

CHAPTER VIII : Trade Unionism in Tea Industry

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8.1 History of Trade Union Movement in Tea Industry

A study of the working class movement in India revealed that the climate of labour movement changed by 1918. The organised working class in most parts of the country was involved in a struggle against colonialism under the leadership of the nationalists. Some significant strikes had taken place in the Textile mills of Bombay and Kanpur and in the Jute mills of Calcutta. But the working class of the tea industry of West Bengal did not respond to this movement. The tea gardens of West Bengal were almost entirely insulated from the nationalist movement which swept the country prior to independence. Trade Union movement in Assam tea gardens, however, started since 1921 under the leadership of nationalists and it became more pronounced after 1935. By 1939 tea gardens in Assam started witnessing widespread strikes.¹

On the contrary trade union movement could not develop in the tea gardens of West Bengal till the eve of independence, as conditions for the growth of trade unions did not exist. The

workers were too poor and weak and they had no bargaining strength. But the planters were highly organised and powerful. They were in dominating positions and dictated both the wages as well as the conditions of service of the workers resulting in many industrial and social ills such as low wages, unduly long hours of work, poor working conditions. Thus the plight of the workers was miserable, and they had no other ways but to tolerate the tyrannies and naked exploitation of the planters.

During the pre-independence period the tea gardens of West Bengal were like a fort of ^{the} feudals. Trade union leaders had no access to the gardens and they were persecuted and victimised by the planters. Planters appointed chowkider to keep watchful eyes on the movement of the workers. So the workers could not go outside the garden to meet the trade union leaders. Moreover, the planters maintained a private armed force known as the 'North Bengal Mounted Rifles' in tea areas. Apart from military exercises and sporting activities this force could supplement the colonial police in overawing unruly labour.²

Thus, the planters made every possible effort to isolate the tea gardens of West Bengal from the waves of labour agitation which were sweeping through the country prior to independence under the leadership of ^{the} nationalists. As a result trade unions had a late start in the tea gardens of West Bengal.

It is often stated that the communists were the first to introduce trade unions in tea gardens of West Bengal around the time of independence. They struggled against all odds to bring a consciousness among tea garden workers. Ratanlal Brahman was the nominee of the Communist Party of India (C.P.I) from the tea garden constituency of Darjeeling in the Bengal provincial Assembly election held in April, 1946. The election provided an opportunity to communists to enter into the gardens. Ratanlal Brahman and Sushil Chakraborty together with their Communist fellows began to hold meeting with red flags. This was the first time that the workers saw red flags inside the gardens. The first trade union in the tea industry of West Bengal was formed in Darjeeling by this election campaign at the end of 1945. It was Darjeeling District Tea Workers' Union. Ratanlal Brahman and Bhadra Bahadur Hamal became its first President and General Secretary respectively. Later it was renamed as Darjeeling District Chia Camman Mazdur Union in 1952.

It is alleged that the planters tried in every way to defeat Ratanlal Brahman in the election. It is also alleged that they also took the help of Government and non-communist party (Congress) for this purpose.* The managers of twelve tea gardens including Fubsiring, Ragnit, Happyvelly Soom etc. issued a letter to Ratanlal Brahman that he would not be allowed to meet the workers during the course of election campaign. But inspite of all these obstacles Ratanlal Brahman

* Roy Manoranjan - Samrajyababu Bidrohi Sangram O Shramik Andolan (Bengali) (1987) Published by National Book Agency, p.135.

continued his election campaign and ultimately elected by massive votes.³

The win of Ratanlal Brahman in the Assembly election was a land mark in the beginning of trade union movement in the tea industry of West Bengal. This brought a new awakening among the garden workers. Under the leadership of Communists they got a new deal to organize themselves against the tyrannies of British planters. The workers who tolerated the naked oppression of planters during the last hundred years now began to protest. On the other hand planters were also aggressive towards the workers. In their turn, they retaliated by retrenching large number of workers involved in trade unionism. They also provided cruel punishment like 'Hattalahaar' to the workers. Under this system of punishment the manager sent out an erring worker along with his family to deep forest in the mid night. Thus, the employers tried in every way to resist the organized movement of the workers.

During 1945-46 Darjeeling tea gardens had witnessed of several labour agitations. On May 31st, 1946, Ratanlal Brahman was persecuted and arrested by the police when he entered into Soom tea estate to hold a meeting. Subsequently the arrest was followed by a large scale labour agitation demanding the release of Ratanlal Brahman. A woman worker, Lumbini snatched rifle from the police. The agitation became uncontrollable and the police released Ratanlal Brahman.

On 2nd June, 1946, the police shoot fire on the agitated workers at Fubsiring Tea Estate. On 16th June, 1946 the management of Ambutia Tea Estate retrenched six workers for the offence of unionism. In July of the same year forty workers who were in the leadership role of trade unions were retrenched from the tea gardens of Pandam, Fubsiring, Sider, Soom and Ambutia. On 18th June, 1946, the Chia Camman Majdur Union gave 'strike notice' to the management of 13 tea gardens for their seven points demand which included wage raise, ration at cheaper rate, dearness allowance @ 25% of total wage, abolition of 'Hattabahar', medical facilities, and recognition of trade unions etc. This is the first time that the workers of 13 tea gardens went on a general strike for a day.

The waves of trade unionism also reached in the Terai tea gardens around the same period. Here also the first initiative was taken by the communists. The two distinguished Communist trade unionist, Biren Bose and Bhupen Bhowmick made an attempt to form trade union in Merry View tea garden in 1946. The tea gardens of Terai region were also unaccessible to outsiders. But Bhupen Bhowmick was a fire wood supplier of Merry view tea garden, so he had easy access to the garden. Under this privilege he first communicated with Jaladhar, a labour sardar of the garden. They hold secret meeting with few workers in the hut of Jaladhar at night. An adivasi muslim worker, Sarbati Mia, played a distinguished role in forming workers' union. But this initiative to form union could not last for a

long. The manager became aware of the fact that some of his workers holding secret meeting to form labour union under the leadership of Sarbati Mia. He soon retrenched Sarbati and ceased Jaladhar's sardari. Latter in 1954 labour unions were formed in Kharibari, Kamala, Fulbari and Merryview tea gardens under the leadership of communists. This time major initiative was taken by Bhupen Bhowmick.

Trade unions in Dooars were formed at the initiative of the communists and Bengal Dooars Railway workers. The Bengal Dooars Railway Workers' Union (BDRWU) was a non political union but a majority of its members supported the communist party of India (C.P.I.). The members of the Communist Party made an attempt to organise the workers of Dooars tea gardens through the gangmen and pointsmen, who had also the adivasi background like the tea garden workers. They performed their activities under the cover of night as the railwaymen could be arrested or even shot by the managers for trespass.⁴

The first tea garden came under the influence of BDRWU is Haihaipathar (now renamed Rapali) near Mal. The other tea gardens like Denguajhar, situated near Jalpaiguri town, Bagrakote and Lakhaipara situated near Bagrakote and Banarhat railway station respectively also came under the influence of ^{the} communists around this time.⁵

In July 1946, the first central trade union for the tea garden workers of Dooars was formed with the workers of nearly

thirty gardens. It was Zilla Cha Bagan Mazdur Union. Ratanlal Brahman and Debprasad Ghosh became its first President and Secretary respectively. The union was latter affiliated to the AITUC.

