

The Objectives Of Trade Union Movement - A Brief Note

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Is the object of the Trade Union Movement to achieve economic gains or to bring about social change?

An answer to the poser is a matter of choice of the individual to whom the poser is addressed.

However if the answer should not be bald assertion of choice but should proceed from an analysis of the factors operating in the objective situation and the possibilities arising from one's commitment to a choice, it would be a different matter.

It is also rather difficult to dispassionately discuss such a controversial issue when one is so involved. However I will make an attempt to explore the question here as an academic exercise and hope it will not be polemical one.

The dichotomization between economic gain and social change as an objective has validity only up to a point. One may certainly make a choice but one must examine the objective situation in order to find out how far the – objective chosen can be realized within the given situation.

I would be saying certainly nothing original if I stated that man make history but not out of the whole cloth. There are certain objectives which can be realized under certain circumstances and certain other objectives which cannot be realized no matter how strong is the will.

Traditionally, the communists, the Socialists and the Sarvodaya groups, or, if I may give them their approximate western nomenclature, 'anarchists', have always sworn by social change and have spurned economic gains. But the – question is how near are we to the realization of the objective of social change today, and if we are not very close to it, the question arises as to why it is so. Is it merely the lack of the will or the absence of favourable objective situation which is responsible for the end result of at least three decades of activity on the trade union front, on the part of the radical group in pursuit of social change?

I believe the answer to the question is not very simple. A cursory analysis should show why it is not simple.

In the last 30 years, certain basic changes have taken place in the economy and society of India. It is another question whether these changes are desirable or not or how these changes have occurred but it is beyond dispute that certain changes have taken place. There is a working parliamentary system with all its imperfections. Industrialization and development of trade and commerce have taken place. Land reforms have been carried out though haltingly and some times fraudulently. Many pieces of labour and welfare legislation have been enacted, certain due processes of law and conventions have been built up for handling class conflicts in the industrial sector. Mass pressures by trade unions and the employees built up for handling class conflicts in the industrial sector. Mass pressures by trade unions and the employees associations have built up techniques of operations. An economy with sizeable public sector, large-scale Industries, concentration of capital in the hands of a few and a free market economy moderated by State control has come into being. There are of course, a number of limitations and qualifications in regard to these developments. In the result there has been a working parliamentary – democracy and an agro industrial free market economy. The emergency aberrations are a different matter. We need not overlook the fact that the emergency was the response of the ruling class to the political and economic crisis in the country. Neither should we overlook the fact that the people restored democracy. But despite the political and economic crisis, the system has continued to work. The situation has been a tailor-made one for the trade union movement to make economic gains but not for effecting social transformation. That was and is the objective situation. Within the frame work of the situation, it is quite arguable that the economic gains could have been more in certain directions or certain other concessions could have been wrested by the trade union movement. But it seems to me to be quite clear that an attempt however determined for social transformations would not have succeeded given the situation and the priority the trade unionists gave to unionize the working class in the organized sector. The economic gains are in a way the price paid by the establishment for legitimizing and validating itself in the eyes of the trade union movement which has been largely confined to the organized section.

Gradually, over the years, the trade union movement has become acclimatized to the environment of parliamentary democratic system and a free economy and collective bargaining. In fact it has become one of pillars of the –

establishment though it plays the role of the opposition within the system. It is not opposition outside the system. As long as the general acceptance of the labour legislation enacted, due processes of law, the lobbying in the legislature, the various tripartite and bipartite collective settlements and conventions and the techniques of mass pressures such as strikes etc., exist the end result can only be economic gains. Social transformation involves essentially opposition both spiritually and – factually outside the system. One must appreciate the significance of the safety valve like legal strikes. Once the whole set up was accepted, it was natural for all the trade union groups, whatever may be their political – colour, they play the rules of the game. The rules of the game was predetermined to result in economic gains. There is no difference between the collective bargaining techniques adopted by a very radical group and a very conservative group. The difference is only in regard to the personal styles of functioning of the leaders, the behavioral pattern of groups and the degrees of mental acceptance of the system. In the result, the trade unions have operated in spite of apparent differences and serious conflicts within an area of agreement. One must not – confuse a spectacular conflict for a basic conflict. Some times the industrial conflicts have been either magnified or even painted in psychedelic colours, may be for effect.

This is not to say that there were no outstanding – heroic struggles. This is only to say that the struggles have aimed at or have ended in economic gains.

The pattern of political structure and economy have followed by and large the western model although the public relations men of the establishment have tried very hard to paint a picture of a different model of development. The Western model oriented ruling class developed the industries and commerce according to its own blue print. Paradoxically, the trade union elite has also proved to be western model oriented and has used collective bargaining techniques which is the product of the West to considerable advantage to the working class in the organized sector. Some sections of the trade union movement committed to radical transformation of society, have of course, protested all the time that they are – participating in the trade union movement not for economic gains but for social change. But as we know, the objective result of the activities of a person is quite often – independent of his own stated objectives. Thus the trade movement as a whole including the radical sections of it is today farther away from actual social transformation than it was 30 years ago. The economic gains have created appetite for economic gains. It is an altogether different road.

