

Trade Union Unity for Social Transformation:

SOME REFLECTIONS BY GEFONT POLICY DOCUMENT

-by Bishnu Rimal, President- GEFONT

After April Uprising of 2006; decisions of long-term importance in the world of work has been made. Among those majors are- constitutional guarantee as fundamental rights of freedom of association, right to collective bargaining, right to social security and employment, and right against intolerable labour practices.

Now, Nepal has, by way of developing a new constitution, entered a unique - yet complex - process of state restructuring. The nation is waiting for the logical conclusion of the peace process that follows a decade long violent conflict and rebellion.

The period of political transition is getting lengthened. And, this is creating chaos in the entire society and labour market. A more challenging task ahead is to promulgate a new constitution for which Nepali people have only one and a half years time.

Trade union and social transformation

Social transformation refers to the process of identification of the root-cause of a problem and its structural complexity. It involves the change in the vision and mission of existing institutions, and also in the power equilibrium of political, economic and social-cultural institutions. It also involves the raising of the level of awareness, and the level of economic, social and cultural development. Social transformation also calls for the end of existing discrimination amongst the people in the access and distribution of "resources, power and opportunity".

If we look upon the Nepali society; a section of the feudal class has turned into a class of entrepreneurs, however, its culture and character is remained still feudal.

Trade union is a specific organisation in the civil society and represents the mainstream of the social movement. They are basically struggling for four rights: right to work, right to wages, right to equality and right to freedom. All these rights are interdependent and complimentary core of social transformation.

The meaning of social transformation in the context of Nepal is the transformation of existing social structures to transform the conflicts generated by economic exploitation and social oppression. To tackle this problem a formulaic solution of "transformation through inclusion" is presented. '*Inclusion*' embodies issues of gender, caste-ethnicity and aspects of regionalism, which draw a demarcation of identity; where as the '*Class*' - an "ideological-theoretical" issue, unites the entire nation together.

Those who have been enjoying their rights have control over power and resources. And, those deprived of their rights are also denied an opportunity to access power and resources. Unless this socio-economic pyramid is altered, Nepal's economy does not undergo transformation.

Without addressing class conflict, economy cannot be transformed. Without the participation of the working class, it is not possible to establish an equitable society. And, this is possible only through redistribution of national income.

We can call this 'economic inclusion'. Just as social inclusion encompasses gender, caste-ethnicity and regional issues, economic inclusion addresses class issues. In another sense, economic transformation refers to a state in which the entire people and those involved in work will have equal access to and control over rights, resources and opportunities, and also to change the nature of the state from its capital-tilt to a system focused on sound balance between labour and capital.

The world of work is the kernel of our society. It is therefore necessary for trade unions to unite for social transformation. The more a working class expands the network of its supporters, the more it is successful to break the networks of its opponent classes.

The world of work and changing face of Trade union movement

International labour market today is also in a chaotic situation. Contradictory systems and practices maintained by labour receiving countries, in the name of regulating labour market, have contributed to this crisis. These countries are only concentrated on maximising production of goods and profits by restricting legal entry of migrant workers and by promoting illegal ways.

In the light of production process, our 'world of work' is divided in terms of 'organised and unorganised', 'formal and informal' and 'intra-state and inter-state'. In terms of the pattern of employment; work is basically divided into 'regular' (permanent) job and 'irregular' (contract, daily wages, home-based outsourcing and part-time) job.

In the world of the day, economic processes have become detrimental to labour relations rather than the physical existence of an enterprise. Any decision related to them is determined by the "forces of market", and not by the size and scope of industrial enterprises, nor by the "strength of workers" of the contemporary world. An "unseen" owner staying in a corner of the world determines, within a minute, the fate and future of all workers of his/her concern in the entire world. Today's workers are compelled to put up their labour for sale as a directionless pedestrian standing at the crossroads. Be they unskilled or highly skilled, including PhD holders, their labour value has been determined more by the competition in descending order rather than the ascending one. Due to uncertainty of jobs, workers are forced to hunt for the purchasers of their labour power almost all the time and in every possible sphere.

A very complex scenario of international economic crisis is hitting the day. This crisis has worsened the situation of working class, which is already suffering from price hikes in food and consumer goods pushing further to extreme difficulties and livelihood crisis. This crisis is not only aggravating poverty and inequality but also ensuing greater challenges in resource distribution.

The situation of present day workers is also different. There has been a significant difference now in terms of nature of work-organisation, shelter, consumption and social participation. The workers of the same enterprise do not know where their co-workers stay. They are mutually exclusive in terms of social relations, and cultural and leisurely practices. With the distance between the work place and their residence, the traditional method of membership expansion through networking has dismantled. Due to lost of links with central unions, in a way, a local union has become a total union.

To face these adversities, we need a broader unity of trade union movement at home and global level. A new phase of formation and reformation has begun in the trade union movement of the world with the establishment of International Trade Union Confederation

(ITUC). We believe that, it has, to a greater extent, ended the division of Cold War-Era within the international trade union movement. Thus, GEFONT is still, firm in establishing and strengthening a plurality- and diversity-based single international trade unions centre that transforms "diversity" into "unity" of the world trade union movements. We will further continue our efforts in the days to come.

Trade Union Movements vis-à-vis Nepali Labour Market

Nepali labour market has its own characteristics. Ninety percent of it is based on informal economy, involving the largest sector of agriculture. There is a dangerous imbalance between the demand for labour and supply. A huge additional labour is available triggering the problem of unemployment and under-employment. There is an unnatural attraction of Nepali workers to foreign employment. As such, migration and brain drain has become rampant.

Two decades have elapsed after the establishment of GEFONT. We played a crucial role in Two Peoples' Movements bravely fought by Nepalis during this period. Being able to recognise our movement as a social partner, we are proud on our role to protect fellow workers constitutionally and legally, although to a limited extent. During this period, trade unions have had access to various state institutions and processes, and have influenced the enactment or amendment of labour legislations.

However, the current model of "enterprise unionism" which we initiated after enactment of Trade Union Act-1992 has localised the trade union movement dis-linking it with the central organs. Therefore, we have to start the process of 'industrial unionism' like in other developed countries.

GEFONT has been active for years in promoting 'single union'. GEFONT along with other seven trade unions have, following a series of discussions and debates, reached the following conclusion in this respect: those unions having different orientation and tradition who are agreed to work together- Joint Trade Union Coordination Centre (JTUCC) will be established by their equal representation. The coordinating centre will be led by an executive committee consisting of a presidents and other two members, one of them woman, from each centres. We will together share administrative costs and before reaching to transform JTUCC into Joint Trade Union Confederation (JTUC), decisions will be made in consensus basis. Nepali trade union movement should further speed up this campaign.

As we believe, through this way forward we can develop our movement as a unique model of union movement in South Asia.

Bishnu Rimal
President, GEFONT