

## **Towards Trade Union Unity in India**

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The growing determination of the Indian working-class to struggle for unity in the trade union field is a most significant and welcome feature of the present situation in India. To establish one united centralised trade union movement constitutes the most important immediate task facing the Indian working-class. That this task is not easy was shown by the events which took place when the Trade Union Congress and National Trades Union Federation met at the end of last year at Nagpur. Credit is, however, due to the persistence of the militant section in the trade union movement for consistently pursuing a number of steps towards unification. These steps, taken by the militant section of the trade union movement of India, have resulted in the achievement of a number of successes in the struggle for the consolidation of the forces of the working-class in the country.

Few sections of the working-class throughout the world can show a better record of class-struggle than the Indian working-class during the last six years. Both on the economic as well as the political front, the Indian working-class has conducted a series of important determined and bitter struggles. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to recognise that with all the determination of the workers these struggles have been seriously impaired by the breaches in the ranks of the movement. This is clear if we take some of the outstanding struggles; such as the G.I.P. Railwaymen's strike of 1930; from the very beginning the position of the railway workers was considerably weakened by their ranks being divided. Similarly,

with the Bengal Jute Workers' strike of 1930, and the many Textile Workers' strikes in the years following in Bombay, Nagpur and elsewhere. The more recent examples are shown with the Dock Workers' strike in 1934, in Bombay, and the Dock Workers' strike in 1934-35, in Calcutta.

All these struggles were conducted with determination, vigour and sacrifice, but without unity in the face of the enemy. With their ranks broken the workers can put up but feeble resistance to the continued attacks upon their economic standards; at the same time they are unable to present to the employers united demands for better conditions. The determination of the working-class of India to establish a united working-class movement springs from these experiences and this situation.

### **The Advance of Unity**

Already steps of tremendous importance have been taken to achieve this unity. The first struggle to obtain unity was in connection with the *All-India Textile Workers' Strike* of 1934. This was followed by the unification, on the basis of the class-struggle and Trade Union Democracy, of the *Red Trade Union Congress* and the *All-India Trade Union Congress* in April, 1935.

We have always stood by and stand today by the principle that an effective and powerful trade union movement requires all embracing class solidarity of the workers. At the same time the representatives of different view points within the trade unions should be free to conduct propaganda for their viewpoints and policy on the issues that arise, always avoiding all disruptive conflicts and loyally maintaining discipline in the common struggle. Here we feel that the importance cannot be over-estimated of the acceptance at *Calcutta* of the two points as the necessary basis of trade union unity; (1) acceptance of the class-struggle and, (2) Internal trade union democracy. These two points must be emphasised and form the corner stone of the future trade union movement; they will help to ensure a vital, fighting, mass trade union movement in India.

Following the achievement of unity between the two Trade Union Congresses at Calcutta the militant workers set about the

task of amalgamating, on the basis of the principles accepted by the parallel Red and National Reformist Girni Kamgar Unions in Bombay and Nagpur, also the G.I.P. Railwaymen's Unions. This trade union action will inevitably lead towards the establishment of trade union unity and the mobilisation of the forces of the Indian working-class in their struggle for their immediate demands, political rights and for the independence of the country from British Imperialism. Of particular importance and significance was the tremendous enthusiasm with which the workers of *Bombay* welcomed the steps to unite the two textile workers' unions. Such scenes of enthusiasm had not been witnessed since the days of the formation of the *Lal Bavta Girni Kamgar Union*; over 10,000 workers turned out to vote for the office bearers of the United Girni Kamgar Union. It is also of particular significance that several official positions were secured by the old office bearers of the *Red* trade union, while on the other hand extreme right-wing leaders like Alve and Kandalkar were thoroughly defeated.

The establishment of the *Joint Labour Board* was the next step taken towards the further extension of the workers united front. The Joint Labour Board was established to co-ordinate the activities of the amalgamated T.U.C. and the National Trades Union Federation, and to draw the mass of trade union workers and local organisations of the right reformist unions closer to the workers in other unions towards trade union unity and to participate in the class-struggle.

Alongside the establishment of the Joint Labour Boards there were organised in *Bombay, Calcutta, Nagpur* and elsewhere joint mass meeting and demonstrations against the new slave constitution, against the ban on militant workers' organisations, against the fascist aggressive war on Abyssinia, and joint demonstrations on May Day. Many of these demonstrations, meetings and actions were organised on the basis of the united front with the Congress Socialist Party, with Provincial, District and Town Committees of the National Congress, etc., and indicated the broadening out of activity, and the fact that the working-class movement was taking its place, not merely in immediate economic struggles, but in the political field.