In a backward country with a developing economy, if the Western model was chosen for development of industries, trade and commerce, the evolution of the trade union movement along correspondingly traditional lines is – inevitable. The last half a century in Western Europe has soon a similar development of the organized trade union movement. The difference is quantitative for, with larger industries and trade and commerce in those countries the trade union movement is larger and has made more – significant economic gains. In Western Europe also those who started with unshakable commitment to social change have acted as relentless practioners of the art of collective bargaining for economic gains. The postulate that the social revolution is on the agenda of the day and the working class is its chosen instrument has been taken for granted without any serious examination of its implication for the Indian radical movement, in particular the communist segment of it. It is necessary to remember the condition of the working class in Europe during the last century in order to understand why Marx and Engels thought that the working class was the chosen instrument of social transformation. The linkage between the – revolution and its instrument has been taken to be indissoluble. In my opinion, this appears to be wrong. Lonin has defined a revolutionary situation and has also postulated the instrument which will lead it. But the question as to whether an alternative instrument may carry out the revolution if the situation is ripe but the chosen instrument is not ready has not been examined in India . In fact, such a bold investigation may not even be palatable to the radicals, especially the communists. The question is dogging the radical movement all the time in India. In the face of adverse evidence, these sections have been unable to examine the question with a fresh mind.

It may be worthwhile to remember in this connection that Mao Tse Tung faced this question boldly. Although he was branded as a heretic, he forged the linkage between a revolutionary situation and peasantry thus making a startling departure from traditional – Marxism. Such radical thinking has always been the contribution of great leaders. In fact, Lenin also did not hesitate to throw overboard his own conception of the linkage between a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary class in April 1917 and postulated a new linkage. As Lohia has stated, whatever school of thought comes to India will soon become lifeless. Marxism is no exception.

India is a country of vast disparities between the earnings and social status of different state. During the last three

decades, the pre-existing disparities have been increased, sometimes distorted. The gap between urban working class and the rural landless working class, between the urban rich and the rural rich, between the urban poor and urban rich, between rural poor and the rural rich have all widened. In very rough terms the average income of a villager and city dweller which was 1: in 1950-51 has now become 1:4. The ramification of these growing multi-dimensional inequalities have to be very carefully examined and not dismissed by the counter point of the growing one-dimensional disparity between the capitalists and the working class alone. The urban working class still lives in miserable conditions, but its socio-economic status has improved compared to the vast rural masses and the unemployed. The British – imperialist ruling classes softened the revolutionary fervour of their own working class by passing on a part of the profits which it gathered by exploitation of the colonial countries. The Indian capitalist class has – softened the Indian working class by passing on a part of its profits gained by exploitation of the working class itself and of the vast submerged rural masses, the - unemployed, the under-employed and the working class in the unorganized sector. In the interests of clarity, I suggest that this reality should not be overlooked or drowned in polemics. After all poverty and misery are relative terms. Bitterness and anger which result from poverty and misery are also relative emotions. A class IV employee in a Bank or LIC or in a large – industrial undertaking is certainly not miserable or abjectly poor compared to the landless labourer though certainly he is so compared to the big bureaucrat or the industrial tycoon or the big trader. In this – situation, the trade union movement naturally does not feel impelled to strive for social transformation. Just as the caste hierarchy did not result in direct caste conflict, the class hierarchy is also not resulting in direct class conflict. In a growing economy, the ruling class does not want a confrontation. It can afford appeasement and would like to buy peace. Under the circumstances, it is very necessary to dispassionately examine the Indian situation with an Indian mind in order to determine as to which are the classes or parts of classes which are most likely to be interested in social transformation. Unfortunately, the Indian mind is traditionally happy with the gulf between precept and practice. The great logician Shankara who preached that all sentient beings are equal, is stated to have frowned upon an untouchable who had happened to pass him by. The Indian radical is equally an inheritor of the split mind and therefore, he can profess his – commitment to social transformation and actually work for economic gains. The fact of the matter is the unionized working class comes within the top 25 per cent of the population, whereas the bottom 25% constitutes the masses below destitute line. Nearly 20 to 25 million of the people are totally un-employed with an additional 20 to 25 under employed and 25 to 30 million working in the – unorganized sectors eking out a miserable existence. If these sections had been organized, a mighty revolutionary force would have been formed and that might have provided an instrument for social change. Incidentally without socio-economic transformation the establishment can give nothing to these sections. However the Indian radical movement neglected these vast sections. In other words, it failed to take a fresh look at the problem.

The Janatha Party has put forth an alternate model of planning based on a different set of priorities, if this model is put into operation the vulnerable sections such as the landless, jobless and the workers in the unorganized sector are likely to benefit more than the workers in the organized sector. As a result, the theatre of – tensions will shift and it is quite possible that the organized working class may not accept these priorities and sacrifices which it entails. It is quite – legitimate for the organized working class to fight against the bureaucrats, the capitalists and the big traders in order to divest them of their political and economic power. But, unless the trade union movement shifts its own base to the landless, the unemployed and the workers in unorganized sector, it is not likely to become a driving force for social change. If it confines itself to its traditional base it cannot escape from the logic of economic gains first and foremost and lip service to social transformation.

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