This is the history of early stage of development of trade union movement in tea industry of West Bengal. The history bears testimony of the tremendous struggle of communist trade unionists, and they had to fight both against the Government and the planters to form the workers' association. Their sincerity and dedication ultimately gave the birth of trade unions in the tea industry.

8.2 Growth of Trade Union Movement in Tea Industry

The organized labour movement in tea industry started after the advent of trade unionism. Before that no significant labour movement could take place in the industry. In the previous part of this chapter we found that the trade union in Dooars tea gardens ~~started~~ around 1946, and well organized just after its advent. Trade unionism in Dooars tea gardens was greatly helped by the Bengal Dooars Railway Workers' Union (BDRWU) which was at that time a well organized trade union. But the trade unionism in Terai tea gardens did not get any support from such organized trade union. It was started at the individual initiative of Communists like Biren

Bose and Bhupen Bhownick. As a result though the attempt was made to form labour union in Terai tea gardens during the same period but it could not successful. The unionism in Terai tea gardens began to organize only after 1951, i.e., after passing of the plantation Labour Act, consequently the tea garden workers of Terai did not participate in the early fifties labour movement.

The growth of trade union movement is co-related with the socio-political environment of the country. Thus the socio political changes in West Bengal had considerable impact on the growth of trade union movement in its tea industry. It would be more acceptable to trace the growth of trade union movement in tea industry in terms of some phases carved around both certain landmarks and set backs. These are like the 'Tebhaga Movement, Food movement, India's independence, Bonus agitation, United front regime, Emergency and the Left Front regime are all socio political in nature and hold a vast significance in the context of the growth of trade union movement in tea industry.

1. Initial phase (1946-47)
2. Set back period (1948-1951)
3. Trade Union Movement during the period 1961 to 1970.
4. Trade Union Movement in present day 1971 to onwards -

Initial phase (1946-47) : During 1946-47 the tea garden

workers of Dooars joined in two major labour movements, viz. 'Food Movement' and 'Tebhaga Movement'. In spite of the non-involvement of the Terai tea garden workers in these two movements the discussion of these movements is relevant here as the struggle of tea garden workers started by these movements.

By the middle of 1946, the Communist Party of India (C.P.I) had started 'Food movement' all over Bengal as a protest against the general shortage of food grains in the state. They also involved the tea garden workers of Dooars in the movement to stand them against the planters who did not supply them quota of food rations. Labour unrest increased in the Dooars tea gardens during this period.

The next major movement took place in early 1947, when the tea garden workers of Dooars joined with share croppers in the 'Tebhaga Movement'. The movement was launched at the initiative of the Communist Party to ensure a one third share of the produce to the share cropper. This was a landmark in the history of working class movements in India as it was one of the earliest united actions by peasants and workers in the country. During the movement a large number of workers left the gardens in a massive scale and joined with the neighbouring agitated peasants as a protest against the tyrannical attitude of planters to them. It is to be noted here that the agitated peasants had the same origins as the adivasi tea garden workers and the

cause of their migration from Chotonagpur was also the same. Caste and Community of the workers had an influence in the movement. The non tribal workers like the Mech and Rajbanshi did not support the movement.

The planters tried in every way to resist the rebel workers. They prevented communists from holding meeting on tea garden lands. They also involved catholic priests and nuns for this purpose. A nun at Oodlabari tea garden implored the workers, "My children, don't go that way, you will only cause grief to yourselves".⁶ But inspite of all efforts the planters could not alienate the communists from workers rather more the workers expressed their support in favour of communists and they were continuously leaving the gardens. On the contrary planters and jotedar became more aggressive and they put pressure on the Government to restrain the movement. In February, '47 the Government sent armed force to the tea areas of Dooars to restrain the peasants' movement.

Police opened fire on 1st March, 1947, at a group of agitated farmers at Mathachulkar village, when they breaking granary of Ataharuddin, a jotedar. Five farmers were killed in the incident.

Again on 4th April, 1947, police opened fire at a group of granary breaker at Mahabari village near Metali. This time nine persons including two workers of Oodlabari tea garden were killed.

Thus, we see that the 'Tebhaga movement' is the testimony of a bloody revolution and the tea garden workers were also the victim of that bloodshed. Though the movement was not initiated for the tea garden workers yet large number of tea garden workers involved in it. The involvement of the tea garden workers in 'Tebhaga Movement' can be marked as a landmark of the beginning of the workers' struggle. This is the first time that the workers protested against the oppression of planters by leaving the tea gardens in a massive way. The consciousness grew among the workers greatly contributed towards the future trade union movement in the tea industry.

Though the 'Tebhaga movement' was largely found in Dooars but it had no impact on the share croppers of Terai. The main cause of it was that the share croppers of Dooars were organised by the communists from the beginning of the forties. Bengal Dooars Railway Workers Union (BDRWU) took major initiative to organize them. On the contrary communists built up their influence on the share croppers of Terai only after 1954. Thus, because of lack of farmers' organization the 'Tebhaga movement' could not widespread in Terai. However, one very unorganized movement took place at Patharghata near Matigara police station in 1946. Near about hundred farmers gathered at the granary of Nabin Roy, a jotedar, under the

leadership of a Communist, Nripen Bose. Unlike in Dooars farmers' caste and community had no influence in the movement. In Terai, local farmers like Rajbanshi and Mache also joined with Adivasi farmers in the movement. The farmers broke out the granary and shared three parts of crops among them. One Adivasi landless farmer, Bandhan Orao, played important role in the movement. Latter police arrested Nripen Bose and other six farmers. They were jailed for three weeks.

Subsequently Nripen Bose took initiative to break out the granary of Matigara jotedar in December 1947. There was a small inhabitants of some adivasi landless farmers near the Panchanan river at Matigara. In order to organize the movement Nripen Bose first communicated with them and fixed up a day in December 1947 to break out the granary of the jotedar. But this time police was informed much earlier and it could not progress much.

Besides these two initiatives no other progress was made regarding 'Tebhaga movement' in the Terai. Again these initiatives were not made in an organized manner and were made at the individual initiative of Nripen Bose. So it could not widespread in the Terai. Further the tea garden workers of Terai also did not respond to this movement, as there was no trade unions in Terai tea gardens during that period.

