

Labour in Politics: Mapping Labour's Political and Institutional Lives in 20th Century India

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Abstract: *The topic will address inquiries that directly relate to the political and public facets of the field of labour history. In this centennial year of the AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), it is critical to examine the links between institutional histories and the individual and collective lives of workers. Autobiographies and oral histories of activists and others reveal hidden narratives, conflicts, and inner tensions that shaped the institutional life of organisations such as the AITUC. Through the lens of institutional and working lives, this article seeks to trace the significant changes that have affected the world of work over the past centuries. Workers and the institutions that were related to them underwent significant change over the long 20th century. How did the social justice languages affect the lives of workers in India? Women's oppression and marginalisation in the framework of economic growth throughout colonialism have received much attention, but not in the context of labour history or movement. To provide a comprehensive overview of labour in politics and a synthesis of the knowledge currently available and their interpretation, this work aims to provide an overview of the social and economic factors that led to the emergence of the Indian working class and its ensuing advancement. Moreover, this paper will map the political and institutional lives of labour in the 20th century.*

Keywords: History, Trade Union, Labour, Working Class

On the surface, the beginning of the twenty-first century is an inauspicious period to examine labour movements. Political groups that were historically associated with the working class appear to have recognised capitalism. The trade unions, that these parties once had ties, to have experienced nearly catastrophic setbacks. The industrial proletariat appears to be fragmented and declining quickly. The regulatory framework for furthering the "interest" of labour appears to have been damaged by the emergence of multi-level governance, which was triggered by the process of "globalisation." As a result, many people now believe that concepts like "working class," "socialism," and "labour movement" are no longer relevant in terms of politics and history. As a political issue, the "working class" has been the subject of several obituaries. Mistakenly, many revolutionary hopes

were centred on this group. There has been significant debate about the fall of trade unionism and the lack of labour unions in India's and the world's public life. Trade unions are seen as obsolete and useless in the neoliberal age and have been replaced by other institutions and new forms of labour organisation. There has been a discernible shift and a fall in interest in issues of labour and class consciousness, whether in the diplomatic or intellectual domains, even though such obituaries have been much less common in India. Early Indian labour historians attempted to capture the "objective" aspects of labour's political and institutional lives, the engagement of the working class in methods of resistance, generally strikes, was its greatest achievement. The aforementioned structure considered societal frameworks like trade unions and the law as well as ideological currents like nationalism or communism because they not only influenced the contexts in which the working class specified its demands but also designed and outlined the conditions necessary for its success. The teleologies of modernity were the motivation behind these early investigations, according to Chitra Joshi's analysis of historiographical trends.¹ Karl Marx's political career began just as the first working-class unions were starting to take shape. Many countries forbade them because their development was incompatible with the capitalist rulers' ideology.² In the Communist Manifesto (1848); Marx had already analyzed the working class organizing process that led to the foundation of trade unions and the party of the working class. In this centennial year of the AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), it is critical to examine the links between institutional histories and the individual and collective lives of workers. Workers and the institutions that were related to them underwent a significant change over the long 20th century.

More compassionate and subtle assessments of working-class behaviour, as well as working-class culture and its current state, have been provided by historians since the 1980s. The assessments of the Bengal Jute Mill Strike of 1929 by Anna Sailer and railway strikes by Ahmad Azhar both place a greater value on more well-known incidences of enhanced working-class politics.³ As the largest producer and exporter of jute historically, and as a site of worker activism, the jute industry of Bengal has received significant scholarly attention. The "rhythm of work" in India was fundamentally different from the European routine of contemporary industrial work due to Indian employees' "pre-modern" "cultural habits," which were hostile to capitalism, according to colonial observers who wrote about the working conditions at the Bengal jute mills. While the late 1920s experienced worker militancy in various sectors such as the railway industry and oil industry, Sailer attributes the strikes and unionism in the jute industry, at least in part, to worker discontent caused by the transition from the multiple-shift system to the single-shift system, which was accompanied by an increase in work from fifty-four hours to sixty hours per week and the discontinuation of food allowance (*khoraki*). Since women employees were more reliant on labour substitution for childcare, cooking, and other domestic duties, the elimination