It is necessary also to place on record the fact of the active participation of the adherents of the militant trade union movement in the *Radical Political Conference* both in Bombay and Nagpur (November, 1935). All these are indications of the increasing activity of the masses in the struggle against war and imperialism, and testify to the fact that the Communists and the adherents of the militant trade union movement are steadily overcoming the remnants of sectarianism, and the isolation of the trade union movement from the anti-imperialist front.

### **Opposition to Trade Union Unity**

The intense desire of the workers for unity manifested itself at Nagpur towards the end of last year when the All-India Trade Union Congress and the National Trades Union Federation met simultaneously. Yet despite the efforts made, particularly by the militant section, to bring the T.U. movement under one head, this was not achieved.

The Executive Committee of the A.I.T.U.C. formulated certain proposals for unity, and it appears that the most important of these were: (1) The name of the organisation shall be the All-India Trade Union Congress; (2) The constitution shall be that of the National Trade Union Federation, with modifications if necessary; and (3) that the first working committee shall consist of an equal number of officials from both organisations. To which a couple of sub-points were added; (a) No affiliation to any foreign organisation. (B) The amalgamated central working-class organisation to accept the principle of sending delegates to Geneva.

It is quite reasonable to draw the conclusion from the above that the Executive of the A.I.T.U.C. were prepared to sink everything in the interests of trade union unity. But it is amazing, in view of the principles accepted at Calcutta, that the important question of trade union democracy does not appear at all, while it was not thought necessary to stress the principle of the class-struggle, the reason being, according to R.S. Ruikar, that the principle of class-struggle was acceptable to both groups.

The tremendous demand for working-class unity has its repercussion in the discussions in the General Council of the

National Trade Union Federation. In fact reports show that there was a majority in the body who favoured immediate structural unity, while a section of the member favoured "Unity by stages". This opposition to immediate unity was led by N.M. Joshi, whose demand was equivalent to a call for capitulation of the A.I.T.U.C., that it should unconditionally enter the National Federation, the Federation leadership reserving the right to accept whom it thought fit and to reject those with whom it did not see eye to eye. To have accepted such a position would have been to have betrayed the fundamental principles of the working-class. The working-class members of the National Federation and the A.I.T.U.C. demand unity not capitulation, unity based upon the recognition of the principles of the class-struggle in practice and complete trade union democracy.

Despite the majority in favour, the resolution for immediate unity was withdrawn and a resolution given wider powers to the Joint Board, and extending the principle of such Joint Boards to the Provinces, was agreed to. Unity for the moment is sidetracked, nevertheless, the policy of N.M. Joshi must be fought and the struggle to achieve one united trade union movement must go on with redoubled energy.

### **Weaknesses in Carrying Through The Struggle for Unity**

While we can place on record a number of successes achieved by the adherents of the militant section of the trade union movement, it is necessary at the same time to emphasize that certain incorrect approaches have been made in their activities in actual struggle. One of the most striking examples was the refusal of the adherents of the militant T.U. movement from the Nagpur amalgamated textile workers' union to let the national reformist leaders and officials of this union participate in the leadership of the *Hingangat Textile Workers' Strike*. So far was this carried that the national reformist leaders of the amalgamated textile workers' union and of the T.U.C. were refused the floor at the strikers meetings, etc. This policy made it easier for the reformist leaders to apply their policy of expelling the adherents of the militant trade union movement, with the result that the struggle for trade union unity was hampered.

Further examples are that of the organisation of *Lal Bavra Press Kamgar Union* of a provincial press workers' conference, and also an All-India Conference—an excellent piece of work, but done without the participation of the nationalist reformist unions which are in existence. Another example of surviving sectarianism is that of the decision of the *Calcutta Tramwaymen's Union*, to remain an independent union and not to affiliate to the amalgamated Trade Union Congress; to this extent our forces inside the Trade Union Congress struggling for T.U. unity are weakened. We recognise the difficulties of our comrades, but these must not prevent us taking the lead always and every time on the question of trade union unity.

