

Convergence Of Trade Unions And The Class Consciousness: A Theoretical View Point

Muzamil Wali
Research Scholar

Department of sociology University of Kashmir (Srinagar, India)

Abstract:

The concept of the class consciousness is the most debatable concept that one come across in the sociological studies. Karl Marx used the concept to understand the dynamics of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to Karl Marx, a heterogeneous mass of workers comes together and forms a 'class' consciously. Thus the political organization like as trade unions had a definite role in organizing the working class. The trade union (or labor union) is an organization of workers or employees who have combined together to achieve common goals in areas such as in working conditions and protecting and promoting their mutual interests through collective action. This paper attempts to understand the relation between the emergence of trade union and the formation of class consciousness.

Key Words: Class consciousness, Trade unions, Political Organization

Introduction

A trade union (or labor union) is an organization of workers or employees who have combined together to achieve common goals in areas such as in working conditions and protecting and promoting their mutual interests through collective action. A trade union, through its leadership, bargains with the employer or the management on behalf of the union members and negotiates labor contracts etc. The process of negotiating wages, work rules, complaint procedure and workplace safety is called collective bargaining. Changes in the political, social and educational environments regarding awareness of rights –such as the right to organize, the right to bargain and the right to settle the terms and conditions of the employment- have caused workers unions to spring up to protect and further workers interests. Thus, with the establishment of minimum wages, norms for mandatory work hours, provisions for health and safety, and overall improvement in working conditions, unionization has become instrumental in improving the quality of life of workers (Rao 2010, 293) Class consciousness as a concept is the most debatable in the parlance of the sociological literature. Trade unions are sometimes taken as an early phase of class consciousness (Legget, Mann, and Lenin). Thus the political organization like as trade unions had a definite role in organizing the working class (Marx, 1847). The wage fluctuation and the insecurity of job faced by the working class under the capitalism would eventually lead them to combine in their effort to oppose their hardships (Marx, 1848). Now the question arises what is the role of the trade unions in the capitalist society. Trade unions can play a limited role as an immediate

bargaining agency for the problems of labor class. In its widest possible sense the trade unions can take an important role by integrating the less privileged of the society and make them class conscious about their subjective realities. The nature of the trade union has attracted lot of attention from several sociologists. The central question of the discussion revolves whether unions do or should function primarily to perform an economic service for their members, or function primarily as agents for social change and as the institutional means for their members to participate more fully in democratic processes (Child, Loveridge, Warner). This question has been approached differently according to the theorists political and intellectual view point. While such analysis is important but it leads one to confusion that “for collective action to take to take place so many conditions must be fulfilled that it is a wonder it can occur at all” (Elster, 1985). Nevertheless numbers of scholars have attempted to explain the class consciousness through the lens of trade unions. Thus present study examines the role of trade union in the formation of class consciousness in the modern capitalist society researcher would take a holistic view presented by the different theorist with regard to the trade union.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to find out the relationship of trade union with the development of class consciousness. The study tries to find out the how far trade unions can be taken as the important indicator of the class consciousness. It seeks to examine the relationship of trade union and class consciousness from the theoretical view point as put forth by different theorists.

Significance of the study

This research attempts to broaden the understanding of the trade unions and its relationship with the formation of class consciousness. The trade unions are the important organization for the redressal of the problems of workers. Thus this study signifies the role of trade unions as envisaged by the different theorists and also examines the role of trade unions in the formation of class consciousness.

Methodology

This study is based on the secondary sources of the data. The secondary sources of data include papers, articles, books and available research material on the present subject.

Objectives

1. To understand the role of trade unions in the industrial society.
2. To understand the relationship of trade union and the formation of class consciousness.
3. To understand the theoretical view points of the relevant theorists on the topic.

Trade unions and the formation of class consciousness: A theoretical overview

A) The Marx and Engels:

Karl Marx and Engels present the most optimistic view about the trade unions (Hyman, 1971). Trade unions for the Marx and Engels were the proletariat oriented organisations. They believe that the proletariat by nature were revolutionary thus it's but evident that the trade unions are revolutionary themselves. Thus they presented four important functions of the trade unions. Firstly the trade union protects the immediate economic interests of its members. This function of the trade union according to them was not fundamental because it doesn't reflect the total condition that prevails among the working class. Thus they feel that the workers join the trade unions because they are oppressed in spite of knowing the results. The second function of the trade union that it reflects the humanistic motivation. Why would the workers stop the work when they know that it can't change their fate? Engel answers that the nature of the human being is not to submit before the economic oppression, that 'they must assert that since they are human beings they do not propose to submit to the pressure of inexorable economic forces (Engels, 1958).

The third and the important function of the trade union according to Marx is to develop class consciousness. Trade unions are the means for uniting the working class, the preparation for the overthrow of the whole society together with its class contradictions (Marx, 1976). Thus Marx differentiates between class-in-itself from the class-for-itself. Marx firmly believed through conscious class struggles, organizational interventions by trade unions or political parties are regarded as a crucial factor to facilitate the formation of class consciousness. The last, function of the trade union is its role as the training schools the workers' class consciousness that the school tries to enhance. They learn how to fight against the bourgeoisie effectively: they learn how to strike, how to propagate, and how to organize. The union activity provides workers with a military school, but as important as this aspect is that they learn administrative and political work' (Engels, 1978). By being actively engaged in the union work, the workers acquire prospects and skills for managing their own societies and they realize that they are able to influence the world through their own organisations.

