



# Movement of the Working Class

## Introduction

### ▪ Rise of Working Class:

- The modern working class **arose in India with the introduction of capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century** under colonial dispensation.
  - It was a modern working class in the sense of relatively modern organisation of labour and a relatively free market for labour.
- This development was due to the establishment of modern factories, railways, dockyards and construction activities relating to roads and buildings.
  - **Plantations and railways were the initial enterprises** to herald the era of colonial capitalism in Indian subcontinent.

### ▪ Industrialisation in India:

- Port cities **Bombay, Calcutta and Madras** became the **centres of the capitalist economy**.
- **Cotton mills** in Bombay, **jute mills** in Calcutta, and several factories in Madras were set up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similar developments took place in the cities of Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Solapur and Nagpur.
- The **first jute mill of India** was set up in **Calcutta in 1854** by a Scottish entrepreneur.
- The **ownership of the cotton mills was with the Indian** entrepreneurs, while that of **jute was with the foreigners** for a long time.

## Workers' Movement in Pre-Independence India

- **Initial Attempts to Improve Workers' Conditions:** Attempts were made in 1870-1880 to better the working conditions of the workers by legislation.
  - Till the [Swadeshi surge of 1903-08](#), there was **no concerted effort** to better the working conditions of the labour.
  - Again between 1915-1922, there was **resurgence of workers' movement** along with the [Home Rule Movement](#) and the [Non-Cooperation Movement](#).
  - The earlier attempts to improve the economic conditions of the workers were in the nature of **philanthropic efforts which were isolated, sporadic and aimed at specific local grievances**.
- **Workers' Movements before the Emergence of Trade Unions:**
  - **Plantation and Mine Workers:** The plantation and mine workers were heavily exploited but their conditions **did not attract much attention initially** as they were away from the notice of early social reformers, journalists and public activists.
    - Despite this isolation, the plantation workers, **on their own, registered their protests against the exploitation and oppression** by the plantation owners and managers.

- **Industrial Workers:** The **cotton and jute industry** workers were **more in the public gaze**.
  - The early social workers and **philanthropists were also involved** with them facilitating better organisational work as well as **better reporting and public support**.
- **Formation of Organisations:**
  - In Bengal, **Sasipada Banerjee** founded the **'Working Men's Club'** in 1870 and started publishing a monthly journal in Bengali entitled **'Bharat Shramjibi'** in 1874.
  - The **Brahmo Samaj** formed the **'Working Men's Mission'** in Bengal in 1878 to impart moral education among the workers.
    - It also established the **'Working Men's Institution'** in 1905.
  - In 1890 in Maharashtra, **N.M. Lokhandey** established the **'Bombay Millhands' Association'**, and in 1898, he started publishing a journal entitled **'Dinbandhu'** in Marathi.
    - The **Bombay Millhands Defence Association** formed by **Bal Gangadhar Tilak** in 1908.
  - However, these bodies were primarily **interested in welfare activities** and did **not have much organisational base** among the workers.

### Emergence and Growth of Trade Unions:

- **Cause of Emergence:** The trade unions emerged in India after **World War I**. The main factors that led to the emergence of trade unions include:
  - Rising prices of essential commodities.
  - Decline in the real wages of workers.
  - Increase in the demand for the industrial products resulting in the expansion of Indian industries.
  - **Gandhi's** call for the **Non-Cooperation Movement**.
  - The Russian Revolution.
- **Formation of Trade Unions:**
  - The **Madras Labour Union**, formed in April 1918, is generally **considered to be the first trade union in India**.
    - **B.P. Wadia**, a nationalist leader and an associate of **Annie Besant**, was instrumental for its organisation.
  - The **Textile Labour Association**, also known as **Majur Mahajan Sangh**, was established in Ahmedabad in 1920.
    - The union was formed following the agitation of mill workers of Ahmedabad demanding for a bonus to compensate for the rise in prices.
    - This union worked along Gandhian lines and became very strong over the years.

### All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC):

- **A New Edge to the Workers' Movement:** The most important development in the workers' movement was the formation of **All-India Trade Union Congress** under the **leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak** and **Lala Lajpat Rai**.
  - Since then the working class movement became strong and by 1930 onwards, an ideological tone was added to the movement.
- **Cause of Formation:** Many people connected with labour realised that there was a **need for a central organisation of labour** to coordinate the works of the trade unions all over India.

- The **formation of the [International Labour Organisation \(ILO\)](#)** in 1919 acted as a catalyst for it.

- The members selected from AITUC represented the Indian Labour at the ILO.

