

Nature of Working Class Movement in Kerala: A Study of Social Movement Unionism

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Abstract

Producing a space for cross movement pollination, the relatively new style of Social Movement Unionism calls for widespread support from workers in various industries to move in solidarity with community groups and other movements in a collective struggle for justice. Indeed it is a different understanding of the role of the working class and its typical organization in the transformation of society. The present study is an effort to re-examine Mavoor agitation, a trade union skirmish which had a strange anatomy in comparison with the generally accepted perceptions on working class struggle in Kerala. The workers of the Birla-owned Pulp and Fiber Factory at Mavoor (Kozhikode district, Kerala state) launched an indefinite strike on sixth June 1985, on rejection of their charter of demands by the management. Contrary to the expectations of the trade unions the strike went on for a period of 39 months bringing untold hardships to the workers. 13 unemployed workers committed suicide, whereas several others were forced to leave the area in search of their livelihood. Paradoxically, the struggle which started for better emoluments slowly transformed into the nature of an SOS struggle with the sole demand, the immediate re-opening of the factory. When the traditional type unions faced setbacks one by one and were struggling to retain the support of the workers, Gwalior Rayon Workers Union (GROW), an informal trade union formed under the leadership of A Vasu, a Naxalite turned human rights activist suddenly emerged as one of the major working class organizations in the area. They made an unprecedented appeal to the general public to extend support to the new movement which is intended to save hundreds of retrenched workers and their family from starvation. Contrary to the style of a traditional industrial dispute the GROW led struggle turned to be a success in mobilizing public support. The present study mainly is an attempt to explore this metamorphosis of a bipartite traditional labor dispute into the kind of a social movement unionism.

Keywords

Working Class Struggle, Social Movement Unionism, Union Renewal, Political Unionism, Business Unionism

Introduction to Social Movement Unionism

Waterman (1991) has acknowledged the use of the concept of social movement unionism in the works of Webster (1987), Lambert (1988), Lambert and Webster (1988) and Munck (1988). Later, the success of alliances among radical workers and social movement

activists protesting against World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999 widely promoted suggestions that social movement unionism might renew many labor movements across the world (Waterman, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Taylor and Marthes, 2002 and Bergmann, 2003). While analyzing the new developments, Waterman wondered whether this new term is a substitute for the earlier term political unionism. To quote Waterman, “We are talking not simply of a different union model but a different understanding of the role of the working class and its typical organizational in the transformation of society” (Waterman, 1988). Gradually, in academic and activists debates about union renewal the replacement of business unionism with social unionism was seen central to the labor movements short-term and long-term survival. It is argued that the supremacy of business unionism as a trade union culture resulted in the decline of trade union density, the atrophy of working class capacities and finally the inability of unions to develop effective strategies for countering neo-liberal globalization (Ross, 2007). This led to a shift from the class content to the non-class content of working class struggle with a strong tendency to transform the nature of traditional working class movement into a kind of workers new social movements. Producing a space for cross movement pollination, the new situation calls for widespread support from workers in various industries to move in solidarity with community groups and other movements in a collective struggle for justice. Recognizing the importance of third parties in the process of industrial democracy, the new trend has provided a large role for students, youths and other activist in the working class movement. It also proposes for a multi class and multi identity coalition.

It is interesting to note that there is a proliferation and interchangeable use of multiple terms in the union renewal literature describing the birth of this new trend in working class behavior. Apart from social movement unionism, the terms like union-community coalitions, social unionism, community unionism, social justice unionism and citizenship movement unionism are popularly used to represent the new development (Ibid).

There are five major trends in social movement unionism (Waterman, 1991). Firstly, it has a fusion aspect in the sense that labour fuses with other social movements making inter movement distinctions difficult. For example, distinguish between a labour issue and women issue has become almost difficult. Secondly, it is meant to revitalize the unions to confront globalization and neo liberal policies. Thirdly, it is a process of extending the realm of trade union activity beyond workplace and beyond national boundaries. Fourthly, it surpasses the existing models of economic political or political economic unionism. Finally, it is call for a grass root style social justice framework of operations.