By analyzing the functions envisaged by the Marx and Engels it can be concluded that the trade unions are the most important organization which facilitates as well as reflects the formation of class consciousness. But the contemporary commentators and theorist cast doubt on the potential of the working class to crumble the capitalist system as envisaged by Marx and Engels.

Hyman: Hyman has a different perspective of the trade unions. He sees trade union as the part of the problem and the solution itself. Thus Hyman believes that the trade unions can be the obstacle in the way of formation of trade unions and at the same time it can be an instrumental factor in the formation of class consciousness. Hyman asserts that the trade unions can be a major obstacle in formation of class consciousness because it can be easily integrated into the capitalist system operating within the hostile

environment. At the same time it is the starting point for the formation of class consciousness because any socialistic movement has its genesis in the production process.

Thus Marx and Engels see the trade union development is the result of the structural defects inherent in the capitalistic system. Hyman position is somehow not clear in this regard. According to him trade unions it is difficult to answer in what sense trade unions can be regarded as an agency of the class struggle (Hyman 1989). He thus doubts about the capacity and capability of trade unions to be fully anti-capitalist organization.

B) The Leninist view point

If Marxist presented an optimistic view about the trade union as far as their potential of formation of class consciousness, the Leninist do not seem to be optimistic enough in this regard. Lenin believed that if the trade unions are left alone from the socialistic revolutionary movement they will be able to form the trade union consciousness. Thus trade unions in this regard do not have the potential to be an instrument of class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Lenin says “ if the trade unions were left alone as they were, they at best would develop trade-union consciousness which is defined as 'the realization of the necessity for combining in unions, fighting the employers, and striving to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.' (Lenin,1929). Lenin asserts that the trade unions can never have the potential of overthrowing the capitalist system. It can only be successful when its integrated into the socialistic revolutionary movement. It is important to mention here that Lenin thought that trade unions only see the relationship between the workers and employers but it doesn't see from the view point of bourgeoisie and proletariat relationship. At certain instances we find the favorable views of Lenin on the trade unions. It is true that the trade unions do not have the potential to overthrow the capitalism but it is the starting stage for raising the class consciousness (Lenin, 1930).

Hobsbawm his view is one of the contemporary views akin to Lenin's view. He believes that the British trade unions have lost the soul and dynamism. He criticized the current labor movement of England on the point that it has itself limited to the immediate economic demands. The narrowing of the scope of trade unions to the economic demands can best be termed as “trade union consciousness” which is compatible with the capitalist system. Thus Hobsbawm like Lenin differentiates between class consciousness and trade union consciousness. One of the criticisms that can be mounted on the Leninist stream of thought is that they undermine the concern of trade unions for demanding wages and better working conditions. . In fact wages struggle constitutes as an important and essential part of the working class struggle (Kelly, 1988). To sum up, Leninist advocate the firm control of the trade unions by the socialist revolutionary party so that they can be able to overthrow the capitalist system.

C) Webian View point: The webian stream has the reformastic view towards the trade unions. According to this view point the trade unions are reformastic in character which implies that it doesn't necessarily have anti-establishment character. Thus trade unions are better off to compromise on the better wages and the working conditions. When one deeply divulges into this view point the webbian do not see trade union as the organization of class consciousness. Rather the trade unions are in close contact with the establishment for the redressal of the problems in the organization. Thus somehow it limits the potential of the trade union to challenge the authority of the bourgeoisie which is often criticized.

D) Gramscian view point: Among the Marxist one school of thought strongly believe that the trade unions are the fire extinguisher on revolution, an integrator of an existing social system. Gramsci himself held the most pessimistic view on the trade union as far as their role in there revolutionary movement is concerned. In fact the Grmasci had no hope in the trade unions on the basis of their origin, ideology, structure and function (Gramsci, 1978). The origin of the trade union according to the Gramsci is very capitalistic, pursuing the aim of securing the interest of the proliterate and to establish monopoly on the commodity. The structure of trade union is based on the institutional hierarchy where the machine crushes and bureaucracy crushes any creative spirit. Other aspect of trade union which limits its potential of being an agency of the class struggle is that it is a bargaining agency on the wages and the working conditions. The trade unions understand the laws, conditions of the employment, contractual engagements that makes the trade unions the part of the management itself. With these 'competent' officials, the fundamental aim of trade union becomes, not the transformation of society but a compromise with it. In other words, a trade union comes to be considered an organisation that makes discipline and the smooth flow of production possible in the factory. Without them, the employers would be confused about how they should go about negotiating: trade unions have the official representativeness that conveniently suits the employers. To sum up the Gramscian school of thought consider trade unions as an agency of "false consciousness" which works an fire extinguisher of any kind of revolutionary movement.