of the multiple-shift system undoubtedly had a gendered impact. She further investigates working-class politics in the Bengal jute industry in the late 1920s by concentrating on how labour activists built networks among workers across the Bengal jute belt so that local strikes could be coordinated into a general strike led by a centralised trade union, the Bengal Jute Workers' Union (BJWU).⁴ The general strike in August 1929 was joined by over 240,000 jute workers, forcing the Indian Jute Mills' Association (IJMA) to meet several demands, including the restoration of bonuses and *khoraki*. After the general strike, the BJWU broke up, but the jute belt experienced continuing industrial instability in the late 1930s. During the Great Depression, the workforce's morale was damaged by widespread layoffs and wage and hour reductions caused by a drop in the market for jute packaging. Mill managers used the economic crisis and threats of dismissal to impose new regulations to formalize the workplace and reduce production costs.⁵ After a short hiatus, labour militancy once again picked up in the mid-1930s in response to the "frenzy of rationalization" in the jute mills (p. 198). Ahmad Azhar, on the other hand, challenges earlier studies that usually saw the labour politics of interwar Punjab as just precursors to Partition. The railway strike of 1920, Mughalpura's struggle for independence during the interwar period, the relationship between labour politics and the Indian National Congress (1919–1947), the Meerut Conspiracy Case, and the Royal Commission on Labour in India are just a few of the significant events he examines. While Anna Sailer integrates her experiences with what she believes to be general strike situations into urban spatial behaviours, Ahmad Azhar strives to return to the brief phase of unified plebeian and elitist politics. The ultimate product is a compilation of in-depth analyses of events with unexpectedly enormous possibilities. According to Engels, strikes are an outward sign of the proletariat's social battle with the bourgeoisie and act as a prelude to that group's participation in class warfare. In *Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels made this assertion. The strikes were significant even if their effect was not immediately apparent. Since the labour (working) class is the most revolutionary class in a capitalist nation and this working-class created the catacomb of capitalism, leading to the socialist revolution, the worldwide working-class struggle is entwined with the working class struggle in India. Without the fight of the working class throughout labour history, the anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle of the common people in colonial India is impossible to envision. What does a labour union truly do? Karl Marx viewed labour unions in the first place as organising hubs, places to gather labourers' forces, and institutions to provide workers with basic education.⁶ What was the single most important fact for Marx? The fact that dispersed employees who were vying for attention with one another were beginning to close ranks and emerge collectively. He saw this as an assurance that the working class would develop into a powerful autonomous force.

The notion that trade unions are institutions of solidarity and socialism is one that Marx and Engels regularly discuss in their writings. The resolution

concerning the past, present, and future of unions was written by Karl Marx and was approved at the Geneva Congress of the First International. According to the Marxist tradition, whereas the worker only has access to his labour force, capital is "concentrated social power."⁷ As a result, no agreement reached between Capital (the employer) and Labour (the working class) can ever be just and equitable, not even in the context of a society that placed ownership of the means of production and subsistence on one side and the living productive forces on the other. The workers' sheer numbers are the only social force they possess. Nevertheless, the lack of cohesiveness weakens this energy. The workers' inherent rivalry with one another fuels and perpetuates the lack of togetherness among them. To acquire at least those contractual circumstances that would elevate them beyond the status of mere slaves, the workers initially made spontaneous attempts to eliminate or at least restrict this competition.

