

The Efforts Initiated by Com. Sankaraguha Niyogi in Building up a Revolutionary Trade-Union Movement Offers a Genuine Ray of Hope

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Trade union is a weapon in the hands of working-class to fight against exploitation and oppression. If this weapon is not properly used it becomes ineffective and blunt. That is what exactly happened in our country. The established and conventional trade-union centres including the central trade-unions AITUC and CITU have totally failed in fulfilling their objectives and in playing their role. On the other hand, the Naxalite movement of 1967 which gave some hope to the working-class by abandoning to assume its class-role to fight against the failed bureaucratic trade union leadership, under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar, refusing to work in mass organisations and particularly by 'boycotting' the trade unions had showered cold waters on the hopes of working-class. By 1974 with the defeat of the historical All India Railway Strike under the combined leadership of the established central trade unions amply made it clear that the existing trade-unions and the methods and policies adopted by them are hopeless and that building-up revolutionary movement was an immediate necessary task to be taken-up by genuine and sincere Marxist- Leninists for the success of new democratic revolution in India- a semi colonial and semi-feudal country.

Sankara Guha Niyogi is one of those genuine and sincere Marxist-Leninists who made devoted efforts to build up a revolutionary trade union movement in India that stands as a ray of hope for building up of a revolutionary trade union movement for the working-class of our country.

Sankara Guha Niyogi had worked during the end of the decade of 1960s with AICCCR and became a member of CPI(M-L) under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar. He had severe differences with the leadership on various issues like organizing mass organizations, trade unions etc, besides various trends of left deviation of the party's political line and programme; due to which he was expelled from that party. He came to the opinion that 'boycotting trade unions' is escapism. He was of the opinion that the working methods and the method of thinking of the leadership of CPI (M-L) groups (with which he had experience) lacked the necessary connections and contacts with the people living in India - particularly with the productive classes and that they have no clear vision about the future society.

This situation made him to study the society in depth, and apply Marxism and Leninism to the concrete conditions of India and particularly for building up a revolutionary trade union. By that time, he already gained experience in organising trade union, while working in Bhilai

Steel Plant. There he organised the Blast-Furnace Action Committee. Because of his militancy he was soon dismissed from his job. For some time, he worked as a full timer, in AITUC. During emergency he was arrested and was in jail until Jan. 77.

To avoid police harassment, he wandered in distant parts of Chhattisgarh. At times he worked as a farmhand, other times as a miner, a fish vendor or even a herdsman selling goats. During these wanderings he came in close touch and contact with the reality of Chhattisgarh. During this phase of wanderings Niyogi organised villagers to resist a dam project that would have displaced a large number of people and successfully had it replaced by a number of smaller irrigation projects that really benefitted the people. He mobilised miners at Dani Tola to wrest some concessions from the contractors.

The problems of miners working under contractors have been increasing and the discontent of miners against the contractors as well against the pretensions of the union leaders was increasing. The contract workers were seriously thinking of leaving their old union and forming a new union. Hearing about this Niyogi decided to go there. Taking up the contract worker's struggle, he assumed the leadership of the new organisation, the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), as organising secretary – a post he held till death.

Tens of thousands of workers mostly tribals were hired by labour contractors to dig iron ore from the surface of mountains and load into trucks for the Bhilai Steel Plant. They were paid with fewer wage, with a heavy workload and treated inhumanly by contractors. In the month of June 1977 under the leadership of CMSS, workers went on strike on the question of fall-back wages, hut-repair allowance and bonus. The police went to the union office to arrest Niyogi. The workers resisted and the police opened fire on them killing 11 workers injuring several others. Niyogi was arrested. Curfew was imposed. But the workers remained firm in their struggle. There were nationwide protests against the police firing. Ultimately within a fortnight's time an agreement was signed conceding the main demands of workers. Later Niyogi was released.

From that time onwards the new CMSS union under the leadership of Niyogi went from strength to strength not only obtaining new gains for the workers but also improving the life of miners in other ways.

After the success of 1977 strike, in 1979 CMSS put forth eighteen point charter that included demands for wage parity with permanent Bhilai Steel Plant worker and departmentalisation. Management accepted all demands except departmentalisation because it ultimately planned to mechanise major mines and replace contract labour with smaller number of workers. The CMSS studied the mechanisation plans and proposed a plan of semi-mechanisation that would not need retrenchment of miners digging the iron ore. The management agreed for partial departmentalization. Since the struggle for departmentalisation of contract labour could not be completed, the CMSS created labour cooperative societies that took over from labour contractors 60% of the work of breaking and bringing stones up out of the mines, displacing the labour contractors abolishing the

middle-man's profit and came to deal directly with the Bhilai Steel Plants' mine management.