2. Set back period (1948-1951) : All the trade union activity in tea industry was done in the beginning by Communists

and they had a good hold over the garden workers. Soon the Communist made their entry in the tea gardens the workers became much organized. The consciousness of the workers grew and they began to protest against the tyrannies of the planters. But the trade union activity in the tea industry did not last for a long. It got a sudden set back when the Government imposed ban on the Communist Party of India (C.P.I) in 1948. Most of the Communist leaders were either jailed or gone under ground. The trade unionism in Terai tea gardens was suffered more due to the arrest of both Biren Bose and Bhupen Bhowmick. Who were then struggling to form trade unions in Terai tea gardens after their failure in the Merry View Tea Garden. During this period Congress and Gorkha League arranged trade union in the Dooars tea gardens. However, no non communist trade unions entered in the Terai tea gardens during this period. Terai tea gardens had no trade unions till 1953. Dr. Bhowmik says that the non-communist trade unions in Dooars tea gardens worked much closer and co-operation with managements and the Government.* As a result, inspite of the oppression on the workers no labour movement took place in the tea industry during 1948 to 1951.

In 1951, High court declared that the ban on Communist party was illegal, and after the General election of 1952, the Communist leaders were freed from jail and warrant on all under ground Communist leaders were withdrawn. After being freed from jail the Communist trade unionists again devoted themselves

*Bhowmik, Sharit, Class Formation in Tea Plantation System, 1981, New Delhi People's Publishing House, p.149.

in the trade unionism in tea industry. They regained support from the large number of workers. How they organised the workers and lead them to the future trade union movement in tea industry has been discussed in the subsequent phase.

3. Trade unions during the fifties (1951-1960) : The organized trade union movement in tea industry started during the fifties. The enactment of various labour laws by the independent Government much facilitated to the growth of trade union movement in tea gardens. The Plantation Labour Act was passed in 1951. The act includes several statutory provision for labour, such as, housing, sanitation, schooling facilities for the children of the workers, medical facilities, drinking water, creches etc. The act makes it mandatory for the employers to provide these facilities.

In March, 1950 the State Government appointed the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for tea plantations. The recommendation of the committee came into effect in early 1952. This guarantee of a minimum wage provided some economic protection to the workers. Subsequently, other acts were passed granting some facilities to the workers. Such as the payment of Bonus Act, and the acts providing for Provident Fund and Gratuity etc. affected the working class in the country. There were other acts too which had been passed earlier like the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, and its standing orders, Minimum Wage Act 1948, which provided for some security of workers in general.

These were initially ignored by the planters as there was no state check on them. The State apparatus to enforce their application did not exist. In early 1950s the State Government set up the Labour Bureau which appointed Assistant Labour Commissioners and Labour officers to look into the implementation of the acts. Labour Tribunals were also set up to decide disputes.

Thus, during the fifties the planters started losing the grip over the workers. The loosening of the tight grip of the planters on the workers gave more scope to the trade unions to gain momentum.

The legislative measures of the independent Government specially the plantation Labour Act formalised the relationship between the workers and employees. The earlier master and servant relationship is replaced by the employer and employee relation. But the post second world war depression, which continued till 1953, further deteriorated the labour management relation in tea industry. Industrialists in different industries retrenched large number of workers. Tea industry was also no exception. Near about one lakh workers were retrenched from the tea gardens of Assam, Bengal and Tripura in 1952-53. In 1952 tea prices in North India decreased abnormally. Various measures of economy were introduced in tea industry on account of the crisis, which ultimately resulted in labour having to accept reduction in their earnings. Planters

resorted to wage cut. They also resorted to close down the gardens in non-plucking season. In 1952, twelve gardens in North East India were closed causing unemployment of one lakh workers. The workers suffered more economic hardship when their weekly working days reduced to five from seven. Moreover, the Banerjee Committee (Second Minimum Wage Committee) curtailed all the benefits received by the workers in kind. Food grains which were being supplied to the workers at a concessional rate of Rs. 5.00 per maund was increased to Rs. 15.00 per maund.

Thus, the workers had to go through with much grief and hardship during 1952-53. In the name of economic measures the planters exercised the utmost economic oppression on the workers. Under such circumstances the Communist trade unionists awakened the tea garden workers of Dooars. Workers began to resort to strike. Labour unrest intensified in Dooars tea gardens. In their turn, the planters retaliated by retrenching large number of workers.

But the tea garden workers of Terai did not raise any protest against the curtailment of wages and benefits. Rather they accepted the planters' measures of economy in a much disciplinary manner. The Chairman of TPA, J.A.Mason, in his speech at the annual meeting of the Association in 1954, highly appreciated the workers for maintaining peace and harmony in the industry during the crisis period. "... I am pleased to

record that no major troubles or stoppage were experienced throughout the year. During January & February of last year various measures of economy were being introduced on account of the crisis which ultimately resulted in labour having to accept some reduction in their earnings during this period, which could have been difficult passed off without incident and it is at this juncture that I would record a work of praise to our labour forces and India staff in the Terai for the manner in which they accepted and the discipline maintained, during the period, these measure were being implemented".⁷

Thus, during the recession in tea industry (1952-53) no labour agitation grew in the Terai tea gardens, and labour management relation was much cordial. The labour unrest which swept in the Dooars during that period could not influence the workers of Terai. This is due to the non existence of trade union in the Terai tea gardens.

Trade unions had a late start in the Terai tea gardens. The communists formed first trade unions in Karibari, Kamala, Fulbari and Merry view tea gardens in 1954. The TPA described this unionism as outside influences on the workers. But at the same time expressed their support for the trade unions which would run at constitutional lines. "... we are all aware outside influences; are at work, and whether their aims be political or otherwise such activities do have an unsettling effect on our labour. ... We are in the Terai have no objection to union for labour which is run on constitutional lines".⁸

The Terai tea gardens had its first experience of labour unrest in August 1955. On the 29th August, 1955, near about 2.5 lacs workers of Dooars and Terai jointly struck for work on the issue of payment of Bonus for 1953-54. In Terai the strike was organized by the Communist Control Darjeeling Zilla Chia Bagan Mazdur Union (Terai Branch), and the congress sponsored Terai Cha Bagan Sramik Sangha. The sudden spurt in the prices of tea in 1954 had secured huge profits to the planters. The unions therefore, demanded for their workers a rightful share in the profits in the form of bonus. In Dooars the strike was launched for eighteen days but in Terai it was launched for nine days.

The issue of bonus was included in agenda for the Delhi conference of Industrial Committee on Plantations (ICP) due to be held on 31st August, 1955.⁹ But the employers had already taken a hard line on the bonus question, and the trade unions felt that neither the union Government nor the ICP would be able to persuade them into a softer position.¹⁰ So the trade unions had not awaited for the outcome of the discussion of Delhi Conference and went on strike from 29th August. TPA described the activity of the trade unions as a most 'rush' and 'unjustifiable' action on the part of the workers.¹¹

On the 2nd September when the strike had entered its 5th day a message was received from Delhi which informed that a committee had been formed to discuss the question of bonus.

The employers than induced the workers to call off the strike, but the workers continued their struggle.

The Chairman of the ICP directed both sides to come to an agreement within three months or else the case would be referred to the tribunal. The strike in Dooars then called off and from 16th September, 1955. In Terai, however, the workers joined in work on 7th September, when the strike had entered its 9th day.