Marx had to coordinate several working-class uprisings, of which the trade union movement was one, and then persuade the others of the vital importance of the trade union movement in the struggle for socialism via tenacious combat.⁸ The International Working Men's Association got into a drawn-out argument. The working class maintained its focus on its basic goals by fighting against trade union reformism, which was later continued. Lenin had to take up that fight, which the Communist International and Communist parties afterwards continued. Nearly all capitalist countries, including those that have only just attained freedom, are still at war with bourgeois labour union rule. Overall, the revolutionary techniques advocated by Marx, Engels, and Lenin formed the basis for the growth of the Indian trade union movement. History has seen the growth of the working-class movement as an economic and political force acting as a counterbalance to the same capitalist system. Like everywhere else, the working class developed as a result of the capitalist system in India.⁹ The trade union movement in India, which is mired in economic conflict, frequently unable to look beyond its factory or industry, and has demonstrated its inability to intervene in political matters, matters affecting democracy and the unity of the country, could benefit from Marx's advice and direction. This is a consequence of the trade union movement in India's inability to look outside its factory or industry regularly. Its shortcomings in protecting the peasantry and agricultural labourers are also widely acknowledged. The growth of trade unionism and labour movements in the early 1900s, aimed to enhance workers' pay, benefits, and working conditions. The effects of the two World Wars on the labour force resulted in massive demographic changes as well as a restructuring of economies and labour markets. The development of recently independent countries like India prompted the creation of new institutions and labour-related legislation. The late 20th century saw the global expansion of neoliberal economic policies that prioritised deregulation, privatisation, and less governmental involvement in the labour market. The growing impact of international organisations like the ILO helped in advancing workers' rights

and establishing global labour standards.

The growth of the working class in India took place during colonial rule over the entire nation. As a result, the emergence had unique problems and quirks that are not often evident in the growth of the working class in a developed country. The imperialist political hegemony over India's working class and the economic exploitation of both native and foreign capitalist classes have been two forces that it has faced from its inception.¹⁰ This paper aims to show how the political movement for national liberation in India came to be linked to the trade union movement there. It accomplishes this by striving to distinguish the threads and patterns of such intertwining of the two battles, as well as to position the working men's struggle in the correct framework of the people's political struggle to free the country from the shackles of British imperialism. Even after India's formal independence in August 1947, the nuances of the interaction persisted; however, after that, the working class struggles in India took on a new face with a higher outlook.

During the time of colonial rule, workers were not granted any rights, including the freedom to associate or the ability to engage in collective bargaining. The Trade Union Act wasn't approved until 1920, which is three years after the Russian Revolution. It is not surprising, given these circumstances, that trade union awareness evolved gradually and took years to become felt and acknowledged. However, this desire for the organisation was continually repressed and crushed by the British overlords. The British government utilised previously unheard-of persecution against the striking workers to undermine all organisational efforts and public confidence in organisations. Along with this, union organisers and leaders faced employment discrimination and open persecution. There were relatively few opportunities for workers in a slave society to organise large unions and protect themselves from the repression of the government and the victimisation tactics of their employers. Earlier, the combination was limited to the use of coordinated strikes. Due to a lack of rights, unions were obliged to fight just for salary to determine what standards will be followed. However, as a result of this upheaval, the demand for long-term groups began to grow, and by the second decade of the century, they had expanded across the entire country. Again, there were few rights, so their only choice to express their unity was to go on strike. By referring to these unions, many of which were run by communists, as nothing more than strike committees, the government began to make fun of them.¹¹

The AITUC's foundation was laid in part by several prominent national leaders, including Lokmanya Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and others. The first session was presided over by Lajpat Rai and the second by C. R. Das. The plan was to put an end to strikes, combat communist influence, which is to say, all independent trade union activities that foster socialist consciousness, and appeal to the working class based on nationalism to limit it to such anti-imperialist action as the Congress leaders deemed appropriate. This was after the 1930 movement and the rising number of strikes and especially the rise

