

CHAPTER 12

United Trade Union Congress and Others

Although the United Trade Union Congress is recognized by the Government of India as one of the four representative all-India federations, in fact, it is a force to be reckoned with only in West Bengal, Kerala and to a lesser extent in Bihar. About half of its membership is in West Bengal and most of the rest is in Kerala. As a consequence the organization tends to be dominated by Bengalis and to a lesser extent by members from Kerala.

Bengal has a revolutionary tradition. Terrorist methods were used against the British particularly after the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905. A number of terrorist organizations were organized at that time and various assassinations took place. Later the nationalist movement in Bengal was led by Subhas Chandra Bose whose ideas had little in common with the non-violence propagated by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers elsewhere. The final rift between Bose and Gandhi came in 1940 and after that Bose was associated with the Indian National Army. Thus in addition to its revolutionary tradition, Bengal also had a sense of being separate from the nationalist movement in the rest of India.

I. THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST PARTY

In other parts of India the Congress Socialist Party became the rallying point for the leftist and Marxist elements in the nationalist movement. But in Bengal the CSP failed to build a strong organization largely because a number of similar organizations were already in existence, having grown out of the old revolutionary associations dating back to the turn of the century. Just as the CSP had a separate organization but still remained within the Congress, so the Bengali groups were also separate but within Congress. Unlike the CSP which accommodated a variety of opinion and philosophy within its ranks, the Bengali groups, which grew out of closely-knit terrorist organizations, demanded strict ideological conformity of their members. They were usually influenced by the communist revolution in Russia and

particularly by Lenin's theories regarding the revolutionary party. Politically there was little to distinguish one group from another, the differences being mainly 'metaphysical.' The main groups that have been active in the 'UTUC are the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Bolshevik Party of India.

The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)¹ had its antecedents in the Anushilan terrorist group. In the 1930's it became known as the Hindustan Republican Socialist Army and as its activities were appropriate to the name, most of its leaders were held in gaol. Upon their release in 1938, they re-named themselves as the Revolutionary Socialist Party and produced a thesis which called for "communism and classless society.' The party was 'revolutionary' in that it believed that final victory would

. . . assume the form of a dictatorship i.e. it is inevitable bound to rely on military force, on the arming of the masses and not on institutions established by lawful' and 'peaceful' means.

That its inspiration was derived from outside India was indicated by the statement that the thesis

. . .recognizes the USSR as the base of the coming Socialist World. Revolution and seeks to defend it from external attacks.. . .

However, when in 1941, Russia was attacked by Germany, the RSP rejected the CPI's policy of collaboration with the British on the grounds that only a communist India could give aid to Russia. After Mao Tse-tung came to power in China and the CPI changed to 'Maoist' policies, the RSP continued to uphold the 'Revolutionary Socialist Way posed by Marx, Engels and Lenin' as opposed to the "new fangled China Way of Mao Tse-tung and Cominform.'

II. SPLIT IN THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST PARTY

¹ See M. Winer, op. cit., pp. 119-122, 135-136.

In about 1948 a split occurred in the RSP which resulted in a minority group leaving it and forming the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI). The rebels accused the RSP leadership of resorting to 'mechanical centralism' instead of 'democratic centralism' in order to put forward their 'Trotskyite' policies. The SUCI is proud of being a 'Stalinist' party and claims to have been among the first parties to attack Krushchev's 'revisionism.'¹

At the end of the 1940's the RSP lost the SUCI but it gained a branch in Kerala. The leftist group that eventually joined the RSP was originally active in the CSP in Kerala. Finding the CSP insufficiently militant they formed the Kerala Socialist Party which nearly succeeded in assassinating the Diwan of Travancore-Cochin, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar. Although close to the CPI, they disapproved of the policies pursued by the communists after 1941 and also of the Telangana policies in 1948. Not wanting to be isolated from national politics they found in the RSP of Bengal a like-minded group and merged with it.²

III. THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA

The Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCP)³ is essentially a Bengali party. It was founded by Saumyen Tagore who had been a member of the communist group in Calcutta in the 1920's. Tagore opposed the 'ultra-leftism' of Comintern after 1929 and founded the RCPI in 1934. Tagore strongly criticized Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939 and the Russian attack on Finland. His party supported the 'Quit India' movement.