Thus, we see though the workers of Terai responded with the workers of Dooars in bonus agitation, but they came out of struggle in much earlier. As we have already mentioned that the trade unions in Terai tea gardens entered only in 1954, and the bonus agitation took place in the very next year, in 1955. The influence of trade union leaders on the workers was yet to be achieved which they already had on the workers of Dooars. Moreover, the workers of Terai had no past experience of struggle as they were not involved in the previous two major labour agitations. Viz. 'Food movement' and 'Tebhaga Movement'. As a result a feeling of 'individuality' easily grew among the majority of the workers after a short period struggle. The trade union leaders failed to break out the individuality of the workers as they had no strong hold on them. So the leaders instructed, the workers to join work after 9 days of struggle.

The resultant loss on strike as gathered by the TPA from the reports of its member gardens is given below :

Mandays lost	...	36,118
Wage lost	...	Rs. 56,613
Crop lost	...	2,820 mds.

Source : Proceedings of Annual General Meeting of TPA 1956, p.4.

The question of bonus was first discussed at the meeting of the sub-committee of the ICP in January, 1956, in Delhi. But their three days meeting could not reach to the final settlement. Ultimately the labour minister and the minister for commerce and industry intervened and laid down a formula for the four years, from 1953 to 1956. As a result the workers got a bonus in excess of their demand. The planters had no other alternatives but to accept it. The TPA expressed their grief on the decision. "We are saddled with this burden for all time. The bonus was a direct result of the 1954 so called prosperity year. It is hoped that we shall never have another such year as there is no knowing for further financial burden the industry might be asked to bear".¹²

The agreement to give a bonus to plantation workers created a record in the plantation industry, for India became the first country to accept the principle of payment of bonus to plantation workers out of profit.¹³

Since 1955 trade unions began to increase their holding on the workers and labour unrest slowly intensified in the Terai. In the beginning the employers did not want to recognize the trade unions and used to play a negative role in dealing with labour. The records of the Terai planters Association (TPA) show that the Chairman of TPA repeatedly alluded to labour trouble in his speeches at the annual general meeting of the Association. He termed the trade union leaders as outside elements and blamed them for inciting the labourers against the management. "The labour had been incited by self interested outside element".¹⁴

In 1956, the State Government framed the rules under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The workers made pressure on the management to fulfill their statutory obligations under the rule. On the other hand the employers frequently revealed their financial inability to discharge the obligations. Conflicts got momentum on the issue. Moreover, due to shortage of food grain in the state the employers resorted to cut workers' quota of ration. The workers, in their protest, resorted to gherao and strike. Thus, the labour management relations had been worsen from the late fifties. On 15th September, 1958 a token strike was called by the trade unions on the issue of basic ration. The strike, however, had not influenced the workers of all tea gardens of Terai. Only three tea gardens observed the strike in which the labourers accepted the alteration in their basic ration to 50% wheat and 50% rice.¹⁵

Another cause which aggravated the labour management relations during the late fifties in the Terai tea garden is the intervention of multiple trade unions with different political ideology, who vied with each other for making hold on the workers. This had created divisions and fractions in labour. It became a stumbling block to the growth of trade union movement in the Terai. Settlements made with one union were challenged by other unions and the solution of the workers' problem became much complex. TPA annoyed to the incidence and demanded that the trade unions should have necessary qualification certificate from the Government and the persons of high integrity. "The chief cause of labour unrest at present seems to be inter union rivalry, there being no less than eight unions in the small district. It seems unfortunate that this state of affairs would be permitted to exist. The management is always prepared to support trade unionism, should have the necessary qualification from Government, and the persons of high integrity".¹⁶

In 1959 the Second Minimum Wage Committee declared the second adhoc increments in the daily wage rate of the workers by 12 paise, and at the same time the employers resorted to increase the work load of the workers. But the trade unions did not accept it. Conflict between the labour and management got momentum on the issue of work load. H.E.Whitely, the Chairman of TPA frequently alluded the workers for their lower

productivity in his speech in the annual general meeting of the Association. "Wages continue to increase but the employer can not increase the work-load. When one tries to obtain a slightly higher standard of work for the greater emoluments paid, one invariably meets with the charge that this is an attempt to get an unfair amount of work from the labour. Unless the workers and their leaders are prepared to give little more, rather than continually to ask for more, the prospects of securing a really efficient industry are slight".¹⁷

Thus, we have seen that trade unionism in Terai tea gardens had a late start and entered only in the middle of the fifties. Unionisation of labour coincided with the rise of militant labour movements during the late fifties. Labour militancy became more pronounced during the sixties, which we shall discuss in the next phase.

3. Trade unions during the period, 1961 to 1970 : In Terai different political parties started tea labour unions with different demands. Hence inter union rivalry was a regular feature. So from the beginning of sixties the trade union leaders tried to bring a unity among different national federations involved in the tea industry with different political ideologies. In 1962, the co-ordination committee of Tea Plantation Workers (CCTPW) was formed by the major trade unions in tea. These were at that time the unions affiliated to AITUC, INTUC, HMS, UTUC, Gorkha League, and the

clerical unions. Its present composition is almost the same except that it also has CITU (which was formed after its split with AITUC) and the IFTU (PCCPI (ML) group). In a sense the CCTPW was a unique body because one can rarely find such diverse unions like INTUC and CITU sharing the same platform.

Though the formation of CCTPW has been abaled to ensure unity among the diverse trade unions at the industrial level but it has failed to bring any unity at the garden level. Interunion rivalry remained as same as before at the garden level.

Regarding trade union movement, during the first half of the sixties, Terai tea gardens had a tendency to resort to 'gheraos' as a democratic movement of the workers against the management. 'Gheraos' often degenerated in violence, confinement and assult of the managerial staff. As a result labour management relations deteriorated. TPA (Terai Planters' Association) expressed its distress at the wrongful confinement and assult of the managerial staff during the course of gheraos". ... It is indeed distressing that the managerial staff should be subjected to assult and wrongly confinement, merely for endeavouring to secure a reasonable standard of work and a modicum of discipline ...".¹⁸

Slowly labour unrest got momentum and worse forms of coercion like gherao and physical threats of violence were quite common in the Terai tea gardens. The Chairman of the

employers' Association (TPA) repeatedly blamed the trade unions for indulging indiscipline and rowdyism in his speech in the annual general meeting of the Association. He was so annoyed to the militancy of the workers that once he asked the Government to employ an additional inspector to administer the trade unionism in the tea industry. "... we in tea are subjected to a vast number of checks by Excise Inspectors, Plantation Inspectors, Factory Inspectors, Factory Medical Inspectors, Explosive Inspectors, Provident Fund Inspectors and in some case Bioler Inspectors could not the Govt. have just another cadre of Inspectors whose duty would be to see that trade unions are properly administered".¹⁹

From the middle of the sixties the labour unrest became more explosive in the Terai tea gardens. Workers resorted to strikes along with the gheraos. In consequent workers lost their wages and employers their production.