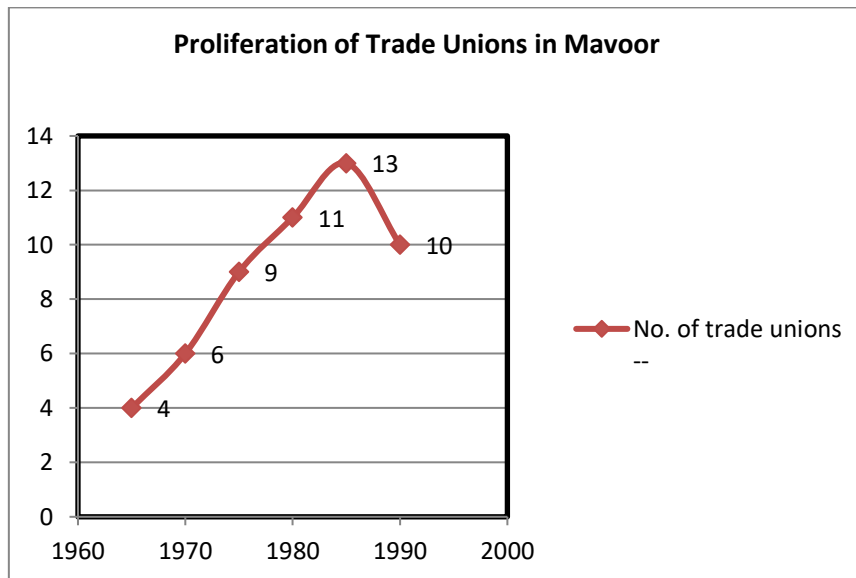
Trade Union Movement in Mavoor

The trade union history in Mavoor starts with the accident death of a worker in 1962 which compelled the workers to form the first labor organization in Mavoor (Chathunny, 1988). Thus Gwalior Rayons Factory and Construction Workers Union (affiliated to pro-CPI AITUC) came in to existence. Later, workers loyal to Indian National Congress left AITUC and formed the Gwalior Rayon Employees Union (affiliated to INTUC). The split in the Indian communist movement (1964), had also reflected the trade union movement in the area. The CPI (M) loyalist left the AITUC and formed the pro-CITU Gwalior Rayon pulp and Fiber workers union. 1970's witnessed the formation of five new unions. The split in the Indian National Congress (1969) inspired a group of INTUC workers to organize the Gwalior Rayon Labor Union affiliated to pro-congress (O) INLC. In 1978, the Indira loyalists formed the Gwalior Rayon pulp and Fiber employees Congress affiliated to INTUC (I). Similarly, a group of workers in the *SwathantraThozhilali Union* (STU), affiliated to Muslim League left their mother organization and formed Gwalior Rayon pulp and Fiber Factory Thozhilali Union (Pro-All India Muslim League). The formation of

Gwalior Rayons pulp and Fiber Factory Staff Union and Gwalior Rayons workers Organization further enhanced the number of trade unions. Finally, the total number of trade union organization in this factory rose to 13 when a group of frustrated workers formed Gwalior Rayons Organization of workers (GROW) (Ibid). The Union party nexus seems to be the most powerful factor which worked behind the proliferation of workers organizations in Mavoor.

Year	No. of Trade Union
1960	--
1965	04
1970	06
1975	09
1980	11
1985	13
1990	10

Source: Information collected from AITUC office, Mavoor.



Collective Bargaining in Mavoor

As pointed out earlier, the history of collective bargaining in Mavoor started in the early years of 1960's with the formation of Gwalior Rayons Factory and Construction Workers Union, the first trade union in the area. In the beginning stage, it mainly focused on the grievances of labors engaged in construction works. For example it organized a general strike in 1962, demanding a raise in the daily wages and provision for accident compensation. Shortly, the management agreed with union's demands and consequently the daily wages were raised from Rs. 1. 75 to Rs. 2. 75. It was also agreed that compensation would be paid for accidents. Thus, the first attempt made by the trade union movement to improve the working conditions turned to be a success (Saboo, 1988). However, it doesn't mean that this success did not cause a remarkable improvement in their physical quality of life. When production started in 1963, the workers successfully organized an indefinite strike for bonus. Since the factory was reaping huge profit the cost of disagreeing with union's demand was significantly high and thus management rather hastily yielded to distribute eight % bonus against the fact that there was no statutory provision for bonus.

