

## Problems of trade unions in West Bengal collieries

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### Abstract

*In West Bengal collieries, trade unions face several problems. Outside and political leadership has been playing a pivotal role in West Bengal collieries' trade union movement due to the inability of insiders to lead their movement. The growth of trade unionism suffered from certain grave and unfortunate defects. The expanded union membership was shared between contending group of labour unions with conflicting ideologies and policies.*

### Introduction

In West Bengal collieries, trade unions face several problems. Outside and political leadership has been playing a pivotal role in West Bengal collieries' trade union movement due to the inability of insiders to lead their movement. In view of low education standards and poor command over English language which is still the principal language of labour legislation and negotiation, low level of knowledge about labour legislation, unsound financial position, fear of victimization by the management and lack of leadership qualities outside leadership has become popular. The main reason for this trend is that the Trade Union Act 1926, itself provided the scope for outside leadership. Section 22 of the Act requires that ordinarily not less than half of the officers of the registered union shall be actively engaged or employed in an industry to which the union relates. Thus, this provision provides the scope of outsiders to the tune of 50% of the office bearers. The Royal Commission on Labour (RCL) 1931 recommended for the reduction of the statutory limit of outsiders from  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$  but no efforts were taken in this direction.

Outside political leadership is prevalent in colliery unions in West Bengal collieries due to the following reasons:

- The rank and file are largely illiterate as such they cannot effectively communicate with the management.
- Men in managerial positions are generally members of castes which are higher in hierarchy than those of the rank and file unionist. Therefore, in any dealing with management, particularly of the face-to-face variety, the psychological advantage lies with the management.
- The union's lack of formal power tends to put a premium on the charismatic types of the leader, usually a politician, who can play the role of the defender of the worker against his enemies.
- For ensuring a measure of equation of power in collective bargaining where the workers are generally uneducated and have a low status.

- For avoiding victimization of worker-office- bearers of the trade unions and,
- For lack of financial resources to appoint whole time office- bearers.

The evil effects of the outside leadership analysed by the National Commission on labour (1969) are as follows:

- Outside leadership undermined the purpose of Trade Union and weakened their authority. Personal benefits and prejudice sometimes weigh more than unions.
- Outside leadership has been responsible for the slow growth of Trade Unions.
- Internal leadership has not been developed fully.
- Most of the leaders cannot understand the workers' problems as they do not live the life of a worker.

### **Inter-union rivalry in West Bengal Collieries**

The growth of trade unionism suffered from certain grave and unfortunate defects. The expanded union membership was shared between contending group of labour unions with conflicting ideologies and policies.

Now, in West Bengal Collieries, there are five central Trade Unions representatives on Joint Bipartite Committee for the Coal Industry (JBCCI)

- 1) Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)
- 2) All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)
- 3) Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)
- 4) Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS)
- 5) Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha (BMS)

Sometime they may agree to take a decision regarding the favour of the worker of the West Bengal Collieries. But most of the cases such as regarding closure of 5 areas consisting 64 mines and retrenchment of about 72,000 worker approved by ECL Board on 22.08.1998 and proposal placed by ECL in J.C.C. (ECL) meeting on 08.12.1998 that closure of 20 heavily, losing mines and consequent early separation of 16,000 persons, early retirement of all employees above 55 age group i.e. 22,000 persons, achieving 15% improvement in man productivity by relating wages to a 15% production and also Wage Board Recommendation and implementation differ their opinion each other. Inter-union rivalry breaks the very purpose of Trade Unions by weakening the strength of collective bargaining in West Bengal Collieries. These rivalries are responsible for a low growth of Trade Union movement in West Bengal Collieries.

### **Union rivalry has been result of:**

- the desire of political parties to have their basis among the industrial workers.
- personal-cum-factional policies of the local union leaders.
- domination of union by outside leaders.
- attitude and policy of the management i.e. divide and rule policy.

- the legal framework of the trade unions and the nature of industry and workers.

### **Effect of union rivalry on union strength in West Bengal Collieries**

Union rivalry affects the union strength in the following ways:

- Because of the multiplication of trade unions in West Bengal collieries, each union commands only a negligible proportion of workers of an establishment and does not enjoy the confidence of most of the employees.
- These splinter unions have assumed only a limited range of functions. Instead of diverting members' energies to constructive and co-operative channels, they have encouraged strife, disloyalty and non-co-operation.
- Most of the trade unions have failed to realize the importance of mutual help and welfare activities. Catlin rightly observes "the greater the number of phases of the workers life which the unions serve, the more secure, presumably, will be its hold on his allegiance and the more effective its control of the trade".<sup>1</sup>

The National commission on Labour (1969) has expressed dissatisfaction over the inter union rivalry / activities. It has recommended for removal of / disposal of inter union issues through proper mechanism. It recommended the following:

- Building of internal leadership with the unions in order to eliminate party politics and outsiders.
- Promotion of collective bargaining through recognition of sole bargaining agents.
- Improving the system of union recognition.
- Empowering Labour Courts to settle inter-union disputes, if the concerned central organisation is unable to resolve these.
- Encouraging union security.<sup>2</sup>

### **Code of conduct to minimise inters union rivalry**

The five central trade unions viz (1) Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), (2) All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), (3) Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), (4) Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), (5) Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha (BMS) accepted to follow the following „code of conduct“ to minimize inter-union rivalry.

- Every employee in West Bengal collieries shall have the freedom and right to join a union of his choice. No coercion shall be exercised in this matter.
- There shall be no dual membership of unions.
- There shall be unreserved acceptance of and respect for democratic functioning of trade unions.
- There shall be regular and democratic elections of executive bodies.
- Ignorance and /or backwardness of workers shall not be exploited by an organization. No organization shall make excessive or extravagant demands.

<sup>1</sup> Catlin, W.R., the Labour Problems, Page- 398.

<sup>2</sup>Report of the National Commission on Lahore, Page-292

- Casteism, communalism and provincialism shall be eschewed by all unions.
- There shall be no violence, coercion, intimidation or personal vilification in inter-union dealings.
- All central unions shall combat the formation or continuance of West Bengal Collieries unions.

## Conclusion

It is revealed from survey work in different collieries of West Bengal that some trade union leaders are outsiders who for obvious reasons may not have necessary acquaintance /understanding with organisation milieu, management philosophy, approach, and vision. So they may not have proper observation in respect of Human resource (HR) policies / Industrial Relation (IR) policies in collieries. At this backdrop trade union leaders selected from working community may be very much effective in solving labour issues as also in promoting dyadic relationship, inter personnel relationship vis-a-vis industrial relations.

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