The incidence of strikes, mandays lost, wage lost and loss of production in the Terai tea gardens during the period 1966 to 1970 has been in Table 8.1.

In August, 1965, there was a one day unofficial strike on the two gardens of Terai. The strike launched by the local unions for the implementation of the projected raise of 40 paise on the minimum wages declared by the State Govt. in May, 1965.²⁰

Table 8.1
Industrial Disputes in Terai Tea Gardens - 1966-1970

Year	No. of strikes	Mandays lost	Wage lost (in Rs.)	Loss of production (in kg.)	Value of production
1966	4	13,282	26,526.26	77,802.00	3,72,309.60
1967	11	10,712	21,386.90	38,912.50	2,10,175.00
1968	11	11,354	22,734.42	31,121.00	1,64,293.35
1969	N.A.	2,41,265	6,02,963.34	9,875.79.00	49,72,742.93
1970	Nil	9,215	25,795.62	21,413.00	1,18,665.00

Note : N.A = Not available.

Source : Data Compiled from Proceedings of Annual General Meeting of Indian Tea Association (Terai Branch) 1967, p.3, 1968, p.2; 1969, p.3; 1970, p.4; 1971, p.3.

In 1966, four gardens were involved in a 7 day strike which commenced from 22nd September and was organized jointly by the CCTPW. The main issue on which the strike was launched was for increased D.A., based on the minimum wages notification made in 1959 with other issues.²¹ This was the first time that the workers struck work under the leadership of CCTPW.

In 1967, the first united front (UF) Government assumed the power of the state. The new Government pledged to recognize the rights of workers with a view to voicing their just demands and grievances, it would not suppress democratic and legitimate struggle of the people. Accordingly the U.F labour Minister

Sri Subodh Banerjee announced a labour policy which "a break through with the past, with the anti-people and bureaucratic policies and approach of the congress".²² The policy desires to enlist the peoples' co-operation for the implementation of policies rather than depend on the administrative machinery. The police was asked not to interfere in the legitimate democratic trade union movement. Lay off and retrenchment without the sanction of the Government was "discouraged". "Gherao" was also legalised by the Government.

By the new labour policy of U.F. Government trade unions got the Govt. with them in their struggles, which made a filip to militant labour movement in all industries of the state. In Terai tea gardens labour militancy and gheraos rose to its peak and managerial staff fell victim to it. "... the workers in particular had resulted in 'Gheraos' of those in charge of running Industrial Establishment. ... those who have been Gheraos were subjected to insults and inhuman treatments".²³

Terai tea gardens had witnessed 11 strikes each in the years 1967 and 1968 (Table 8.1). Moreover, in 1967, 7 gheraos were reported in the Terai.²⁴ In 1968, the labour militancy turned to more violent shape and caused murders in the tea areas. The proprietor of the Bagdogra Tea Estate was brutally murdered by the workers of the garden.²⁵

In 1967, the second U.F Ministry led by C.P.I(M), was voted into power. The labour policy of 1967 remained unchanged. There was no improvement of labour unrest in the Terai. Labour management relations further deteriorated due to continuous process of gheraos and confinement of managerial staff. There were confinement on 6 occasions on 5 member gardens of I.T.A., varying from 1 hour to 15 hours at a stretch. Stoppage of work from half a day to one day on 8 gardens.²⁶

Thus, during the United Front regime the workers resorted to large number of gheraos to fulfil their demands. This is due to legalisation of gheraos by the United Front Govt. in its new labour policy. But the employers association (ITA) was not willing to recognize 'gheraos' as a weapon of workers' protest. On protesting the tactics of gheraos, the Chairman of ITA (Terai Branch), R.R.Gupta made the following statement in his speech at the annual general meeting of the association in 1970.

"We do not favour to use the expression 'Gheraos' as we were told, or advised that latter usage of expression does not appear to have been included in the English dictionary, yet the usage of this form of expression has found favour with the workers of all the industry, much more so by the press".²⁷

In their turn, the employers retaliated by retrenching the workers involved in the gheraos of managerial staff. They also filed criminal cases against the workers for assaulting

the managerial staff in the course of gheraos. But latter they had to withdraw the cases under the instruction from the U.F.Govt.²⁸

In two cases of confinement the employers obtained search warrants from the magistrate, but the police who directed to serve these warrants stood as silent spectators and in one case a police official acted as a conciliation officer and instructed the confined manager to negotiate with labour to obtain his own release.²⁹

Thus, we see that the U.F.Govt. was at the back of the workers, helping them in their movement against the employers. The police was also kept aloof from the labour agitation in the Terai tea gardens.

The second U.F. Govt. was obligated to help the workers in their struggle for increasing wages, unemployment benefits etc. This encouraged the labour leaders of CCTPW to organize the second major strike from 18th August, 1969. The main issue of the strike was for increased employment and the implementation of plantation Labour Act (PLA). Earlier the CCTPW submitted a charter of demands on 27th July, 1969. A series of tripartite meetings were held at both upcountry and Calcutta to discuss the issues involved. Although a satisfactory settlement was reached on certain issues under dispute, but the main issue on land labour ratio remained unsolved. The employers did not agree to settle the issue of land labour

ratio immediately and demanded same period to study prior to reaching the final settlement to it. But the labour leaders put forward their claim that unless the land labour ratio was decided upon, they were not prepared to negotiate on their issues. In ultimate, the workers went on continuous strike with effect from 18th August, 1969, which continued for 16 days - the longest in the Terai tea gardens. The strike was in all tea gardens of West Bengal.

In the previous phase of trade union movement we observed that in Bonus Agitation of 1955, the workers of Terai did not remain in struggle for full 18 days period of strike, and joined in the work after 9 days. But in the general strike of 1969, they continued their struggle for full 16 days with the workers of Dooars and Darjeeling. Because throughout the sixties trade union leaders involved the workers of Terai in continuous militant agitation. This allowed the leaders to have some sort of hold on the workers.

The 16 days general strike resulted 2,41,265 mandays lost in the Terai. The workers lost their wages amounting to Rs. 6,02,963.34 and employers their production of the value of Rs. 49,72,742.93 (Table 8.1).

During the period of strike, on 28th August, 1969, the workers numbering about five thousand led by five union leaders assembled in front of the I.T.A (Terai branch) head quarters shouting slogans to ventilate their grievances.³⁰

After several joint and separate conferences at the intervention of the Labour minister, West Bengal, a settlement was reached on 2nd September, 1969. The chapter of land labour ratio was finally closed by agreeing to fill up all permanent vacancies of workmen which have occurred since 1st January, 1969, and to employ additional heads on the basis of acreage of each gardens as follows :³¹

1)	Estates below 250 acres	20
2)	Estates from 251-500 acres	25
3)	Estates from 501-1000 acres	30
4)	Over 1000 acres	35

In addition to the land labour ratio, agreement on the following issues were also settled between the employers and workers.