Interestingly, the Bonus Act which was passed after one year provided for a statutory rate of four percentages (Cherroppa, 1988).

However the developments during the next two decades reduced management's cost of disagreeing with union's demands in a considerable manner due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the management took a strategic decision to establish a new pulp producing unit in Harihar in Karnataka taking away from the Mavoor unit the status of sole supplier of pulp to the Birla's industrial network. Secondly, it also managed a license from central government to import pulp. Thirdly, working class unity in Mavoor started to decline due to the influence of party affiliation and consequent rise in the number of trade unions. Moreover, the long term agreement signed in 1978 brought about a new class of under employed and under privileged reserve workers leading to a new dichotomy between the organized and unorganized sectors in the factory premises. The alleged institutionalization of trade union movement and so called collaborationist kind of leadership also inversely affected the collective bargaining power of working class in Mavoor.

Obviously, most of the strikes during the 1970s failed to produce any positive results. For example, the trade unions struck work in 1972 for 144 days demanding interim relief, but failed to produce any expected outcome. Whenever the trade unions resorted to strike, instead of resolving the conflict through negotiations, every time, the management retaliated by closing down the factory. It paid little attention to the demands of the unions and rejected the demand for renewing the long term wage agreement signed in 1978. The condition of reserve workers of the factory was very pathetic. They were offered work only for thirteen days in a month. The newly emerged contract system began to take away the opportunities which could be assigned to the reserve workers. The bonus rate was reduced to statutory limit, whereas the workers had received an average bonus of 40 per cent during the 1978-82 periods. Thus the tension that originated in the early years of 1970's found intensified and resulted in the indefinite strike in 1985. The historic strike which continued for such a long period of 39 months constitutes the background of this study (Vasu, 1989).

Social Movement Unionism in Mavoor

It was in this background the working class politics in Mavoor took the shape of a social movement. As the strike went on and traditional trade unions failed to find out a solution, Gwalior Rayon's Organization of Workers (GROW), a relatively new informal association of laborers came forward with a plan of reorienting the style of trade union activity in the area. Contrary to the nature of a regular trade union struggle of the conventional order, the new union proposed the idea of a mass movement to mobilize public support. Cutting across political barriers, it appealed civil society to extend support to the strike. As a result, hundreds of students, youth, women, intelligentsia, professionals, merchants, social activists, teachers, media persons, artists and several others came forward and rallied behind the GROW-led agitation.

The indefinite hunger strike started by A. Vasu and Moyeen Bappu two prominent leaders of GROW union was the driving force of social union movement unionism in Mavoor. It is interesting to note that the way of behavior and techniques used by the GROW leadership was unique in nature. In search of a solution to the problems of their brethren, Vasu one of the pioneer leaders of naxalbari movement in Kerala and Moyeen Bappu, a product of *Dars system* (a traditional school for Islamic learning) found to be treading purely a Gandhian way of social action. The two hunger strikes by these leaders evoked unprecedented response from the civil society. Here it is to be admitted that the United Democratic Front, the main opposition coalition in the state of Kerala was instrumental in supporting the struggle mainly due to the political antagonism with the ruling Left

