

Industrial Unionism:

Next destination of Nepali Trade Unionism

Limitations of the Enterprise Unions: Local union itself is Total union

The Trade Union Act- 2049 set the process to form Trade Unions and rules of its recognition in Nepal. As of any other democratic country, Nepal also followed the 'Button-up' approach in the process of Union formation. All power were delegated to the lower committees, the committee was responsible for individual grievances handling and collective bargaining; in other sense 'third-party' involvements were denied during CBA in the workplace. 'Paper' unions mushroomed grabbing the opportunity prevailed by the democratic environment of the country, a compulsory provision of '25% of working people as member to form an enterprise level union' was laid in order to regularize them legally.

These all 'policies and practices' were not ill intentioned; but the demonstrative effects of them had variations.

'25% workers together in an enterprise make a union, 50 such unions together federate into a central Federation and 10 such federations again have to combined to launch a Confederation- such 'rule of game' was designed to recognize nationwide union hierarchy. Workers can go directly to the management are they having to and the decisions to be made by the representative- these rule were also made.

Such Unions were neither sector-wise nor unitary. In fact, the main motive for federating is to give the lower level all the power. But it has happened just the opposite, all the works had to be done the lower level which was just in their learning phase whereas the seasoned unionists were opted out from the executive role.

In the 5th National Congress of GEFONT, this practice was identified as 'local unions are the total union'. This gave a lot of space to the fictitious Unions. By law, the 25% of workers in the workplace concern were necessary to make a union; by manipulation we saw near about dozen "recognised" Unions in one of the Public Enterprises.

In many organizations, the workers either had to be the favourite of the management or be their foes. The situation became worse where the union leaders were ill-intentioned; the 'Yellow' unions emerged in such work- place. Irrespective of numbers workforce, be it is the 50 or 3,000, the limited numbers of executives in the enterprise union burden to take care union affairs resulted instead of comradely-relationship between union-leader & the members, into the relationship as of "peasants and their wage earners".

Model of the worldwide trade union movement, better than ours

There are many models of Union making process in the world, which varies in continent-wise. In general term, all the active unions are based on Shop-stewardship. Shop-stewardship is interpreted as appointing "*Sardar*" to look after more than 70 workers in our Jute Mills. Almost all the unions collect membership-dues and conducted union activities based on it. There is no economic give and take between

unions and the employers or political parties, thus they are more effective to influence political parties by their agendas.

It has been seen that there are two trends in the election of chief executives in unions and their roles & responsibilities. One is the British model, often known as *Anglo-Saxon*, where General Secretary is the chief executive in the committee. And the second one is *Nordic* model, where President is the chief. However, both trends do not bother on how to elect entire working committee. The chief executive selects his/her deputies; who is salaried by the union fund. Remaining members of the committee are at their own work and they serve unions as volunteer. This process, as well, has eternalised in various ways in each of the continents during the union formation.

In Africa, the method developed by South African is widely practiced. The COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) has championed this method and termed it as the "workers-controlled unionism". The COSATU claims- majority of office bearers and the members in the Executives committee of federations and the central unions should be employee- at- work. Only the General Secretary, who shoulders all administrative and the organisational responsibilities is paid as full-time executive by the union. There are numbers of conditioned applied to be a General Secretary in the Federation such as deep knowledge and experience as a shop-steward. Interestingly COSATU General Secretary has no voting rights in the Executive Committee meeting. Other unionists paid for full-time work by the union act as Educators or the directors of various departments, they do not consider as 'leaders'. COSATU has not granted liberty to the person acting as "leader- staffers- or directors" simultaneously.

Thus, in the South African model Union leaders are classified with Executive officials and non-executive office bearers. COSATU disqualified even as the member, those who don't pay union dues. Their union delegates in Congress are selected on the basis of due-paying numbers. This practice applies to all locals and the affiliates as well.

COSATU has classified the companies into three categories, where it has union as National companies- having braches all over the country, Regional companies with the branches in the provinces and Local companies. They follow different style of Collective Bargaining with the employers by creating a Central Negotiating Team. The Team deal with employers in group. No individual Team member is allowed to conduct bargaining with the 'employers' privately; every work should be an outcome of the teamwork. Thus South Africa has the practice of National Bargaining Agreement and Collective Bargaining Agreement. To give this practice a definite direction, the COSATU has a slogan- 'One Industry-One Union; One Country, One Federation.'

The hot topic in New Unionism: Serving Model vs. Organising Model

As the Africans advocates the concept of 'Workers Controlled Unionism', the American and European Union debates on model of union organisation. They have classified the union basically two categories as per their function- *Serving* model and the *Organising* model. The masters of American-European have compared the servicing model to the insurance companies. In such type of union movement daily routine works are done by the experts & employees. Leaders work for the admin

management and receive reporting from the committee. And the member pays the membership dues for the service they take as they do in the insurance companies.

Contrary, it is claimed that, in *Organising* model of unionism, paying the dues is not enough; the workers have to voluntarily dedicate themselves for the unionisation. Thus every worker feels ownership on the union. They show their interest on everything like CBA, the negotiation team etc. They complete their assigned job with enthusiasm. As Union always works for the members and more the members make a strong organisation. This model establishes direct communication with the members and this helps to preserve the democracy within the union. This type of union reforms with time and the members are given the moral lesson- "Let's do this, together for ourselves!"

Servicing model instead of creating pressure with the collective power of the workers takes other ways. Thus this type of model is often suspected as not so good form of union which works with the political power. But servicing model says- "the trade union for individual."

Following chart shows the differences between the two models.