The resident temporary workers would be supplied ration at concessional rates or given cash compensation in lieu of thereof at their option. But the non resident workers would be given cash compensation only in lieu of supply of ration to them.

The wage issue was agreed upon to be settled by setting up a suitable machinery in due course. However, the rate of

extra leaf price (E.L.P) increased from 5.5 paise to 7 paise for the tea garden workers of Dooars and Terai.

The employers also assured that there would be no victimization of any workmen for joining the strike. The strike was withdrawn with the immediate effect of agreements. The employers felt that they had been burdened with extra financial load. "This settlement interalia brought in an increase in wages and other benefits which imposed additional burden which majority of the gardens in the Terai just can not afford".³²

Thus, we see that the general strike of 1969 could wrest a number of concessions from the employers. After 1969 no major strike took place in the tea industry. The CCTPW has given only occassional calls for one day token strike.

Apparently during the sixties labour unrest was much explosive in the tea industry. As regards trade union movement the workers resorted to gheraos and confinement of managerial staff. The movement received a strong support from the left coalition U.F.Govt, as the Government legalised 'gheraos' as a weapon of workers' protest. In consequent, theraos gathered momentum within a few days of the U.F's assumption of office in February, 1967. Between March and October, 1967, there were 52 cases of gheraos for 258 hours in the tea industry of West Bengal.³³ The two leftist trade unions, AITUC and UTUC organized 34 cases of gheraos.³⁴ Thus, 65% of the cases of gheraos organized by leftist trade unions. This

figure shows that the leftist trade unions gathered much support from the working class of tea industry during the U.F regime. The U.F Government was dismissed in November, 1967, and it remained out of office up to February, 1969. During this period the state was under presidential rule. There was no cases of gherao in tea industry during the presidential rule. In March, 1969, the U.F.Government again returned to power. As soon as it was resorted to power gheraos recurred. After 11 months of regime the second U.F.Government broke out in February, 1970. The state was again put under the presidential rule. Since the fall of the U.F.Government the trade union movement reflecting a changing picture, which we shall discuss in the next phase.

4. Trade union movement in present day - 1971 to onwards :

From the beginning of seventies labour unrest in the Terai tea gardens gradually abated. Employers recognized trade union movement as a democratic right of the workers, and asked trade union leaders for amicable settlement of grievances by bilateral discussion. "... the disputes which arise could be settled amicably and smoothly, and in a manner which would be fair to both employees and employers. Let us hope this request will be accepted by the officials concerned in the spirit that it is given".³⁵

Trade unions also responded to the appeal of the employers, gave up their early militant attitudes and demanded to

settle or iron-out differences at the bipartite level than any confrontation. In consequent there had been a significant drop in the number of strike and gheraos.

In 1972, the Congress Government voted into power. Unlike the U.F the labour policy of the new Government did not support gheraos, demonstration, confinement etc. The labour militancy in the Terai tea gardens who considerably reduced and labour management relations became relatively 'cordial' during this period. Employers felt that it had been mainly possible due to change in the Government. "During the course of the year behind us the industrial climate obtaining on the gardens were completely peaceful. Various causes can be attributed to this happy state of affairs, ... one of which may be said to be our having a stable Government. ... it will not be far from the truth in asserting that the year 1972 is the best year in our relationship with both the workers and unions in comparison with the previous five years".³⁶

In 1974, the Central Government imposed emergency in India. Industrial unrest became much explosive in the post emergency period. In the year 1974, the figure of mandays

lost in India rose to about 40 million.³⁷ This was a record figure for one year and for any country in the world. In West Bengal mandays lost due to strike rose to 7,334,715 in 1974 from 2,52,792 in 1973. The figure further rose to 10,785,261 in 1975. The percentage of mandays lost was 70.4 per cent and 79.4 per cent respectively in 1974 and 1975.³⁸

The index of mandays lost on account of strike clearly an evidence of explosive labour agitation in West Bengal during the post emergency period. But the tea industry was relatively peaceful. Number of strikes reduced to 11 in 1974 from 17 in 1973 and further to 7 in 1975. Though the figure of mandays lost on account of strike increased to 38,864 in 1974 from 20,321 in 1973, but decreased to 10,120 in 1975.³⁹ This figure indicate that labour unrest in tea industry was not explosive.

There was also no labour disturbance in the Terai tea gardens during the post emergency period. The Chairman of the I.T.A (Terai Branch) expressed his pleasing at the role of trade union leaders in the annual general meeting of the association. "I am happy to report that with the gradual growth of trade unionism on very healthy lines, labour leaders in the Terai have adopted a more positive view of their responsibilities".⁴⁰

In the context of above data and remarks of the ITA (Terai Branch) we can conclude that the workers of tea

industry did not response to the labour agitation which swept in the state during the post emergency period. This may be due to two factors, firstly, from the beginning of seventies the major trade unions of tea industry had adopted the policy of 'negotiation' than 'confrontation'. Secondly, the second Minimum Wage Fixation Committee declared two consecutive wage rise for the workers of tea industry. First one of 15 paise per day effected from 1st July, 1973 and the second one of 25 paise per day from July, 1974. This wage rise in pre-emergency period reluncted the workers to involve themselves in any major agitation in the post-emergency period.

In 1977, the Left Front Government, led by CPI(M) was voted into power. During the first four years Terai tea gardens had witnessed an increase in agitational activities on the part of the workers, including demonstrations, stoppages of work and gheraos for the settlement of their demands.

A wide spread agitation was launched by the leftist trade unions on the bonus issue in order to secure higher bonus for the workers. The workers did not willing to accept minimum bonus of 8.33% and demanded for maximum rate of bonus of 20 per cent. The employers were not willing to pay bonus more than the minimum rate. As protest, the workers went on the path of strike, dharnas, demonstrations and gheraos, supported by trade unions. In Gaya Ganga T.E., labour indiscipline rose to its peak and gheraos became the order of the day and the

Assistant Manager fell victim to labour militancy and violence in the latest in the series of gheraos which the workers were staging with impunity.⁴¹

Thus, we see that after assumption of power by the leftists labour militancy in the Terai got momentum. Labour management relations became hostile on the issue of bonus. The workers resorted to gheraos of managerial staff to wrest higher rate of bonus. The employers annoyed at the practices of gheraos on the part of the workers. "We have been pained to notice again a tendency to treat gheraos as a democratic movement of the workers. We have also noticed with concern the reluctance on the part of the law enforcing machinery to intervene in a gherao. But is gherao a democratic movement ? Is it democratic to keep a person wrongful confined for hour without food and drinks and subject him to pressure, intimidation and abuse ? ..."⁴²

After three years continuous bonus agitation ultimately the issue was settled by negotiations in 1980.

In 1982, the Left Front Government was again voted into power. This time the Government has changed its attitude towards the employers and persuaded a new labour policy discouraging the strike struggles that would vitiate the atmosphere for investment by the employers. The Chief Minister, Mr. Jyoti Basu asserted that Marxists were in power not to bring about revolution but to do "some good for the people".⁴³ In fact, he

rebuked trade unionists for violence in industry.