of the communist leadership. In practice, it meant that the trade unions should limit their demands to economic ones, resolve them amicably, reject any revolutionary politics, and engage in political activity only in response to bourgeois leadership requests. When the communists took trade union activity seriously, the appearance of bourgeois leaders and their attempt to bind the union to their ideologies were destined to spark a fight inside the trade union movement.¹² A short while after the AITUC was established, Communist organisations began to emerge across the nation as a result of the Great October Revolution. But as of yet, they were both individuals and collectives wholly unrelated to the working class's actual movement. There was a good potential that some of them would separate from the working class movement and form their peculiar cult. The Kanpur conspiracy case had a characteristic with prior communist conspiracy trials in that the youthful communists had not yet been successful in introducing their new doctrine to the working class. The situation altered between the Kanpur (1924) and the Meerut (1929) trials. Now that Marxism had been merged with the practical working-class struggle, communists were bringing working-class ideology to the working class. To support the populace's anti-imperialist struggle, the communists were successful in creating large mass unions, advocated total independence and an agricultural revolution, and organised massive anti-imperialist protests and strikes. When the imperialist Simon Commission arrived in Bombay in 1927, the city's workers went on a complete strike, which became a part of a massive national boycott campaign against the commission. Similar demonstrations occurred in Calcutta and other industrial cities. This was made possible because communists had worked tirelessly to create strong mass organisations in which the general populace had complete faith and which had already advanced their awareness to a higher degree.¹³ Muzaffar Ahmad, an accused and a founder of the Communist Party of India, writes, 'The Communists in the Meerut Conspiracy case acted in an altogether different manner. The Statements they made day after day in the Sessions Court, instead of establishing any grounds in their favour, foredoomed all chances of escape. Through their statements, the communist prisoners sought to establish Marxism ideologically and politically and to create conditions for the emergence of a strong Communist Party in India. That these statements could be used against them and even result in enhanced sentence mattered little to them.'¹⁴

As it is quite obvious, a conflict inside the trade union movement is now unavoidable, just as it is in other nations. The proletariat ideology and non-working class non-Marxist viewpoints were destined to clash, but the task of maintaining trade union unity had to be carried out despite the struggle and collision with a no-surrender attitude. The friction, between the left-wing and right-wing tendencies—between the communists and left-oriented nationalists on the one hand and the reformists and rightists on the other, that had been sharpening in the political and labour movements of the country for the last few years climaxed at the tenth session of AITUC held at Nagpur on

28-30 November 1929 and ultimately resulted into a split in this premier national-level organization of the Indian labour.¹⁵ In 1930, the Sholapur textile workers went on a complete strike in protest against Mahatma Gandhi's arrest. This led to martial law and the hanging of four patriots. Workers in Bombay staged a one-day political strike on October 2, 1939, against the war and imperialism's oppressive policies. The national movement's leaders in Congress did not issue the demand for all of these measures. The working class took the initiative on their own and acted voluntarily. Even when the AITUC was mainly dominated by Congress politicians, Gandhi's brain-child – the Ahmadabad Majoor Mahajan – never sought affiliation with the AITUC.¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the working-class movement in India during the war would be remembered as a pivotal period in the development of Indian labour. The Indian working class emerged as a highly organised, class-conscious, and unyielding fighting force against imperialism with the defeat of fascism and the conclusion of the war. Conflicts that split the unified front and united front again were inevitable. However, the communists never gave up on their quest for cooperation inside the labour movement despite fully comprehending its precepts.¹⁷ An unbiased description of the different splits and the political struggle that led to them was provided in the CPI(M) note on divisions on the AITUC that was published in People's Democracy on August 9, 1970. The AITUC came back together after the first two splits, and things moved along. The trade union struggle's ideology was being overcome by the national appeal, but these proletarian protest incidents were becoming rare. The nationwide strike of workers in Bombay in 1946 in support of the RIN cadets' uprising was the final independent working-class action against the British government. The Communist Party issued the strike call. On February 22, 1946, the working class and other sections of the toiling masses of Bombay universally participated in this strike and *hartal* faced indiscriminate police and military firing.¹⁸ Popular demonstrations in support of the struggle of the naval ratings were organised in Calcutta, Madras, Karachi, and other locations. This incident served as a shining example of the working class and other oppressed masses' acute political consciousness and their great desires for achieving national freedom, even if it meant sacrificing their lives in the hundreds. The third separation happened in 1947 and beyond. It demonstrates once more how the bourgeoisie and its proxies believe a split is necessary when the Communists win power over the working class.¹⁹

The Congress leadership was profoundly impacted by the growing working-class consciousness and the accelerating mass upheaval, which exacerbated their anti-communist prejudice. Even Mr. Nehru, who had previously vigorously defended the idea of class struggle in the AITUC session, became concerned at the sight of its difficult advancement and engaged in public declamation against the communists. Hence at the direction of the National Congress leadership, the AITUC's Congress wing broke apart in 1947 to create the INTUC, a new trade union group. Sardar Vallabhbai