Democratic Front. But it was not the case of masses that represented the cross of Kerala society. Driven by the sacred spirit of eternal human values, they dared to cross the political barriers and became a part of the new movement. The role of students in and around Calicut deserves a special reference. They boycotted classes and organized protest rallies and corner meetings in different parts of the district. The students of Regional Engineering College (presently NIIT), Devagiri College, and Darul Ulum Arabic College Vazhakkad, three prominent educational institutions in the neighborhood found very active in making the strike a success. The role of youth in the struggle was also significant. Youth Congress, Kerala Yuvajana Vedit, Yuvamorcha, and several other youth organizations in the state actively participated in the agitations. Another organization which took a strategic position was Kerala *Vyapara Vyavasya Ekopana Samithi*, the largest interest groups of merchants in Kerala. T. Nasarudheen, the general secretary of the KVVES visited Mavoor several times and played the decisive role in mobilizing the support of the merchant community in favor of the agitation. Women were also active in the movement. Their presence was explicit in programmes like dharnas, protest rallies, picketing, fasting, door to door campaign and fund raising. Bodhana, a Calicut based independent association working for the well-being of women, co-ordinated the involvements of women. The participation of intellectuals and literary figures from different parts of the state was also notable in the movement. Many of them abstained from public programmes as a sign of their protest against the unending hardships of workers in Mavoor. Among those who supported the struggle C. Achuthamenon, Justice V. R. Krishnayyer, Justice T. Chandrasekara Menon, George Fernandes, M. P. Veerendrakumar, K. P. R. Gopalan, SCS Menon, P. Balagangadara Menon, Adv. Majeri Sundar Raj, and Adv. Kaleeshwaram Raj need a special reference. (Cherooppa, 1988)

The alleged presence of radical left in the movement was another debatable subject in this new style of trade union activity. Left generally kept away from the new development and drew attention to the naxalite background of GROW leaders. They suspected that it is a pre-planned movement to un-popularize the ruling LDF government. The left trade unions in the state also support this argument. While responding to this criticism, A. Vasu the leader of the new movement ruled out the allegation of naxalite involvement and the so-called conspiracies against the left democratic government. To quote him, "I would have welcomed if the agitation of the GROW were led by naxalites. But among the 1000 workers of my union there may not be even ten people to support naxalite politics. I still remain a naxalite and believe in that ideology. But GROW is an independent union of rayon workers without any political label. GROW members work for different political parties, as we have seen in the last assembly and panchayath elections....." (Vasu, 1989)

It was held that the views of radical leftism had influenced new social movement unionism in Mavoor. The slogan, '*Open the Rayons Factory, Save Mavoor*' and '*Drive out All-India Monopolies, Save Kerala*' raised by the agitators strongly support this argument. Many radical leftist organizations found it as an opportunity to expose the hazards of development activities carried out under the assistance of monopolies whether Indian or foreign. For them, the movement was a part of wider struggle against big capitalists (Ibid).

Vasu was an ardent critic of the traditional style of trade union activity in Mavoor. He firmly believed that there was an unholy alliance between the management and trade union leadership. Most of the strikes in Mavoor were for the benefit of the management. He even suspected that the indefinite strike and consequent closure of the factory for such a long period was a 'planned drama' to bring down the royalty rates of raw materials and for liberalizing government policies towards polluting industries. He also admitted that it was because of the vulnerable conditions of retrenched workers, the movement unwillingly

supported the reopening of the factory against the fact that the way it functions is extremely harmful to the general and long run interest of our public life.

The course of social action of the movement was purely Gandhian and this constitutes another peculiarity of social movement unionism in Mavoor. The non-violent techniques like dharnas, corner meetings, hunger strikes, hunger-marches and relay-hunger strikes proved successful in mobilizing the support of larger society. Rejecting the proposals for direct action of his ideological brethren Vasu always insisted on passive resistance and firmly believed that radical steps in any form would reinforce the well-publicized perception that labor struggles in Kerala are militant in nature.

However, the radicals had also played an important role in the movement. Their presence was explicit in the Strike Aid Committee (SAC) formed in connection with the hunger strikes. The political parties like CRC (ML), the CPI (ML) and their auxiliaries organisations like Yuvajanavedi showed enthusiasm in making the functioning of SAC a success (Vasu, 1989).

Gandhian and Socialist interest groups like LohiaVichar Vedi, and Gandhi Yuvak Mandal found to be very active in the movements. Moreover leaders like George Fernandes, M. P. Veerendrakumar and several other Janatha Leaders extended whole hearted support to the strike. They frequently interacted with the GROW leadership.