One of the most difficult problems with which the adherents of the militant trade union movement are faced is that of the *Ahmedabad Textile Workers*. Here we have the second largest textile centre in India, with the largest textile workers' union in India — the *Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association* with a membership of 25,000. We will agree that it can be called a company union, and that there is almost an entire absence of trade union democracy in connection with its methods of work; many examples of this can be cited, the latest being the set-back the workers suffered when the Delhi agreement was imposed upon them. The adherents of the militant section of the trade union movement have struggled to establish their position and organise the Ahmedabad workers in the *Mail Kamgar Union*. Here they have met with the most vigorous Government repression, *V.J. Patel*, in a speech recently to the textile workers, incited Government action against the militant T.U. workers, comrades have been arrested and the union declared illegal. The adherents of the militant trade union movement, grouping themselves outside the Labour Association, remain isolated from these 25,000 organised workers, unable to influence the policy of the Association, unable to give a lead.

This isolation and these remnants of sectarianism find their most striking expression in the almost entire absence of work at the present time, in the largest right-reformist unions, affiliated to the National Federation, as well as independent ones, and in the

inadequate initiative and activity in developing the united front struggle in defence of the immediate economic demands of the working-class.

In order to overcome this weakness a more vigorous attitude is needed towards the training of cadres among the workers for leading trade union positions, not merely organisations where they have influence but in the right-reformist organisations, in the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Associations, etc. With this there is the urgent need for the workers' press reflecting the policy and tactics of the militant section of the trade union movement. If our comrades could put into effect these questions many of our shortcomings would be quickly overcome.

### **Next Steps For Trade Union Unity**

We feel that the adherents of the militant trade union movement, working in the trade unions of India, will be able to greatly strengthen their position and place themselves in the forefront of the struggle provided they are able to concentrate their attention on and carry through the following suggestions.

It is necessary to carry through at the earliest possible moment the amalgamation of the parallel Lal Baita and National-reformist trade unions still existing in a number of centres and industries. This should be immediately applied to the unions on the G.I.P. Railway, to the press workers, to the textile workers in all centres—linking up these centres, and to a number of unions in Bengal. The next step would be the transformation of the amalgamated trade unions into powerful mass organisations. This would constitute the major task in the struggle for the elimination of the split in the trade union movement. When we recognise that only a very small percentage of the industrial workers of India are organised in the trade union movement and what tremendous possibilities there are, the next task obviously is to achieve powerful mass organisations. To do this every amalgamated union would declare a "recruitment month" and make the recruiting of new members one of the most important tasks of the trade union.

Provided the adherents of the militant trade union movement abide by the basic principles and conditions of the amalgamation,

established by the Calcutta agreement on the amalgamation of the two trade union Congresses (class-struggle and trade union democracy), show flexibility in solving the questions of the forms and procedure of the amalgamation, and take into account in every case the concrete situation and strength of the Lal Baita or militant and reformist unions—to the extent that these principles are observed will we carry into life the Calcutta agreement by turning the amalgamated T.U. Congress into a real weapon of consolidating the masses and strengthening the militant trade union movement.

A persistent struggle for the united front in action against the offensive of capitalism and imperialism, and for the amalgamation of the local unions affiliated to the amalgamated Trade Union Congress with the parallel unions of the right reformist Trade Union Federation, will create the basis and accelerate the amalgamation of both these T.U. centres into a unified T.U. Congress, based on the class-struggle and trade union democracy. The immediate struggle can be developed for one union on the B.B.C.I. Railway, one union on the G.I.P. Railway, one union for the dock workers, one for the seamen and so on.

Unity of action between the trade unions of the T.U.C. and unions of the National Trade Union Federation can be greatly facilitated by full use being taken of the proposal to extend the principle of Joint Labour Boards to the Provinces. By our joint work and action with the workers in the unions under the National Trade Union Federation we should greatly strengthen the demand for trade union unity. The struggle for the amalgamation of the T.U. Congress and the National T.U. Federation, on the basis of class-struggle and trade union democracy, necessitates a strengthening of business-like, concrete criticism of the policy of class collaboration, pursued by reformist leaders, and an exposure before the working-class of all the opponents of trade union unity, of all reformist leaders who endeavour to replace unity on the basis of class-struggle by unity on the basis of class collaboration and expulsion of the militant forces from the amalgamated unions.