The new labour policy and the statement of the Chief Minister clearly indicate the changing views of leftists towards the employers. This changing attitude may be due to their past experiences of labour movement during the period in 1967 and 1969.

Soon after the announcement of new labour policy CITU, the largest trade union in tea industry, came out of struggle. under the grab of maintaining industrial harmony it has refused to take up any issue which could result in a show down between employers and workers. The second largest trade union, INTUC, is always known for its attitude of co-operation rather than confrontation with the employers. As a result a period from 1982 onwards the tea industry of West Bengal as well as the Terai Tea gardens witnessed a complete shift in the state of trade union movement. There has been a significant drop in the number of strikes by the late eighties. There was no incidence of strike during the last three years (1988 to 1990). Other agitational activities on the part of the workers like gheraos, demonstrations etc. also an isolated incidence in tea industry.

8.3 Multiple Trade Union

In the early part of this chapter we observed that communists were the first who took initiative to form the labour union in Terai tea gardens. Some communist leaders like Biren Bose, Bhupen Bhowmick, etc. started to organize the workers since the middle of the forties. But due to imposition of ban on Communist Party of India in 1948, the Communist trade unionism got a sudden set back. During this period most of the communist leaders were either jailed or gone under ground.

From the beginning of the fifties the Congress led unions started trade unionism in Terai. In 1950-51 Darjeeling Cha Kaman Majdoor Sangha (D.C.K.M.S) was established. The union was affiliated to the I.N.T.U.C. The first president of this union was Atulya Ghosh and Theodar Manin was the general secretary. In 1950-51 Kiran Bhattacharya one of the leading Congress leaders of Siliguri asked Iswar Tirky to join the trade union in 1952-53. Iswar Tirky was an army man and he came back home after taking part in the second world war in

1945. After returning home, he started to spread formal education among the tribals and tried to educate them against liquor addiction. In 1947-48 he established a social organization - Terai Adhibasi Welfare Board. In 1952-53 Tirky became the general secretary of D.C.K.M.S. During this period D.C.K.M.S successfully formed unions in New Chamta, Hanskwa, Putinbari, Fulbari (Patan), Tirihana, Manja tea estates etc. In 1957 Assembly election Iswar Tirky contested against Sonam Wangdi the official candidate of the Indian National Congress. He expelled from the Indian National Congress for six years on this ground. This hampered the growth of Congress led unions in Terai.

A number of Congress led unions affiliated to INTUC in Tea Plantation in North Bengal such as Dooars Cha Kaman Majdoor Sangha, Rastriya Cha Majdoor Congress etc. before 1960-61. In 1960-61 Congress decided that there would be one INTUC affiliated union in one industry. Accordingly a new union National Union of Plantation workers was formed in April, 1961 and all the Congress led unions merged with it except Rastriya Cha Majdoor Congress (RCMC).

After the General election of 1952, the Communist trade unionists were freed from jail and they again started to organize the tea workers in Terai. Till 1959, in Terai and in Darjeeling hills the communist trade unionists worked under the banner of Darjeeling District Cha Kaman Majdoor Union. In

1959, the communist trade unionist in Terai formed a separate union - Terai Cha Bagan Majdoor Union. The union was affiliated to the AITUC.

In 1964 C.P.I was divided on the issue of Indo-Chinese war and for some other reasons. A new party, Communist Party of India (Marxist) was formed. But there was no split in trade union organisation till 1971. In 1971 centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) was formed which was split from AITUC. Terai Cha Bagan Majdoor Union was controlled by CPI(M) organizers and therefore it was affiliated to CITU. In 1977, the Terai Cha Bagan Majdoor Union was dissolved and in Terai and Darjeeling hill CPI(M) led trade union started work in the name of Darjeeling District Chiya Kaman Majdoor Union (DDCKMU). The union is affiliated to CITU. The CPI led trade union started work under the banner of Darjeeling Tea Workers Union (DTWU). The union got affiliation to AITUC.

Rastriya Cha Majdoor Congress (RCMC) was registered in 1952. The union organized the workers in the tea gardens of Dooars. In 1964, Ranjit Ghosh, a leader of R.C.M.C came to Terai from western Dooars to organize the tea workers in Terai under the banner of RCMC. It built up its first influence in Sukna Tea Estate in June 1966. During this period RCMC also formed unions in Chandmani Tea Estates, Tirihana Tea Estate, Ord Terai, Panighata, Belgachia and Meery View etc.

R.C.M.C was affiliated to INTUC but in 1967 it detached itself from INTUC due to internal conflicts and affiliated itself to National Front of Indian Trade Unions (NFITU). Now

at least in 25 tea gardens of Terai RCMC has its wings.

During the period 1967-68, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) started trade unionism in Terai under the banner of Darjeeling Cha Bagan Workers Unions (DCBWU) affiliated to the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC). The leadership role was taken by Nani Bhattacharjee and Suresh Talukder. They formed first union in Sanyashithan Tea Estate. An Adivasi worker Zashim Mulla took initiative to form labour union. Subsequently DCBWU also formed union in Gayaganga, Kiran Chandra, Bagdogra Tea Estate. Now DCBWU has extended its influence in a number of tea gardens. In Bagdogra Tea Estate it has sole union. Swapan Bikash Roy, a lawyer of Siliguri town and Badal Mukherjee, an ex-head clerk of a tea garden of Terai are the prominent local leaders of DCBWU.

In 1962 K.T.Chako, a Keralian Christian and ex-employee of Tata was sent to Terai by an INTUC leader of Jamshedpur to organize the workers in Terai. He joined Terai Cha Bagan Sanjukta Majdoor Union and became the General Secretary of this union. This union was formed by Mr. Tensing Wangdi in 1960. Mr. Wangdi was a Congress MLA from Terai and also the minister for tribal development. This union was active in Gangaram, Kamala, Hanskua Tea Estate at that time. This union was not affiliated to any central trade unions. In 1967, Mr. Chako changed its name to Terai Plantation Workers' Union and affiliated it to H.M.S. From 1963 the influence of this union

gradually increased and in 1970 it formed unions in around fifteen gardens in Terai such as Bijolimoni, Pahargumiya, Singhijhora, Sahabad, Gargara, Gayerganga, Hanskua, Bagdogra etc. But at present this union has lost much of its early influence over the workers and exists in a few garden and mostly with christian community.

In 1981, a new Communist trade union - Darjeeling Zilla Cha Majdoor Karmachari Union (D.Z.C.M.K.U) formed by the Organization Committee for Communist Revolutionaries (O.C.C.R) under the leadership of Kanu Sanyal. The union first formed its organization in Azambad Tea Estate. Subsequently it also formed unions in Gangaram, Lohagarh, Kamalpur, Belgachia, Panighata etc. Except in Azambad tea estate DZCMKU has very small amount of holding.