Patel orchestrated the split by urging the Congress unions within and outside of the AITUC to unite and found a new organisation.²⁰ To increase their control over the working class and combat the communists as their principal adversary, the bourgeois leaders of the Congress needed a separate organisation. The bourgeoisie broke apart because it was politically necessary to do so. This was made obvious in the statements given during the INTUC's foundation meeting, which also demonstrated their desire for a class collaboration programme and an end to the communists' dominance. The distinction was made obvious by Kripalani in his inauguration speech: 'In truth, there is a gap that cannot be filled between the AITUC and the supporters of the new trade union. If it were necessary to advance the real interests of labour, the new organisation would not think twice about using the weapon of strike action. But that weapon is to be employed after due consideration and with the utmost caution. But it would however not only be a misuse of this weapon if it were to be employed for the attainment of sectional political ends.'²¹ Familiar phrase used to oppose both strikes and the working class revolution. A new chapter in the history of Indian labour was launched with the foundation of INTUC, which represented the ideology of class collaborationism as opposed to the ideology of class struggle. Therefore, whereas achieving national liberation had been the working class's immediate political goal in the pre-independence era, the working class's revolutionary goal in the post-independence era was to overthrow the capitalist system and establish socialism in the truest sense of the word—a society free from the exploitation of man by man.²²

The Congress-Socialists had long been an active part of the AITUC's trade union movement. But at the same time that they left Congress in March 1948 and became known as Socialists. They also left the AITUC and established a new group called the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, who later in a joint meeting with the Indian Federation of Labour led by the Royists at Calcutta on 24th December 1948 unanimously decided to give birth to an entirely new organisation, Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Other organisations' separation from the Party was fostered and aided by sectarian errors in the Party's political position. Additionally, sectarian errors on the commercial front have occasionally been the work of disruptors in past years. Although Hind Mazdoor Sabha was founded as a means of reaching the working class with the vague political outlook of the Socialists and the decadent Royists who claimed to uphold the "constructive aspect of trade union work," which in plain words meant abandoning the class struggle, INTUC was established as an open appendage of the National Congress and a vehicle for propagating Congress ideology and implementing the labour policies of the Congress Government.²³ However, further splits significantly decreased the AITUC's numerical strength, which received another blow in October 1948 when Mr. N. M. Joshi resigned from his position as general secretary over a disagreement regarding the selection of a member for an AITUC delegation to the ILO. Mr. Joshi's refusal to suggest a CPI member to the government after

the CPI was declared banned was the real cause of his resignation.²⁴ AITUC, which is now mostly led by the Communist Party, continued to expand. Following the Second Party Congress's sectarian errors, it suffered a setback. But once more, it became stronger. A portion of the Party leadership, however, eventually caught the class collaboration virus. Supported by revisionist tendencies abroad, this sector descended the opportunistic inclined plane quickly. It caused the Party to split, and the CPI(M) was born in 1964.²⁵ While rejecting the revisionism of the CPI leadership, the CPI(M) chose to struggle for the right policy inside the AITUC based on Marx's teachings. The United Front cabinets of West Bengal and Kerala were disbanded during this time, with CPI leaders playing a significant part in this upheaval. In Kerala, a coalition ministry made up of the Congress (I) and the CPI replaced the coalition ministry of the CPI(M), CPI, and others. The struggle against bourgeois leaders, the government, and the ruling party has been supplanted by the struggle against the CPI(M), or communists.²⁶ This inevitably resulted in the AITUC using identical strategies, which led to a split in 1970 thus leading to the foundation of the CITU. The joint struggles of the Central and State government employees marked another significant feature of this period. The foundation conference of CITU organized by The All India Trade Union Conference was thereafter held at Lenin Nagar, Ranji Stadium, Calcutta on 28-30 May 1970, as per the decision of a Convention of General Council members and State Committee members of AITUC, held at Goa on 9th and 10th April 1970. A reception committee with Com. Jyoti Basu as Chairman and Com. Manoranjan Roy as General Secretary organized the conference. Reception Committee had enrolled 50,000 workers as members of the committee. The review made later noted that the enthusiasm among workers for this conference was such that, when a call was made for the collection of Rs.2 lakhs, 3 lakhs was collected within a short period of 3 weeks.²⁷ CITU is affiliated to the World Federation of Trade Unions. Therefore, it came as no surprise that following the split, the AITUC leaders ploughed ahead on the path of interclass cooperation and supported the emergency rule by the Indian government at the centre.