### **The Development of United Struggle**

The struggle for the united front and trade union unity will not achieve its aim if it remains isolated and divorced from the developing struggle of the working-class for its immediate economic and political demands. The united front and trade union unity should become a mighty weapon for strengthening the working-class-struggle against the ever continuing and, in some centres, intensifying offensive of capital, against the anti-labour and emergency laws of the Imperialist Government, aiming to deprive still further the workers of their remnants of political rights.

The task of the adherents of the militant trade union movement should be to show the greatest possible activity and initiative in developing and extending the struggle of the working-class for its vital economic demands, taking into account the situation in various industries, and mobilising the masses for the struggle around urgent slogans and demands, based upon the vital needs of the masses and the degree of their fighting capacity.

Questions such as the fight against wage cuts, for the restoration of the cuts effected in the past period, for insurance against sickness and accidents, for the reinstatement of dismissed workers, for non-contributory unemployment insurance, against the anti-working-class laws, etc., are the questions agitating at present the broadest masses of workers. These are the slogans around which the workers should be rallied for a counter-offensive fight against capitalism and imperialism. All these issues should be linked up with the struggle for the workers' elementary political rights; (the right to strike, freedom of organisation, freedom of the workers' press and assembly, freedom of political prisoners, universal suffrage, etc.).

The active participation in the coming *Second All India Conference of Textile Workers* is acquiring enormous significance. It is therefore of the utmost importance to prepare carefully and thoroughly for the offensive struggle of the textile workers on the basis of the broad united front, taking into consideration that the textile workers' strikes are breaking out in many centres throughout the country. At the same time the adherents of the militant trade union movement should — in connection with the wide unrest among the railway workers — show initiative and activity in

developing work among the railwaymen. It may be considered timely, in conjunction with the *All India Railwaymen's Federation*, to call for the convening of an *All India Railwaymen's Conference* of representatives elected by the trade unions as well as at general meetings of organised and unorganised workers for the discussion and drawing up of a programme of immediate demands and action.

### **Work In Reformist Trade Unions**

Persistent, systematic work inside the reformist trade unions is among the most important conditions of a successful struggle for the everyday economic and political demands of the working masses. It is necessary to develop systematic, painstaking, everyday work in all the reformist and amalgamated trade unions. While it would be a mistake to aim at crystallising in a fixed organisational form a trade union opposition, it is necessary to carry on independent work of militant education and mobilisation of the masses, in defence of their economic and political interests, tirelessly combatting all tendencies of class collaboration, and explaining that the policy and practice of Gandhist non-violence objectively aids British Imperialism for the enslavement of the toiling masses of India.

The more determinedly to adherents of the militant trade union movement lay stress on the consolidation of the trade unions, on the recruitment of new members to the amalgamated trade unions from among the unorganised, the more actively they join in the day-to-day work and life of the trade union organisation, always remembering the specific features of every mass union and every industry, the more boldly they will be able to come out in the defence of the workers' demands — the more successful they will prove in strengthening their positions in the reformist trade unions, in gaining the confidence of the workers and leading positions in the unions, and turning the latter into organs of the class-struggle. The question of developing work in the railwaymen's textile workers', dockers', seamen and municipal workers' unions, of which some are very large and have increasingly militant membership — is acquiring particular and growing significance.

### **Trade Unions and The National Congress**

The further development and strengthening of the struggle for the affiliation of the trade unions and other workers' and also peasants' and students' organisations to the National Congress, as elective members, is of the utmost importance. The tremendous importance of this is in connection with the strengthening of the anti-imperialist forces, and is demanded with a view to a more active inclusion of the trade unions in the anti-imperialist struggle, the establishment of a broad anti-imperialist people's and the mobilisation of the rank and file of the National Congress for the struggle against British Imperialism.

While developing — in conjunction with all anti-imperialist-minded organisations, Congress Socialists, etc. — the broadest possible campaign for the affiliation of the trade unions, peasant and other mass organisations to the National Congress, this must be supported by the passing of resolutions by trade unions and at meetings, etc., calling upon the National Congress to change its constitution and admit of affiliation of these bodies, and at the same time it is also necessary to send fraternal delegates from the amalgamated Trade Union Congress, the Bombay Girni Kamgar Union and other organisations to the next session of the National Congress at Lucknow.

