods of time and eventually, the unions come to be identified with the names of these leaders. The political parties prefer to have their workers working on the trade union front, rather than having trade unionist working in alliance with them.

Finance is another important tool of controlling the unions. The records of the old Textile Labour Union show that its income through subscriptions seldom went beyond Rs.600/- a year as against yearly expenses running into thousands. The difference was met by the Congress Party. Similarly, the Communist Party granted Rs.13,000/- to the C.P.W.D. Worker’s Union in 1946. In the early stages of union organisation, the parties not only send organisers who are on its pay-roll, but also provide them with almost all the funds necessary for carrying out their work. However, the parties expect the unions to become financially independent and subscribe to the party funds.

Industrial unions generally have centralized financial control and are favoured by political parties. Factory branches and area committees raise the funds and pass them on to the central office. The latter reallocates the funds to its constituents. Thus the control over collections, bookkeeping distribution and spending of funds is retained by the central office. The central office thus can and often does force the branches to fall in line with its policies.

IV. SEMI-INDEPENDENT UNIONS

The unions functioning within the ‘sphere of influence’ of political parties are characterized by a close liaison that they maintain with these parties. These are the unions that have come into existence, mainly, as a result of organizational effort from the ranks of workers themselves. Political leaders hold only prestige positions in the union organization. As such, the administration and finance of the union are entirely in the hands of the internal leadership. All decisions are taken by the union itself, but these usually reflect the line of the political party with which the union is associated.
Before taking any major decisions, the union leaders consult the leaders of the fraternal political party. These unions receive moral and material help from political parties and they, in turn, rally round these parties whenever the need arises. Unless the members are active and vigilant, unions of this type are likely to lose their independence.

A large number of factory unions in the newspaper, printing and engineering industries are under the sphere of influence of political parties. Union offices are held by 'insiders', but many of these are frequent visitors to the offices of various political parties. Some of them sell party literature in their spare time. Political leaders are invited to address union meetings. But this relationship really comes to the forefront when a union faces a crisis. A political party will go all out to help a fraternal union. It may use high pressure diplomacy to influence the employer in favour of the union. Its leaders may rally round public opinion for the union, by discussing the situation in the public, in press and whenever possible, in the legislatures. The managements of the factories where these unions exist have to take into consideration the nature of the political backing available to their unions.

The unions of this type are not always at the receiving end. Occasionally, they help the political parties with which they are associated. During general elections, union work is suspended and union workers devote their time in electioneering for the party candidates. In one case, at the time of elections, a union called upon its members to vote for a particular candidate and also to contribute five rupees each to his election fund. While this study was in progress, a number of unions joined together to give a public reception to the Communist Chief Minister of Kerala. Later on, when the anti-Communist front organized by the Congress was carrying on a campaign for the removal of the Communist Government in Kerala, many other unions collected funds and held meetings in support of this campaign.
V. INDEPENDENT UNIONS

The third type comprises of those unions that are independent. While these too have contacts with political parties, there is a tacit understanding between union leaders and party leaders, that the latter will not interfere in union work and will respect the wishes of the unions. Some of the union leaders may be politically active, but this does not significantly affect their work in the unions. These unions make it known that help from political sources will be appreciated only when requested. Union officers try to maintain good relationship with leaders of different political parties. However, decisions within the union are not normally influenced by political considerations.

Unions of this type have come into existence through the process of self-organisation. These organisations are often joined together in a federation. Some of these unions are affiliated to national federations. In these unions, professional and trade interests take precedence over regional and political considerations. They are also marked by active membership participation in union affairs and security in respect of funds.

In Delhi region, these unions are found amongst white collar employees in banks, insurance companies, commercial houses and retail trade. There is also a local federation of seven occupational unions in the textile industry. There are over twenty unions of bank employees in Delhi. They are affiliated to the All India Bank Employees' Association, which has leftist leanings. Smaller local units, conscious educated membership, regular subscription, secure finances and stable leadership have helped these unions in maintaining their independence.