IV. THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY OF INDIA

The Bolshevik Party of India⁴ had its origins in the Bengal Labour Party which was founded in 1933. The party was closely associated with the Communist Party. In the expectation of war and the suppression of their party, N. Dutt Majumdar, its

¹ Interview with member of the SUCI in the party office in Calcutta, March 1965.

² N. Sreekantan Nair, *in interview*, New Delhi, March 1965.

³ See M. Weiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

leader, created an underground wing which was known as the Bolshevik Party. In 1939 the Bolshevik Party became active. In 1941 Majumdar broke with the communists and supported the 'Quit India' resolution of 1942, but the Bolshevik Party continued to associate with the communists and also adopted the slogan of the 'People's War.' Majumdar himself left the party and later became a minister in the West Bengal government, leaving the leadership in the hands of the trade unionist, Biswanath Dubey.

In addition to these parties which took their unions into the UTUC there were two other similar parties in West Bengal, the Subhasist Forward Bloc which became associated with HMS and the Marxist Forward Bloc which remained in AITUC.

These left-wing parties in West Bengal had much in common with each other. Each had some sort of militant, revolutionary tradition. They were all influenced by Marxist political theory but for various reasons could not remain within the CPI. Except for the Bolshevik Party, they all differed from the CPI in its attitude to the war after 1941 but in addition each had doctrinal differences with the CPI and Comintern which to the outsider appear minor but which to the members of the party were the very basis for the existence of their party. And each party had doctrinal differences with every other leftist party. Thus although on most of the immediate issues facing India after 1945 the leftist parties had an identical approach, they were unable to unite. Myron Weiner suggests that the continued separation of these parties must be explained in psychological terms rather than in terms of political doctrine. It would also appear to be the case that the Calcutta environment is in some way conducive to the formation of factions in all types of organizations.¹

V. POLITICAL IMPACT OF UTUC

A rough index of the political strength of these organizations shortly after the foundation of UTUC, was revealed by their polling in the 1951-52 general election. Of the valid votes cast in contested constituencies for the West Bengal Legislative

¹ Indeed this fissiparous tendency is ubiquitous in Calcutta; and whether it be a school or a college committee, the board of directors of a bank or an insurance company, the presidium of a learned society or an academy of art, would be dictators are ever faced with potential insurrectionists—Sudhin Datta, 'The World's Cities: Calcutta' Encounter, June 1957.

Assembly the CPI polled 10.76 per cent, the KMPP 8.47 per cent and the Socialist Party 2.98 per cent. The strongest of the other leftist parties was the Marxist Forward Bloc with 5.29 per cent followed by the Subhasist Forward Bloc with 1.51 per cent votes. The parties in UTUC were extremely weak. The RSP won 0.86 per cent, the RCPI 0.43 per cent and the Bolsheviks won 0.27 per cent votes.¹ Of course some parties contested more seats than did others but it can be assumed that the reason why more seats were not contested by the weaker parties was the fact of their weakness. Thus it could be said that politically the existence of these small left-wing parties was quite futile, whatever personal satisfaction the leaders and rank-and-file of the parties may have gained from them.

It is in the field of trade unionism that these leftist parties have had some success. As Marxist parties they had an ideological bias toward activities with the working class. Some of their leaders had been active in the AITUC for many years. When the AITUC adopted the extremist policies of the CPI in 1948 the leftist groups in Bengal, except the Marxist Forward Bloc, were forced to leave. However, they did not join the HMS because they were afraid of Socialist Party domination or, to put it in another way, they were perhaps conscious of their own weakness. In April 1949, the first session of UTUC was held which elected Professor K. T. Shah as president and Mrinal Kanti Bose as general secretary. Bose had been associated with AITUC since its foundation in 1920 and had, in fact, drafted its first constitution. In 1929 he walked out of AITUC and was among the leaders who set up NTUP. Later he rejoined AITUC and was its president from 1945 to 1947. Politically, although leftist, he was not a member of any party. Because of his personal qualities he was able to dominate the UTUC until his death in March, 1957.

Bose was succeeded as general secretary by Sisir Roy, a member of the Bolshevik Party but in fact the strongest group in the UTUC was the RSP, whose leader Jatin Chakravarty, held the office of secretary, and who appears to have become the most influential leader in UTUC since the death of Bose. After the death of Bose, some groups in UTUC began to accuse the RSP of using the UTUC for its own political purposes. The groups included the SUCI which had split off from the

¹ S.V. Kogekar and R.L. Park(eds.) Reports on the Indian General Elections 1951-52 (1956), Appendix Table 4.