ORGANIZING MODEL	SERVICING MODEL
Proactive	Reactive
Independent of management	Dependent upon management
Actively involves members in all decisions	Union officers "solve problems" for members in response to complaints or requests
Creates many activities in workplace	Total reliance on grievance and arbitration
Constantly negotiating for improvements	Waits for regularly scheduled contract dates
Develops the skills and abilities of the members	Total reliance on union staff, "experts" and lawyers
Open communications channels	Union info is considered privileged and kept secret to a small group
Active membership	Passive membership
Decentralized union structure	Centralized union structure
Bottom-up decisions	Top-down decisions
Regularly supports other unions	Basically isolated from other activity

Source: <http://student.ccbcmd.edu>

Contrary to this, Organisation model focuses on the self power. Those who favour this model say, "How the demands of the workers can be fulfilled by pleading the state-government- Minister and other authorities?" "Union of Individuals" is the motto of this model. As trade union lessons the workers that "a class in itself is a class to itself," similarly, the Organisational Model tells workers that the power of the union relies on the collective efforts of the members.

The union movement of America is based on the experience of the AFL-CIO United States of America. There, the Executive chief is Union President. Between the president and vice presidents there are 2 other executive officials; Executive Vice President and Secretary Treasurer.

South Asia different to the world; contrary Nepali experience

The experience of South Asia is basically influenced from the Indian experience. And the Indian unionism is slightly influenced from the British experience. Being the well-known model in the entire world, India model has also somehow embraced the Industrial Unionism. But the experience of India in the union autonomy, dues paying membership and its relation with political parties is mess. After being freed from Britain, India followed the 'one party- one union' system.

Nepal is contrary to all of these. We follow the Enterprise Unionism, which is now converted into 'local unions are the total union.' Thus the National Centres and the Central unions have less authority according to the law. Thus, taking the lesson from the other countries, we should change our practice.

There are two needs of the Nepali Trade Unionism. First, we should introduce the industrial unionism instead of ongoing practice of Enterprise Unionism. And second to bring the 'multi' unions together and building the Single voice of the Nepali working class.

The main meaning of the union movement is launching an action to uplift the *class- as- a whole* from their *Haves-Not* status. For this, the class unity is utmost important thing. Thus all the workers have been following the slogan- '*Workers of the world, Unite!*' for centuries

Our experience says that the *Enterprise Unionism* puts the full stop on the unity of the workers as a class. "Power to the below" interpreted against the "class-will" by the opposite class in our context and paved red-carpet to the Bosses to implement their old-fashioned trick "*divide and rule!*" Partial movement based in different enterprises rather than whole, resulted hard reality of "somewhere there are facilities and somewhere there are none." Differences on the workplace made the equal rights of all the workers of the nation into shades.

Thus the Industrial Unionism has not only become the need but the next destination as well. Let's discuss

The Next destination: Future model of the Nepali Trade Unionism

No doubts, now the way should move along with the Industrial Unionism. Both practices, which has been proved wrong- 'the top-down' policy, where the national federations and enterprise unions are rounding-up around the orbit of centrally formed "Confederation" or the so-called 'bottom-up' approach, where centre of enterprise unions scattered different directions or the super-centre of such federations, should not follow. Our union movement must base on the solid foundation of strong unitary unions built by the dues-paying individual members covering entire industry. Our future National centre should be the Federation of strong Central Unions rely-on vast numbers of workplace committees.

1. **The Industry based central union:** Today's Federation which only work policy level will be replaced by the unitary central union. Such unions will have direct access to the work-place. The membership will be recruited individually instead of present day 'federating enterprise unions' into national federation.

Such 'unitary' unions have the rights to CBA directly with the management of Industry concerned. Where there are the members of these unions, there will be automatically the 'branch of the union' in operation. And the central union has the right to mobilise the branches and the members directly.

In this process, there will be multiple unions on the basis of the political/ideological beliefs or apolitical. The authenticity for CBA will be determined based on dues-paying members of unions active in the workplace.

2. **The national federations affiliated by unitary (industrial) union:** The national federation will be launched by the central unions established according to own political/ideological belief. In other words, the present central unions like GEFONT, NTUCI etc will be converted into such Federations. The working style of the federations will be the same, thus multi-federation will thus continued. They will represent their central industrial unions.

In the industrial unionism, there should be **One Confederation** recognised by the state equivalent to that of employer's organisation. To finalise various labour agendas, a new kind of mechanism perhaps the Labour Parliament also should be necessary.

It is the Central Unions, which will send their elected representatives to the 'Labour Parliament' and the 'Single Confederation'. The numbers of representative will be decided on the numbers of dues-paying members of the central unions.

3. **The local units of the central union:** In workplace there will union branch of central unions and shop-stewards of the federation. Here as well, multi-union situation will be continued. As in the central unions, at workplace also authentic union will be decided as per their verified dues-paying members' strength.

The membership verification will be carried on through Cheque-off system. The local branch of industrial union will replace present days Enterprise Union.

4. **Single Confederation of the National Federations:** A single Confederation will be launched to represent entire working masses as the umbrella platform of all the active federations. And the leadership will be created on the basis of dues-paying members.

This will be the Single Union to response the multi-union situation. And the decision will be taken in consensus among the affiliated federations. This confederation should be recognised by the state as the only 'Centre' of all the unions, which will represent Nepali wage earners in the international platform such as ILO as well.

Through this, we will be able to correct error caused due to existing Trade Union Act-2049. "Unity based in diversity" through this way, we will also be able to unite workers organised in multiple unions.