



# The Indian Trade-Union Movement ? a short overview

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Uslan Yentik provides a history of the various trade union federations in India and the work of the New Trade Union Initiative

The first trade-union federation of India was AITUC, the All Indian Trade-Union Congress. Founded as a unitary federation it was soon dominated by communist activists. Similar to China the developing working class in this huge colony had little base for reformist social-democracy at that time.

To contain the working-class, growing by numbers and militancy, in 1926 the Indian Home-Rule introduced a corporatist trade-union system which was copied from Mussolini's model in Italy, just as Varga had copied it for Brazil. Its characteristics were company-based unions controlled by a strong state influence through a strict registration process and strong interference by the state thereby integrating the unions and the working-class into the state. The later problems are still existing. Even though the right of national federation was defended, today a great many of the more than 70,000 TUs are independent.

An important split took place when INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) was founded by members of the Congress Party. The background was the policy of the Stalinist CPI supporting Britain and the British rule for the sake of the block of Stalin with British Imperialism against Hitler-Germany in the final years of World War II. In the name of this block AITUC-representatives even tried to call off strikes.

This was the Indian version of a policy that replaced the struggle for socialist world-revolution, the fight to spread the revolution from the Soviet Union, by a policy of 'Socialism in a single state?'. This 'strategy?' had already led to the 'Anglo-Russian? Trade-Union- Pact, in which name the British communists did not fight against the sell-out of the 1926 general-strike by the same TUC-leaders, who had made friendship with the SU-Trade Unions. Later this policy had led to the Hitler-Stalin-Pact. A Leninist strategy would have used the split between the imperialist powers, in this case Britain and Germany, but never subordinated the struggle for national liberation (of India) or workers revolution to a block with one of the imperialists. A successful national liberation struggle connected to a powerful class-struggle in India would have been a blow for not just for British Imperialism, but also for Hitler. His goal of destroying Bolshevism by attacking the Soviet Union would have been shown as futile had revolution spread across the colonised world.

A further split of the AITUC occurred in 1969, when the split inside the Communist Party of 1964 took its toll also in the TU-movement. The split between Moscow-oriented and Mao-oriented Stalinists had a special sharpness in India where there had also been a war with China over Tibet. This is how the CITU came in existence. Further splits occurred in the left, the Socialist Party organised a new split from AITUC to form HMS and the BNP founded BMS. Today there are eleven recognised federations, all bound to political currents and all supporting capitalism and the state.

The whole system of labour-relations was shaken up in 1990/91 after the fall of the Soviet Union when the Indian capitalists quickly sensed that playing the 'independent?' card was no longer an option. Up to this point they had been leaning towards Moscow which had given India a certain space to move free from US-Imperialism. It was able to pursue a certain industrialisation without falling prey to American or European exports. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this game was over and within months the Indian bourgeoisie switched to neoliberalism.

The bureaucratic organisations of the working-class took much longer to react. Their apparatus relied on the traditional

organised sectors, the public sector and the state-pampered Indian-controlled industry. Here changes came quickly, as Transnational Companies appeared on the ground intent on ripping up the old order.

The car Industry might serve as an example: India had kept out foreign cars quite effectively by an import tax of 150%. For Indian-produced cars there was a waiting time of eleven years. In this situation international companies had golden opportunities. In this case Suzuki, by then a rather small group, was the big winner. But they would completely change the factories, new factories and companies would be different from the start.

So whereas Suzuki-Maruti quickly learned from the fierce union struggles and replaced two-thirds of the old permanent workers with contract workers, in order to break the union power, the Union movement has yet to find an effective counter-attack.

### **The birth of the NTUI**

The traditional federations are mostly outside this process. Many TUs in new plants in an expanding economy are not affiliated to national (or state) federations. Leaving aside those that are under the direction of the management, an understandable reluctance about party interference is one reason for their lack of national co-ordination. But facing a multinational company with a small work-force drives every honest trade-unionist into seeking allies and solidarity.

Here the NTUI is a most interesting formation. Going back in its core to AITUC militants who refused to choose sides in the 1970 split, they seem to be the most successful to reorganise the TU-movement and get roots in the new sectors. The New Trade Union Initiative was formed in 2006 after a 5 year stage as an 'organising committee'.

Its two-fold strategy aims to collect unaffiliated company-based unions and to put pressure on the traditional federations to come out of their bureaucratic routine. This is not easy as the other federations quickly concluded that the NTUI as a potential competitor, even though NTUI has not yet applied to be recognised as a national federation. This has led to a rather sectarian response by most federations.

Very hopeful for example is the NTUI-Initiative of the creation of SHRAMIK EKTA MAHASANGH, Workers Unity Federation, bringing together some 80 Trade-Unions in the Region of Pune, one of the four industrial boom regions in India.

To fight the fragmentation in general, the NTUI struggles for the principle of 'one union per plant', which means to organise the different categories of workers in one union and making different affiliation to national federations no obstacle for union unity in the company. For companies with more than one plant, they suggest joint bargaining commissions. For the future they project sector structures, eg a national car-workers union, as the way out.

Whilst there are positive signs that activists are working to overcome the decline the TU-movement in India, nothing similar is yet to be seen on political grounds. But without defining political perspectives for the Indian Working class, a strategy to overcome the Indian bourgeoisie, its state and their international allies and without a tactic to involve the hundreds of thousand political and TU-activists, also the TU-movement will head into dead-end streets again. All positive initiatives would be doomed to syndicalism at best.

We are most interested in the views of militants from India on these questions and ready for debate.

In general the international left has much to learn from this huge working-class with its long tradition of struggles and organisation and much to win by combining forces.

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