Role of Bodhana, the socialist feminist organization led by a former Naxalite leader K. Ajithadeserves a special reference. This organization was instrumental in bringing the women to the forefront of the agitations. They visited households of the retrenched workers and mobilized women cutting across the barriers built by the traditional trade unions and political parties. They observed a mass solidarity fast in front of the factory gate. As a sign of protest they disrupted a flower show organized by the Rotary Club (Ibid).

Here, it is to be specially mentioned that the main stream political parties and their auxiliaries, found to be reluctant to support the new movement in Mavoor. However, the rank and file of these political parties and associations slowly changed their attitude. The unending hardships of the people due to closure of the factory had produced a kind of political apathy and in turn strengthened the civil society movement in the area. This developed actually played a key role in the growth of social movement unionism in Mavoor

The active role of opinion leaders was another element that shaped the destiny of this unique working class movement. Opinion leaders representing different walks of life responded positively to the movement. The contributions of Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer, Justice T. Chandrasekhara Menon K. P. R. Gopalan, S. C. S. Menon, P. Balagandara Menon and C. Achuthamenon were prominent among them. Similar strike aid committees were formed in several parts of the state under the leadership of prominent social activists. 17 leading artists, writers and academicians in the state issued a joint statement calling upon the public to postpone all literary and cultural functions and celebration in Calicut till the withdrawal of the hunger-strike (Bappu, 1989).

The arrest of fasting leaders Vasu and Bappu against the charges of suicide attempt (on 3rd February 1988) and the decision to hospitalize them is an important event in the history of working class politics in Kerala. Though the police carried out the arrest during night, the news spread like a wildfire and thousands of workers and their family members, crossing the barriers of trade affiliations rushed to the hospital where the leaders were admitted. The crowd shouted slogan urging the government to save the life of their beloved leaders. The unprecedented support of the working class in Mavoor and their family found to be a source of inspiration for the fasting leaders to continue the hunger strike in the

hospital. On the very next day, the people of Kozhikode observed hartal as an expression of their solidarity. Similar kinds of responses were found across the state. The Strike Aid Committee in Thiruvanthapuram organized adharna in front of the state secretariat. While addressing the participants K. P. R. Gopalan, a veteran communist leader strongly criticized the so called passive attitude of the LDF government towards Mavoor agitation. R. Sankaranarayanan Thambi, a social activist and former speaker of Kerala legislative assembly also came up to support the agitations. The students and youth also played a key role in the movement. The call by the Students Action Council to boycott classes on 10 February 1988 met with enthusiastic response. KeraleeyaYuvajanaVedi and YuvajanaVedi (two youth organizations in Kerala affiliated to CPI (ML) organized hunger strikes at the district capitals. Furthermore, on 18 February 1988, the five districts in northern Kerala (Kazargode, Kannur, Wyanadu, Kozhikode and Malappuram) observed a bandh in which the public life came to a standstill (Ibid)

The transformation of Mavoor agitation into a social movement finally forced the LDF government to start dialogues with the new trade union leadership. Initially the government had made an unsuccessful attempt to compel the GROW leadership to withdraw the strike. Informal talks continued and finally resulted in a settlement. Thanks to the mediation role played by Theruvath Raman and Dr. K. Madhavan Kutty, two prominent social activists in Kozhikkode, it was guaranteed that the government would intensify measures for the immediate re-opening of the factory. Taking the mediators into confidence the fasting leaders ended their 26 day long fast on 20th February 1988 (Vasu, 1989). But the reluctance of the main stream left to acknowledge the new developments taking place in the trade union movement in Mavoor. This was reflected in the statement made by the chief minister that the government had not given any fresh assurance to the GROW, regarding the re-opening. A humiliated GROW leadership immediately retaliated by declaring its decision to restart the hunger strike.