So there are seven major unions working in the tea gardens of Terai. Among them Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Majdoor Union (DDCKMU) has highest number of members followed by N.U.P.W and R.C.M.C. Other unions have marginal influence in the Terai.

Table 8.2 shows the different trade unions working in the Terai tea gardens. The multiplicity of trade unions has been the result of their close links with politics and the disunity among their leaders. This multiplicity has seriously harmed the trade unions by weakening their bargaining power. The multiple trade unions vie with each other to secure the

Table 8.2

Key to Unions in Terai Tea Gardens

(1) Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Majdoor Union (DDCKMU)	Affiliated to the CITU, the union wing of Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M).
(2) National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW)	Affiliated to the INTUC, the union wing of the Congress Party.
(3) Darjeeling Tea Workers' Union (DTWU)	Affiliated to the AITUC, the union wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI).
(4) Rashtriya Cha Mazdoor Congress (RCMC)	Affiliated to the NFITU, the union wing of Congress party.
(5) Darjeeling Cha Bagan Workers' Union (DCBWU)	Affiliated to the UTUC, the union wing the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP).
(6) Darjeeling Zilla Cha Mazdoor Karmachari Union (DZCMKU)	Independent, the union wing of organization Committee for Communist Revolutionaries (OCCR).
(7) Terai Plantation Workers' Union (TPWU)	Affiliated to the HMS, the union wing of Janata Party.

backing of workers and the competition among themselves leads to inter union rivalry and internecine quarrels and strifes.

8.4 Collective Bargaining Strength

Collective bargaining is an institutional process of representations. The chief participants in collective bargaining do not act for themselves. They are representatives of their respective institutions. In tea industry the

employers have a number of associations to represent their interests. They are, Indian Tea Association (ITA), which has its head quarter in Calcutta and branches in three tea districts of West Bengal, as well as in Assam, Dooars Planters' Association, Darjeeling Planters Association, Terai Planters' Association etc. The employers' association have a joint forum known as the consultative Committee of Planters' Association (CCPA).

The workers are represented by the Co-ordination Committee of Tea Plantation workers (CCTPW), which is a joint forum of all leading trade unions in tea industry like CITU, AITUC, INTUC, UTUC etc. The CCTPW was formed in 1969. Several of the small splinter unions, especially those owing allegiance to the Congress (but not affiliated to INTUC) and the Janata Dal have formed a joint forum called Committee for Defence of Plantation Workers' Right (CDPWR).

The CCTPW and CCPA are the main fora for negotiations on issues such as wages and bonus. The CCTPW did not allow the CDPWR to join in negotiations, as this is the combination of breakaway unions. However, of late the concurrence of CDPWR is also sought.

The industry had witnessed the first joint action of the workers in 1955 on the bonus issue. This time the union succeeded to introduce the bonus for the tea workers. Thereafter upto 1969 the industry did not witness any joint action

of the unions. The individual unions struggled at the garden level to improve the working conditions of the workers by the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act 1951. The second joint action of the workers in tea industry took place in 1969 on the issue of employment and the implementation of the provisions of Plantation Labour Act, 1951. After 1969, no industrywise joint movement took place in tea industry.

By the end of 1992 the daily wage of an adult tea workers in Terai stood at Rs. 19.24, which is less than an agricultural worker in North East India. The trade unions could not improve the wages over the time. Between the period 1952 to 1992 the daily wage of a male worker increased by only Rs.18.08, i.e., only 45 paise annually, on an average. Trade unions could raise the wages somewhat satisfactory only after 1977, through tripartite negotiation. Between the period 1977 to 1992 the daily wage of a male worker increased by Rs. 14, i.e., 0.93 paise annually, on an average. Thus, wages increased more than three and half times during the last fifteen years. It has been largely possible due to support from the Left Front Govt.

By the end of 1992 the trade unions have been succeeded to wrest 20% bonus for the tea workers.

The other issues relating to work load, work environment, welfare facilities as per Plantation Labour Act etc. are settled at the garden level through bipartite and tripartite

negotiation. The trade unions could not succeed to improve these issues due to weakness of trade union at the garden level. Multiplicity and inter union rivalry is the prime cause of weaking the bargaining strength of trade unions at the garden level. The trade unions are led by the political leaders. The political parties and their leaders held influence over the trade unions so as to utilise their backing for political purpose. As a result when a union submits a Charter of Demands before the management on different issues of the workers, the other unions do not support it rather protest against it on the question of political interest. So it is needed to form a common forum at the garden level also to develop the collective bargaining strength of trade union at the garden level. At the same time CCTPW should also take initiative to improve the welfare facilities at the garden level through joint action.

8.5 Summary

The pace and pitch of the union's activities was high during fifties and sixties. During this periods, the upsurge in the working class movement in tea industry was due to fact that tripartite forums were not developed. It was during 1969 that the negotiation process had started in tea industry and both bipartite and tripartite negotiations were gradually developed. These negotiations succeeded to regulate the two

major economic demands of the workers, viz, wages and bonus. But the other economic issues like provident fund, gratuity etc. yet to be regulated.

Due to lack of proper leadership at the garden level problems are settled through bilateral discussions between the management and the outside trade union leaders. Sometimes these leaders negotiated with management without prior concern of the workers. This caused apathy of the members towards the unions.

So far little interest has been laid on educating trade union leaders. It may be that the education of trade union leaders has been neglected deliberately so that a new leadership within the trade union may not emerge. Workers' Education Centre in Siliguri is already providing one month's special training and the leadership course for the plantation workers. But its impact has been marginal. One of the reasons for this meagre impact is that in many cases the workers selected for such programmes do not have meaningful role either in the trade union management or as representatives of workers in the garden in which they employed. Moreover, the education and basic understanding of such workers is so low that they cannot understand various social, political, and economic aspects of garden management in short term programme. Long duration focussed educational programmes are required to be undertaken.

Trade unions in tea industry have been affiliated to different political ideologies. Among the national federations, CITU with communist ideology commands the largest union affiliation in the tea industry followed by INTUC with Congress ideology. There is always a keen fight among these national federations to gain more membership. This kind of struggle among union leaders has led interunion rivalry in tea industry. It is interesting to note here that though the leftist national federations like CITU, AITUC, and UTUC have same political ideology in the state, but there is no co-operation among their affiliated unions at the garden level.

Alcholism is the most threat to the workers in the industry. Productivity has been declining sharply because of increasing alcholism among the workers. The trade unions should play a leading role in the campaign against alcholism. They should extend all co-operation to de-alcholism efforts.

Population problem in tea industry is very acute to day. It is therefore, imperative that representative bodies like the unions should also join hands with others in popularising the family planning measures amongst the workers. The unions are in a relatively advantageous position to take up family planning activities because as voluntary bodies of the workers, they repose their faith in them and the unions are dealing with some what homogeneous group in terms of educational and income levels.

So far the trade unions have struggled for higher wages and bonus. They should be more concern in providing welfare facilities to the workers like housing, education, medical etc. in addition to hike in wages and bonus. For this purpose a joint forum of all unions to be developed at the garden level.

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