Aronowitz declares that unions are no longer in a position of leadership in workers's struggles. Thus he concurs the Gramsci where he says that the trade union still remains the elementary organ of defense of workers immediate economic interests, according to him, it has also evolved into a force for integrating the workers into the corporate capitalist system (Aronowitz , 1973).

D) Simosian View point: Henry c. Simons perspective on the trade unions is totally different from the above perspective mentioned. He relates trade unions with the system of liberal democracy and feels that the democratic system will eventually help in the organization of the trade unions. According to Simons (1944), the economic powers that trade unions abuse are basically two kinds: strike power and monopoly power. The former originates in the trade union position that can at any time interrupt or stop the whole flow of

social incomes. If trade unions persist in exercising that power, the system must soon break down. It is the strike power attributed by the Simson to the trade unions which has significance for the present study. Strike power reflects the better organisation of the trade unions to take direct action against the management. It reflects an element of class consciousness though not clearly mentioned by the Simson. The monopoly power results from the gradual and consistent demands for the increase in wages and better working conditions which institutionalize the trade union as the only organization for the interest of the workers. Simson have the serious apprehension that if trade unions are left free without the government control they would pose threat to the current system in place. The Marxist would argue that Simson at least acknowledges the potential of trade union to transform the whole society that may be termed as revolution. The difference is that simson has faith in the liberal democratic system but the Marxist believes total transformation of the liberal democratic system with socialistic system.

Trade unions in the information age

One of the pertinent question that arise here is that the role of trade unions in the information age. In Information society information was becoming the definitive economic element in the advanced western world (Bell, 1979). Thus the information is the main vehicle which drives the modern industrial society. Historically the trade unions have been the primary vehicle for the class consciousness. With the advent of the information age with the penetration of new technologies it is debatable how far trade unions can be the primary organization for the formation of class consciousness. As the new technologies emerge majority of the technology intensive workers remain non-unionized, while few workers in high-tech industries see unionism as panacea for their problems (Howard, 1985). In the information society,

..... technological changes and managing practices..... are challenging the very foundations of union power -cutting into membership level, eroding union bargaining units and occupational categories, and undermining the traditional skills, work rules, and union tactics such as the strike. With these changes has come an increasingly widespread perception that unions, have, somehow, become outmoded obsolete.....irrelevant to the concerns of a new generation of workers and the issues of new work places (Howard 1985). Thus it appears there is the little room for the trade unions as a vehicle of class consciousness in the new industrial environment. The response of the trade unions to the new technologies have been reactive and peace meal that is perhaps the reason Howard argued about the diminishing role of trade unions in the information society. Howard further argues that the management control eventually lies with the employers and the workers are having the false perception that they control the management of the work place through new technologies. Some argue that its highly unlikely that trade union can achieve class consciousness in the modern information socirty due to massive de-skilling, emergence of white-collar class, sophisticated surveillance techniques and the growing obsolescence of the trade unions.

The above discussion makes these things clear.

1. The trade unions have the potential to disrupt the whole economic system, if not, overthrow it.
2. There is no clarity as far as potential of trade union in overthrowing the capitalistic system.
3. The trade unions surely are the best indicators of the class consciousness.
4. The trade unions can be both the obstacle and also the facilitator of the class consciousness.
5. Trade unions can be the initial training school for the future revolutionaries that may overthrow the capitalist system.
6. In information society there is little role of trade unions to be as a vehicle of class consciousness.

References

1. Adamson, D.L. 1991 *Class, Ideology and the Nation: A Theory of Welsh Nationalism*. Cardiff: Uni. of Wales Press.
2. Anderson, P. 1967 'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action'. *The Incompatibles*.
3. Anderson, P. 1983 *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*. London: Verso.
4. Aronowitz, S. 1983 *Working Class Hero: A New Strategy for Labor*. New York: Adama Books
5. Banks, J. 1974 *Trade Unionism*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
6. Bell, D. 1953 'The, Next American Labor Movement'. *Fortune* . 47 (120-205)
7. Blau and Scott (1963) *Formal Organizations*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
8. Braverman, 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Pres.
9. Carchedi, 1987 *Class Analysis and Social Research*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
10. Cockburn, 1987 *Women, Trade Unions and Political Parties*. London: Fabian Society.
11. Engels, F. 1958 *The Condition of the English Working Class*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford Uni. Press.
12. Etzioni, A. 1961 *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*. New York: Free Press
13. Foster, J. 1974 *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
14. Giddens, A. 1980 *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*. 2nd ed. London: Hutchison
15. Gorz, A. 1982 *Farewell to the Working Class*. Boston: South End
16. Gramsci, A. 1977 *Selections From Political Writings 1910-20*. London: Lawrence and Wishart
17. Hyman, R. 1971 *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism*. London: Pluto
18. Lockwood, D. 1958 *The Blackcoated Worker*. London: Allen and Unwin
19. Marx, K. 1975 (1844) 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts vol.3 London: Lawrence and Wishart.
20. Webb and Webb 1920 (1897) *Industrial Democracy*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.