The second hunger strike was started on 18 March 1988 at two centers, one at Thiruvanthapuram and the second one at Mavoor. It was A. Vasu who led the strike in the state capital and Moieen Bappu in Mavoor. Interestingly some of the constituent units of SAC did not agree with the idea of another indefinite hunger strike. The radical left within the SAC strongly proposed direct actions. They also suggested a massive campaign to expose the double standards of the government and menace of industrialization brought under big capital. They also wanted to strengthen the social base of the movement. It was also held that the exclusive dependence on hunger-strike would never serve the purpose of the agitation. The GROW leadership was not ready to accept these suggestions and found them 'immature and insignificant'. This debate finally resulted in an internal division within the SAC. In his report A. Vasu, the general secretary of GROW used to criticize the organizations like Bodhana, CRC CPI (ML), and CPI (ML) for what he called their 'petty bourgeois' attitude towards the Mavoor agitation. He also rejected the argument for revolutionary means as inappropriate. However, these differences of opinion did not make any changes in the decision to go for the second hunger strike.

The government and the ruling parties continue to neglect the hunger-strike and they denounced the new agitation as a deliberate step to disrupt the ongoing negotiations for re-opening the factory. K. R. Gouri, the Minister for industry alleged that the GROW-led agitation was a purely politically motivated effort to bring down the LDF government. EMS Namboothiripad, the then general secretary of CPI (M) urged the GROW leaders to fight against the central government. Major organizations and associations affiliated to the main stream left urged their units not to support the GROW led agitation. For example, All Kerala Tailors Association (AKTA), a pro-left organization asked its Mavoor area committee to withdraw its support given to the hunger strike. Meanwhile the SAC met to evaluate the

developments after the declaration of the second hunger strike in which majority of the SAC constituents supported an unconditional withdrawal of the indefinite fast. In spite of the fact that the GROW union was not in favor of the majority decision to put an end to the struggle, second hunger strike came to an end on 19th April 1988 based on a letter written by the chief minister requesting to withdraw the agitation (Nayanar, 1988). As pointed out by an observer "it was only here that the GROW faltered. Even if for a while, the GROW too fell a prey to the face saving solutions". Though the GROW-led agitation ended in an uncertainty it had succeeded to intensify the efforts of the state government to reopen the factory. The mounting public opinion for the cause of Mavoor strike pressed the state government to gear-up its measures speedily. The 39-month long historic struggle concluded on 15 September 1988. While declaring the settlement of the strike, chief minister himself admitted that the recent settlement is the final outcome of our month long continuous efforts. Obviously the credit goes to both the GROW and the LDF government.

Conclusion

The emergence and role played by the GROW in the 1985-88 agitation was a strange experience. Apart from a conventional trade union it developed in to an organization of masses. The over institutionalization and consequent degradation of existing trade unions were projected as the main reasons for the emergence of GROW in the trade union scene of Mavoor. In the final phase of the agitation (GROW-led agitation), the new union came up to the expectations of the workers to launch an SOS-struggle which succeeded to reopen the factory which remained closed for a long period of 39-months. The phenomenal emergence of GROW perhaps has no parallel in the trade union history of Kerala. It was a mass movement, struggling to save the lives of the poor workers. The social movement unionism initiated by GROWS, however partly succeeded to overcome the sectarian political barriers on the way to working class unity whereas, it broadened the social base of the working class movement, of course only in Mavoor area for a very short period. It did not succeed to produce an in depth support from the side of traditional trade union leadership. It was mainly a movement led and supported by the radical elements within the left movement in Kerala. Interestingly, there were no significant efforts to build up coalitions with the main stream left and those negligible steps did not produce any positive results. Obviously, the social movement unionism in Mavoor was a reflection of the ideological conflicts within the leftist movement. Moreover, this movement had an unsuccessful effort to re-orient the working class politics, by emphasizing the role of the working class and its typical organization in the transformation of society. It is also important to note that the social movement unionism initiated by GROW in turn produced the social acceptance for the unheard kind of extraction of natural resources from a wide area of forest land in the state of Kerala and also an unprecedented type of multi edged environment pollution pausing serious challenges on intergenerational justice.

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