RSP in 1948, the RCPI, and one of the factions that had developed in the Bolshevik Party which was led by Biswanath Dubey. Eventually the three groups broke away and formed their own UTUC, leaving the RSP and the remainder of the Bolshevik Party in the original UTUC which continued to be recognized as the larger Federation. Although the RSP continued to be the strongest group in the UTUC it made a practice of electing members of other parties to the post of general secretary. When Sisir Roy died in 1980 he was succeeded by a lady, Sudha Roy, who also belonged to the Bolshevik Party.

Under the leadership of M. K. Bose, the UTUC, like the other federations, condemned the entry of party politics into trade unionism. While criticizing both the communists and the socialists for allowing political considerations to influence their trade union policies. Bose at the same time pleaded for a unification of the trade union movement, although without the INTUC. There is reason to believe that Bose, unlike many others, was sincere in calling for the removal of party politics from trade unionism. The fact that he was not a party member and his previous career as a trade unionist support this conclusion. But apart from the personal beliefs of its general secretary, the UTUC had further reasons for emphasizing trade union unity and condemning political unionism. In the first place it was itself an amalgamation of three political groups and would therefore be the first to lose from political unionism within its own ranks. Secondly, UTUC's constituents were very weak politically. Whereas the HMS and the AITUC were supported by relatively strong political parties, it was almost the case that the UTUC was supporting its own supporting parties. If UTUC was to have any political influence as a pressure group it could not be through the parties that were associated with it but would have to be through co-operation with other trade union federations and other political parties. Therefore, the UTUC wanted the other Federations to be less dependent on political parties so that some sort of merger would be more easily effected. However, UTUC did not want to merge with either AITUC or HMS alone, where it would be swamped by the larger group. It wanted a merger of all three 'leftist' federations, so that UTUC, although in a minority, might have some influence in balancing one major group with the other. As UTUC would clearly gain from such an arrangement, it is perhaps reasonable to describe UTUC as the only consistently non-political trade union federation.

However, in a wider sense, the UTUC is as politically-inclined as any other federation. Jatin Chakravarty made the distinction when he said that UTUC was

Inspired by the principles for which Mrinal Kanti Bose fought, namely for keeping the militant TU and working class movement in the country independent of any kind of narrow partisan politics (as distinguished from basic class politics of the workers and the toiling people fighting against the ruling capitalist class).¹

Politically, the UTUC reflects the Marxism of its constituents: However, in the short-run the UTUC accepts that it must work within the confines of a capitalist society. Thus the secretary of UTUC warned against dismissing economic planning just because it had been introduced by a capitalist ruling class.

It is to be remembered, that so long as a capitalist structure of society subsists, we can only have plans of economic reconstruction and development of the country which will not transgress the basic capitalist class interests. It would, be absolutely theoretical and unrealistic for the workers to say that they will support those plans which square with their own conception of socialism. . . .in spite of the inherent limitations of the Second Plan, the working class of India can not, therefore, set its face against the increased accent on industrialization in it.

Chakravarty attacked those who wanted 'to prune the Plan'

If any thing, the working class regards the target of the Plan falling far short of what it could have been if it were conceived in other terms and if it were built up from bottom upwards upon the creative participation of the toiling people.²

In 1960 Chakravarty explained that

¹ UTUC, Report (Fourth), 1960, pp. 2-3.

² UTUC, Report (Third), 1958, pp. 12-14.

The working class or the UTUC do not lag behind other sections of the people in making the required sacrifices for an accelerated rate of economic development.¹

Thus, although it is ideology committed to overthrowing the existing system, the UTUC supports policies designed to make the existing system work better.

Ideologically, the UTUC is close to AITUC and in practice the two organizations often work together. According to one leader in West Bengal, the UTUC is prepared to co-operate with any other federation but it is more common for AITUC to accept such invitations.² In Kerala the UTUC is completely controlled by the RSP which is led by N. Sreekantan Nair, MP. The RSP and the CPI have nearly always had good relations in Kerala. In the 1952 and 1954 elections the two parties had entered a united front and an electoral arrangement had been agreed upon in 1957. On the trade union front the UTUC and AITUC had reached an agreement whereby neither would create rival unions against the other and where two unions already existed, the smaller would merge itself into the larger. This agreement was known as 'T.V. - Sreekantan formula' after the AITUC leader T.V. Thomas and Sreekantan Nair.