Such fraternal delegates should endeavor to present and defend the demand for collective affiliation of the trade unions, peasant and other organisations of the toiling masses to the National Congress. At the same time the representatives of the militant organisations should utilise in every way the platform of the National Congress in order to expound and popularise before the broad masses the viewpoint of the Left-wing Labour movement on such burning issue as the struggle against the new slave constitution, the demand for the convening of a Constituent Assembly based upon universal, equal franchise, direct and secret ballot, the struggle against imperialist war on Abyssinia and China, for the full independence of the colonial peoples, etc.

**Trade Unionism in The Elections**

The initiative and activity of the Communists and the adherents of the militant trade union movement in the coming campaign of elections to the Legislative Councils, in accordance with the new constitution acquire extremely important political significance. The militant unions and the adherents to the militant trade union movement, is the most active and advanced section of the Indian T.U. movement, should not keep apart from the elections, neither the labour constituencies nor the general territorial election districts.

In the labour constituencies, where candidates will be elected through the existing trade union organisations, we should endeavor to get the best possible militant workers returned. The campaign in the elections to the Provincial Legislative Councils must be closely connected the development of all forms of struggle of the masses. The struggle for the nomination and election of candidates of the anti-imperialist people's front, developed alongside of strengthening the struggle for the vital and clear demands of the workers, peasants and city middle-class elements, can and should result in a strengthening and extension of the anti-imperialist people's front, in an intensification of the struggle against imperialism and in a growth of the militant anti-imperialist forces.

The consolidation of the anti-imperialist people's front on the basis of an extended election campaign and the struggle for the immediate relieving of the conditions of the workers, peasants and city middle-class cannot but result in a weakening of the position of the reactionary bloc, set up in connection with the coming elections, and in an intensification of the anti-imperialist struggle. This in turn will have the effect of helping the exposure and isolation of the pro-imperialist reactionary groupings and leaders and their supporters (inside as well as outside the National Congress) who sabotage the establishment of a broad anti-imperialist people's front. All this cannot but help to strengthen the influence over the masses of the Left wing of the national liberation movement and provided the proletariat and its vanguard are active — of the role of the working-class in the anti-imperialist

people's front of struggle for the overthrow of the rule of British Imperialism.

### **Strengthening Militant Trade Unionism**

To strengthen and broaden the whole of our work in the trade union movement the adherents of the militant trade union movement should consider in the nearest future the possibilities of issuing a militant labour press, carrying propaganda through such a press from the viewpoint of the militant labour movement, publishing material on all the questions of current life in India and abroad, developing a determined struggle against the reformist ideology and policy as well as the practice of class collaboration, concretely criticising the opponents of the united front and trade union unity on the basis of class-struggle and trade union democracy, and rallying and organising the masses for the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

The question of assisting in the development of and bringing forward new militant working-class leaders is a problem facing acutely the militant section of the Indian trade union movement, and one which requires immediate solution. The promotion of leaders from the midst of the workers devoted to the cause of the working-class, from those connected with the masses and steeled in action of the class-struggle, should become the main concern of the militant trade union movement. The proper allocation of those leaders, their protection, the careful and comradely notification of any short coming and mistakes, concrete everyday leadership and political education of cadres should not bear a casual character, but become a living part of the work and struggle of the adherents of the militant trade union movement. It is, therefore, imperative that Marxist literature be issued, short-term courses organised, etc.

In conclusion we can say that during the past sixteen years the Indian working-class has waged many important and heroic economic battles and participated in the national liberation struggle. The tremendous experience over these years has shown with ever greater clearness that the Indian working-class, drawing in its wake the great mass of peasantry and all the exploited mass, is destined to lead to a finish and to final victory the fight against imperialism.

The bourgeois-landlord class have proved themselves incapable of leading the struggle; they move towards co-operation with imperialism and bitterly oppose every sign of mass struggle of the workers and peasants for fear of the menace to their own private interests. For the success in the field of economic struggle and the advance of the national struggle requires the development and extension of the mass struggle at every point. The Indian working-class has a decisive role to play in the anti-imperialist people's front as the strongest driving force.

For the working-class of India to realise this important role one thing is indispensable—the development of a united trade union movement, organising the main body of the workers on the basis of their common class interests in the daily struggle. In this manner the united working-class will not merely be able to pull its full weight in successful economic struggles, but will be able to bring its full strength to bear in the powerful anti-imperialist people's front and this will be decisive for the future victory in the struggle against British Imperialism.