In response to the growing working class, the Communist Party of India (CPI) created a 17-point trade union policy for the future development of the working class movement (Text IV A-12). In short, the goal of the policy was to bring most of the working class into its fold. It brought attention to how important everyday labour is to the largest group of workers for their "economic interests". The CPI emphasised the growing need for the workers to become politicised and involved in the national polity to combat the trend of pure "economism" or "pure trade unionism" In the current environment, the policy placed a strong emphasis on the responsibilities of fostering unity and deeper ties between the Congress and the trade unions.²⁸ The Marxist trade union perspective in India had to fight for its existence, acceptance, and recognition as a significant force in the common struggle at every turn, just like it did in other capitalist countries. The separation, however, definitely

angered the CPI(M). The Party recognised how this undermined trade union unity and hindered efforts to foster a feeling of class awareness in the workforce. At its founding meeting, the CITU requested that its unions mark a week of trade union solidarity and inspire workers to take collective action. The CITU promoted a unifying front and unifying action. In 1973, the CITU, HMP, P&T Federation, and AIEA created a unified front organisation. With its objective of favouring the Congress above the CPI(M) and Left, the AITUC teamed up with the INTUC to establish a different alliance. A significant accomplishment was the organisation of the 1973 all-India railway strike by the UCTU front.²⁹ The movement was hampered by the emergency, but after it was over, the CITU and other groups picked up the thread and resolved to work toward greater unification. Expanding the extent of union unity was made feasible by the CPI's shift in political philosophy, separation from the Indira Congress, and readiness to work with the left opposition parties. The CITU, which has always been keen to create such unity, took the initiative to make it happen and, with help from others, was successful in creating the National Campaign Committee in 1981. An authoritative voice of workers' and employees' organisations in India today is the National Campaign Committee, which is founded on central trade unions and supported by other trade union federations with sizable memberships. It encompasses almost all significant organisations in these two sectors, except the INTUC, which supports the government. This illustrates how the ruling party is cut off from the labour movement. It should be noted that there is growing cooperation between members of the National Campaign Committee and the INTUC unions during certain events, such as negotiations.³⁰

Trade unions in India are registered and file annual returns under the Trade Union Act (1926). Statistics on trade unions are collected annually by the Labour Bureau of the Ministry of Labour, Government of India. The CITU suggests a confederation of all trade unions, central organisations, and a federation for the exchange of ideas and discussion on shared issues to strengthen the already-attained unity. The limitations of the unity attained are noted in the Party's Mission on the Trade Union Front paper from 1983. 'Despite the advancement of trade union solidarity, it must be kept in mind that it was achieved at a low level of consciousness thanks to a few initial demands. The consciousness depicted here does not go far beyond basic survival needs.'³¹ The party is aware that the working class won't be able to fulfil its function with this degree of consciousness. The Indian trade union movement is consequently prepared to fight against economism, which is a prevalent tendency. Therefore, it calls for the Party and the unions to have a proper working relationship, never forgetting either the Party's guiding function or the trade unions' mass nature. It criticises the labour unions' bureaucratic and anti-democratic operations and cautions its members against these kinds of errors. It criticised those who operated the mass organisations independently of the Party and those who saw them as pocket boroughs of the Party at its Plenum.³²

The working class of India is currently at a turning point in its history, and Marx's statement in the Communist Manifesto that 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle for democracy' best captures the magnitude of the historic responsibility that this revolutionary (working) class faces. The 1993 Central Committee document reiterated that the weakness of the agricultural worker's movement and the Kisan Sabha, despite the favourable conditions, constituted one of the important weaknesses of the democratic movement in the country.³³ The deepening of the agrarian crisis and the consequent growing miseries of agricultural workers and peasants have further increased the importance of urgently addressing these tasks.³⁴ The trade unions and the Party, at all levels, should show determination and sincerity in addressing these tasks wholeheartedly.

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