At first the RSP supported the communist government that took office in Kerala in 1957 but the UTUC refused to enter into a six months moratorium to enable the new government to find its feet. Within a few months a serious rift developed between the government and the UTUC. By April 1958, the state president of UTUC, T. K. Divakaran had compiled a large catalogue of crimes committed by the government against UTUC and the working class. Disregarding the 'T. V. - Sreekantan formula,' AITUC had begun forming rival unions with government support. Divakaran recalled

. . . that when the Congress came to power they also sought in this fashion to bolster up INTUC unions and disrupt the unity of the workers. There is no difference between the policy followed by the present Communist

¹ UTUC, Report (Fourth), 1960, p. 7.

² Interview with Anil Chaudhary, Calcutta, May 1964.

government in this respect and the policy of the previous Congress regime when they were in power.¹

The UTUC accused the ministry of partisanship in industrial disputes:

Whenever there is a dispute between an AITUC-led union and an employer the government comes to intervene. But in the case of other unions government keeps itself aloof in spite of the repeated requests.²

In Kerala the government is a major employer and the UTUC claimed to control most of the unions in the public sector. Because of this

. . . the government is out to wreak vengeance upon the workers. The agreement entered into between the unions and the previous government were all rejected or left unimplemented by the present government. Thus the workers were forced to go on strike and the government utilised that opportunity to sponsor Communist-led black-legging unions.³

A further factor causing a break-down in the relations between UTUC and 'the government were the police firings on workers, some of whom belonged to UTUC. In June 1959, the UTUC joined INTUC, HMS and other trade unionists in condemning the government⁴ and together with the other opposition parties they helped to create the conditions that resulted in the dismissal of the communist government.

Despite basic differences between AITUC and UTUC in Kerala in 1959, the two federations apparently continued on the best of terms in West Bengal and in a few years the wounds inflicted in Kerala had healed sufficiently for the two unions to again hold joint activities. In 1965 the RSP and the right-wing CPI entered an electoral alliance during the elections in Kerala.

¹ UTUC, Report (Third), 1958, p. 38.

² *ibid.*, p. 38.

³ *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴ V.B. Karnik, *Communist Ministry and Trade Unions in Kerala* (1959), pp. 56-60.

The UTUC essentially consists of two organizations, one functioning in the north-east corner of India and the other functioning in the south-west. In order to become recognized as a national organization the two groups formed a federation but the central organisation does not appear to interfere in the affairs of the two major constituents. Thus UTUC could in 1959 be the bitter opponent of the CPI in one state and its ally in the other. Similarly, the split that occurred in the UTUC in Bengal in 1957 had absolutely no effect on the UTUC in Kerala. According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, UTUC had a combined membership of 3,83,946 in 2002.¹

The main reason for the UTUC's existence appears to be simply that it is a legacy from the past history, particularly of Bengal. The habit of having a separate organization of one's own with one's own leader was formed in the days when the British ruled India. As the old leaders of the UTUC disappear from the scene one is forced to doubt whether this reason for its existence will continue to have any force.

OTHERS

It is not only the socialist and leftist parties that take an interest in trade unionism. In 1955 the fourth 'all-India' party, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, was responsible for the setting up of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh. As of 2008, besides the above four trade unions, we are going to discuss rest of the Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUO) recognized by the Ministry of Labour. According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, Trade Unions had a combined membership of 2,46,01,589 in 2002.²

A. BHARTIYA MAZDOOR SANGH

The Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers' Union) is the Largest central trade union organization in India. It was founded by Dattopantji Thengdi on July 23, 1955, which also happens to be the birthday of Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

¹ Table (1) Trade Union Verification Date, 1989 and 2002 (provisional), Ministry of Labour in 2002.

² *ibid.* p.

The Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh, first came into prominence during the India China war of 1962. A section of the Communist Party of India proclaimed that Chinese forces were 'liberating' India from capitalist domination. Many leaders said that India was the aggressor and had occupied Chinese territory. The labour unions which till then were dominated by the Communists observed strikes and obstructed defence production. This saw major desertions from the Communist trade unions towards the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh which was seen to be patriotic. The BMS withdrew all agitations by its unions. A call was given to workers to give top priority to stepping up defence production and assisting all defence efforts.

In strategic sectors such as defence production, transport, power generation, transmission, etc., special efforts were made. Two decades later they secure foothold in all major unions.

The BMS itself claims to have over 8.3 million members. At present it is estimated around 5860 unions are affiliated to the BMS. According to provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, the BMS had a membership of 6215797 in 2002.¹ It can also be noted that the BMS is not affiliated to any International Trade Union Confederation.