- **Leaders Involved: Bal Gangadhar Tilak, N.M.Joshi, B.P.Wadia, Diwan Chamanlall, Lala Lajpat Rai and Joseph Baptista** were the **main leaders behind the formation** of AITUC.

- Lala Lajpat Rai **became the first president** of the AITUC and Joseph Baptista its **vice president**.

- Lajpat Rai was the **first to link capitalism with imperialism**: “imperialism and militarism are the twin children of capitalism”.

- **Ideology of AITUC**: In the beginning, the AITUC was influenced by social democratic ideas of the British Labour Party.

- The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, trusteeship and class-collaboration had great influence on AITUC.

- **The Trade Union Act, 1926**:

- The act recognised trade unions as legal associations.
- It laid down conditions for registration and regulation of trade union activities.
- It secured civil and criminal immunity for trade unions from prosecution for legitimate activities, but also put some restrictions on their political activities.

### Role of Communists:

- **Emergence of Communists and CPI**: The most important phenomenon in the field of labour movement in India was the emergence of the communists.

- The communist ideology, deriving from the theories of **Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin**, assigns the working class the central place.
- The **Communist Party of India (CPI)**, formed in Soviet Union in 1920, soon after its formation, **became active in the labour movements**.

- **Role in the Movements**: The communists organised the workers in cotton mills of Bombay and jute mills of Calcutta, besides many other industries and led militant struggles.

- **Role in Splitting the AITUC**: By 1928-29, the communists gained a marginal majority in the AITUC.

- **Splitting the Moderates**: In the **tenth session of the AITUC held in Nagpur**, the communists **called for the dissociation from the ILO** and **association with the League against Imperialism**.

- The moderate and reformist group were against the idea and consequently left the AITUC and formed the **Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)**.

- **Splitting the Nationalists**: Another split occurred in 1931 due to divergence between the nationalist and communist opinions.

- The **communists severely criticised Gandhi** and **condemned the [Round Table Conference of 1931](#)** in which the **[Indian National Congress](#)** was participating.

- Unable to secure a majority for this condemnation, the **communists split from the nationalists** and formed the **Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC)**.

- By 1931, there were three national federations of trade unions – the AITUC, the IFTU and the RTUC.

- **Reunion of Trade Unions**: It was felt by many trade union leaders that the division in their ranks was creating problems for their political and economic struggles.

- As a result, the **Railway Unions and some unaffiliated unions united with the IFTU** to form the **National Federation of Trade Unions (NFTU)** in 1933.

- Consequently, the **RTUC, and the AITUC also united** in 1935 and the name AITUC was retained for the unified organisation.

## Workers' Movement in Post-Independence India

- **Formation of New Unions:** The post-independence period saw the formation of a number of trade unions such as **Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)** and **Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)**
  - CITU was formed by Communist Party of India (Marxist), splitting from AITUC.
- **Legislations Framed:** The **Industrial Dispute Act, 1947** and **Labour Relations Bill and Trade Unions Bills, 1949** were introduced.
- **Decline in Strikes:** Between 1947-1960, the condition of the working class improved and there was a decline in the number of strikes.
- **Economic Recession:** The period of late 1960s saw decline in the wages of the working class; as a result, **disputes in the industrial front increased.**
- **New Economic Policy, 1991:** It introduced **LPG** (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation).
  - Liberalisation **deteriorated the bargaining position of the workers** vis-a-vis capital.
  - The policy provided **no statutory minimum wages** for labour.
    - It gave the employers the **complete right to hire and fire.**

## Weaknesses of the Movement

- **Incomplete Coverage:** A large section of the working class, the **unorganised sector, was left outside the fold of trade unions.**
  - The unions took the relatively easy path of pressing the demands of those who could be easily organised or whose demands were likely to be heard by the government.
- **Multiplicity of Trade Unions:** Post independence, the trade unions representing workers in the country have multiplied.
  - Multiplicity of unions in a capitalist system **keeps the working class fragmented and vulnerable to all forms of pressures.**
- **Irresponsive Trade Unions:** Trade unions in the country had not been responsive to the problems of the working class in the country.
  - Unions lay fragmented which produced bitter rivalry among them and hence very often they failed to respond to the issues of the working class.
- **Disunity among the Workers:** The **industrial working class of the country did not ally with the peasants** and other sections of the society in collective direct action on political issues'.
  - This reflected the **lack of political consciousness** among the working class.
- **Negligence for Marginalised Sections:** Trade unions in the organised sector **overlooked the problems of women workers and workers belonging to the socially oppressed groups.**