Niyogi had not confined his trade union activities exclusively for the betterment of working conditions of the workers and economic demands alone. He extended the activities by taking up activities relating to the welfare of tribals living in the villages from which most of the miners come from. A sister organisation called Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) was established to struggle for liberation from socio-economic exploitation of the region largely by the outside interests of state and capital. He made his union CMSS to touch every aspect of the worker's life. He formed 17 departments under the Union.

The union launched a campaign against the consumption of liquor by the workers. A climate was created in which the tribal members of the union felt consumption of liquor was a betrayal of the union that fought for them. The women of the worker's families were drawn into the anti-alcohol movement which led to the formation of the women's wing Mahila Mukti Morcha. Women played an important role in the mobilisation effort after police firing. The women played a very active role in the campaign against job displacing mechanisation policy. Women's participation peaked during crisis periods of intense struggle.

The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha took up the problems concerning the peasantry; it took the cause of sharecroppers at Nandiya village and conducted a prolonged struggle to protect their interests against a powerful land owner. The CMM made efforts to organise the evicted persons elsewhere to enable them to cultivate new lands.

The CMSS made efforts and initiatives for the release of bonded labour, which had a high incidence in some parts of Chhattisgarh. It worked with integration of the trade union of bonded labourers due to which over 5,000 bonded labourers were released with the help of Supreme Court of India and were rehabilitated.

The peasantry in the villages were organised along with workers in towns so that both came to each other's help in times of crisis. The green-red flag movement of CMSS has campaigned against big dam projects which displace a large number of people. With this effort at some places the displacements were avoided to a large extent and irrigation benefits were increased.

A hospital - Shaheed hospital was built by the workers themselves, under the leadership of CMSS. Doctors like Binayak Sen devotedly worked to develop the hospital in providing scientific and rational therapy at nominal cost without using banned or bannable drugs but only the drugs which are listed in the list of essential drugs of WHO. Effective home remedies are also advocated.

A campaign against gambling was waged by the union and many workers were weaned away from gambling bringing financial stability of the labourer's families. The CMSS union also made available facilities of education to the children of miners. Set up 11 schools of which 9 were finally taken over by the government.

The union waged agitations for collection and removal of garbage from the miner's 'Bastis' (localities).

With its Red-green flag symbolizing the worker-peasant alliance the CMSS conducted struggles against atrocities of forest and revenue officials.

The union allied with small and medium businesses to resist massive displacement of livelihood. It mobilised the truck-owners and operators, shopkeepers and traders who would lose their business if transportation was to be carried out by conveyor belt (mechanisation).

A cultural team was evolved with miners, which used traditional Chhattisgarh folk theatre to depict the history of Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh - an adivasi leader of 1857 who fought a guerrilla war against the British and was finally hung in public in Raipur. The cultural team also is enacting skits and dramas on the day-to-day problems of the miners and tribals. On 3rd June of every year Shaheed Divas and Veer Narayan Singh Divas are being conducted, in which the miners and family members of workers in Dalli Rajhara participated.

The union organised the Shaheed Sudama foot-ball club; which won many prestigious tournaments.

During 1984 riots against-Sikhs after the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the union invited all the Sikh families all over Pondi-Lohra Tehsil in Dalli Rajhara to the union office and dozens of families came from all over Chhattisgarh and camped for days and weeks in the union office. Thus, the union took an anti-communal action in practice.

Niyogi considered the demand for a new Chhattisgarh state as a legitimate popular demand as a means of harnessing the forces generated by the loyalty to national identity in order to tackle the wider question of socio-economic exploitation. He promoted the demand through Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) challenging the dominance of the forest contractors, traders, money lenders and corrupt officials. He succeeded in forging unity between workers and peasants, industrial and agricultural labourers, the urban and the rural poor and the tribals and the plains people. With that the influence of CMM extended to nearly a thousand villages.

Niyogi was involved in parliamentary politics, by participating in elections, conducting election campaign to use it as a convenient vehicle for expanding CMM's influence and carrying its message to every village. Janak Lal Thakur was run as a candidate of CMM in 1980, eventually winning a seat in Madhya Pradesh Assembly in 1985.

Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) started organizing contract labour in over a hundred metal industries in Bilai. These ranged small and medium workshops to large business-like simplex, Kodia, the Bilai Engineering Corporation, the Beekay Engineering etc that have long been operating industries around the public sector Bilai Steel Plant. Some ancillary

industries supply parts to Bhilai Steel Plant while others process its products in to intermediate or finished goods. Collectively they employ around 25,000 workers on daily wage-basis. Most workers neither enjoy minimum wages nor decent working conditions. Many had to work for 15 hours a day in most unsafe and noxious conditions and succumb to accidents.

The CMM leadership established Pragati Steel Sramik Sangh (PESS) covering all ancillary industries around Bhilai in 1990. They demanded recognition of their union, besides statutory minimum wage, an eight-hour working day and departmentalization that entitles workers a variety of fringe benefits. The industrialists refused to consider these legitimate demands. The workers protested and conducted protest demonstrations like Dharnas. In retaliation 1800 workers were retrenched. Over 800 workers were arrested. On the other hand, the BJP state government filed over 30 criminal charges against Niyogi and jailed him. The district magistrate of Durg issued an order banishing Niyogi from 5 districts. Following protests from trade unions around the country and on a petition, the MP High Court dismissed the externment order. The agitating workers of the union were assaulted by the goondas of the managements on 30th April 1991. The management of simplex demanded the workers to sign a bond that they would not maintain any link with PESS union. Again, on 24th August 150 goondas emerged from the factory, assaulted workers conducting the dharna protest. The police arrested the protecting workers. The workers were demanding the arrest of five industrial barons of Bhilai who reportedly planned the goonda attacks on protesting workers.

At the time of externment order banishing Niyogi, seeking to bring the matter to the attention of President, and Prime Minister, Niyogi led around 2,000 workers of Bhilai on yatra to New Delhi.

This infuriated the highly resourceful industrialists of Bhilai and nearby areas. They determined to crush CMM linked unions, at any cost. This resulted in killing of Sankar Guha Niyogi on the mid-night of 27-28 September is 1991.

Thus, Sankar Guha Niyogi fought tirelessly not only for the economic rights of contract tribal workers but also for their social rights and betterment. His methods of non-conventional trade unionism in building up of a revolutionary trade union won national recognition. Niyogi's political motto was "struggle and creativity - struggle for creation and creation for struggle". With such a motto he applied Marxism-Leninism to the concrete conditions of India, to build up a revolutionary workers movement. He developed mass political, cultural and social consciousness among workers and peasantry. Though his initiations and efforts in the struggle to change the system realised limited success, it stands as a model for building up revolutionary trade unions that could effectively pave a way for the termination of exploitation ultimately.

All the efforts initiated by Niyogi were made with the consultation of the workers in the widest possible way and with the collective decisions of all concerned.

His modest personal life style and speaking in an easy language that could be understood by laymen and the easy language without any political jargon in explaining various issues through pamphlets and articles written by him also have to be regarded as a model for the pioneers who intend sincerely to build revolutionary trade unions. Practising trade union democracy must be the actual method for organising revolutionary trade unions as was done by Niyogi.

The particulars and experiences gained by CMM by participating in assembly elections and their methods have to be reviewed and a proper assessment has to be made of its effects. The role of the member of CMM's candidate elected in the assembly election too had to be reviewed and draw suitable lessons that could contribute to better organisation of revolutionary trade unions across the country.

The demand for a new Chhattisgarh state and the loyalty it generated to national identity and its result and its outcome too have to be reviewed to have a clear understanding about the consequences of such a demand. Though a separate Chhattisgarh state is formed and, likewise a separate Telangana state was formed as has been aspired by some communist revolutionary groups, no change of even an iota in the working and living conditions of the workers and oppressed people had occurred in those newly formed states. On the contrary they have been worsening further in the newly formed states. State repression is being increased day by day on workers and masses. So, these experiences have to be weighed against the demand for a new state within existing system of economic, cultural and political rule in our country.

These aspects have to be reviewed and correct lessons have to be drawn to improve the initiations and efforts to build up revolutionary trade unions with the ultimate purpose of establishing socialism in our country.

Whatever might be the limitations of the movement created by Com. Sankara Guha Niyogi, the revolutionary worker's movement created and organised by him for almost 14 years of his life will be an eternal inspiration to those who genuinely and sincerely attempt to build up a revolutionary trade union movement. It definitely is a ray of hope to march forward with confidence.