Girish Awasthi is the current president of the organization, and Mr. Lakshma Reddy its General Secretary.

Politically the Jan Sangh is strong in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh which are areas without much industrialization. In order to spread its influence among workers the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh set up its headquarters in Bombay but so far it has had little success. The Jan Sangh ideology of militant Hinduism does not offer very much to the working class which is more interested in the economic 'bread and butter' issues. It is possible that the Jan Sangh ideology might be attractive to Hindu, Hindi-speaking, lower middleclass employees. So far, at least, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh does not appear to have attracted either working class or middle class employees.

¹ *ibid.* p.

B. ALL INDIA UNITED TRADE UNION CENTRE

The All India United Trade Union Centre (AIUTUC) is a Central Trade Union Organisation in India and the labour wing of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist). Presently its activities are spread over 19 states. The organization claims to have 600 affiliated unions, comprising an individual membership of over two million. It is the 6th largest trade union in India. According to provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, UTUC-LS had a membership of 1368535 in 2002.¹

All India UTUC was founded at a conference held in Calcutta April 26-27, 1958, following a split in the United Trade Union Congress. Initially it used the name UTUC, but in the general media it was referred to as UTUC (Dharamtala Street) (where it had its office) to distinguish it from the original UTUC. In 1969, at the initiative of Subodh Banerjee, West Bengal State Committee President of the organization and PWD Minister in anti-Congress United Front Government in the state, the name of the street was changed to 'Lenin Sarani'. Thus the new name of the organization became UTUC (Lenin Sarani).

In the 17th UTUC (LS) conference held in Delhi in 1985 the organization was re-named as 'United Trade Union Centre (Lenin Sarani)'. In the 18th conference held in 1992 in Calcutta 'Lenin Sarani' was un-bracketed, implying that it no longer referred to the name of the street where the office is located but became an integral part of the name of the organization which was there after known as 'United Trade Union Centre-Lenin Sarani' (UTUC-LS). The 19th all India conference of the organization held in Delhi on 27th March, 2008 approved the change of name to All India United Trade Union Centre (All India UTUC).

The All India UTUC is functioning in both formal and informal sectors. In informal sector, the most important segment where it has been working from the very inception, is agriculture. In the formal sectors All India UTUC has unions, federations and activities in basic, heavy and key industries and important service sectors like

¹ *ibid.* p.

Iron and Steel, Engineering, Electricity, Coal and Non-Coal Mines, Railways, Port and Dock, Road-Transport, Banks and Financial Institutions, Insurance, Central and State Government Services. On the basis of its membership strength All India UTUC has been recognized as a Central Trade Union Organisation by the Government of India and has its representations in apex level tripartite committees as well as in International Labour Conference (ILC) of the ILO.

C. ALL INDIAN CENTRAL COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS

The All Indian Central Council of Trade Unions, a central trade union federation in India (AICCTU) is politically attached to Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. According to provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour AICCTU had a membership of 6,39,962 in 2002¹

D. CENTRE OF INDIAN TRADE UNION CONGRESS (CITU)

The Centre of Indian Trade Union Congress (CITU) is a national level trade union in India. Politically attached to the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The CITU is today one of the biggest assembly of workers and classes of India. It has strong unchallengable presence in the Indian states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura besides a good presence in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. It has presence in almost all the Indian states. According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, CITU had a membership of 32,22,532 in 2002.² Chittabrata Majoomdar was a General Secretary of CITU from 2002-2007 but he died in 20.02.2007. Now Mohd. Amin is its General Secretary.

E. LABOUR PROGRESSIVE FEDERATION

The Labour Progressive Federation, Trade Union Federation is in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The LPF is politically attached to Dravida Munetra Kazhagam. According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, LPF

¹ ibid p.

² ibid p.

had a membership of 6,11,506 in 2002.¹ Mr. C. Kuppu Swamy is the president. Telecom Employees Progressive Union is an affiliate of LPF. The union is shortly called TEPU that represents BSNL workers in India.

F. TRADE UNION COORDINATION COMMITTEE

Trade Union Coordination Committee is politically attached to All Indian Forward Bloc. According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, TUCC had a membership of 7,32,760 in 2002.²

G. SEWA

According to the provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, SEWA had a membership of 6,06,935 in 2002.³

¹ *ibid* p. 151.

² *ibid* p. 151.

³ *ibid* p. 151.