

## **PARTING OF THE WAYS: TRADE UNIONS, NGOS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA<sup>1</sup>**

Michael Gillan  
UWA Business School  
The University of Western Australia  
35 Stirling Highway  
Crawley WA 6009

### **Introduction**

While leading trade unions in India continue to be defined and constrained by their State-centric historical development and bureaucratic-patriarchal internal organisational structures, the challenge of neoliberal restructuring has provided impetus for gradual strategic re-orientation. Several union federations, particularly on the Left, have sought to mobilise workers in national campaigns against State policies and to begin to direct union organising activities towards unorganised sector workers and women. Moreover, as this paper explores, there have been tentative, but noteworthy, interventions within civil society, including the exploration of linkages with non-union/non-party affiliated organisations and social movements. In examining these recent interventions, the paper provides a brief assessment of the interactions between Left trade unions and social movement and non-government organisations before and after the pivotal 2004 meeting of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai. In 2006 and 2007 the Left Front government in West Bengal attempted to acquire and clear land for the purposes of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented to the 17<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne 1-3 July 2008. It has been peer reviewed via a double blind referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright. This paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

constructing special economic zones (in collaboration with domestic and foreign capital), action that resulted in violent local political conflict. These developments threaten to increase the existing divide between party-affiliated organisations and the emerging social movements and their organisations.

### **Labour movement and economic liberalisation in India: Crisis and response**

The pervasive argument that labour movements globally are confronted with a multi-dimensional ‘crisis’ suggests the ascendancy of neoliberal ideology and market driven State policy ‘solutions’, transformations in productions systems, labour markets, employment relationships, and the mobility of capital have eroded trade union legitimacy and institutionalisation. Nonetheless, as Hyman<sup>2</sup> has suggested, a crisis can “provide a shock which compels the abandonment of once comfortable routines and the search for new directions.” In particular, the search for renewal and social agency may require trade unions to consider difficult choices on their *organisation* with regard to new forms of member recruitment and “structure, capacity, democracy and activism.” and on the form and scope of their *politics* to allow for meaningful interventions in the “battle of ideas”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while one strategic response to crisis involves attempts to renegotiate (typically, at a micro, enterprise based level) formal social compromise via pacts and partnership deals with capital; another response stresses a renewal of purpose, direction, and legitimacy by focusing on a role for unions as agents of defending and extending rights and social justice and as exponents of “contentious politics” which entails new forms of mobilisation and movement building.<sup>4</sup>

In Hyman’s view this “can also imply cooperation, often uneasy, with other social movements which have never required the respectability gained by trade unions in most countries.”<sup>5</sup> This observation of strategic movement within labour movements is supported by a developing body of literature that seeks to describe and explain (and often to proscribe) a new depth of engagement between trade unions, politics and social

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hyman, ‘The Future of Trade Unions’, in Anil Verma and Thomas A. Kochan, *Unions in the 21st Century: An international Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2004, pp.17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., page 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

movements. Some scholarship has considered union-‘community’ coalitions (of interest) as one aspect of trade union ‘revitalisation’.<sup>6</sup> Another stream of debate centres on the notion of “social movement unionism” and, in the main, is theoretically informed by Gramsci and Polanyi (the construction of alternative/counter hegemonic politics and movement building in society to counter the destructive consequences of commodification and unfettered markets).<sup>7</sup>

In India, from the 1990s onwards, the ‘crisis’ of labour and the labour movement is associated with the progression of a process of ‘economic liberalisation’ aggressively pursued by the State, in conjunction with domestic capital and international institutions. While the general features delineated above of labour movement ‘crisis’ and strategic response are also evident in India, trade unions, of course, have complex and unique organisational trajectories which necessitate description and explanation and, moreover, can only be understood with reference to the specificity of historical contingency and political context in India.<sup>8</sup> In India leading trade union organisations-- the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU); the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC); Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC); and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) -- are closely linked to major national political parties. In part, these linkages are a result of the institutionalisation of worker/class based mobilisation in the decades following independence as unions gravitated towards a powerful and pervasive State.<sup>9</sup> By the early 1990s, this historical legacy, along with the surviving colonial legislative framework of labour relations, ensured that the labour movement in India was fragmented into ‘independent’ (but generally very weak) enterprise or sectoral worker associations and various competing national union ‘centres’ tied directly to structures of party political

---

<sup>6</sup> Lowell Turner “Globalization and the Logic of Participation: Unions and the Politics of Coalition Building.” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 48:1, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ronaldo Munck, *Globalisation and labour : the new "great transformation"*, London ; New York, Zed Books, 2002; and for an overview of the debates surrounding the term ‘social movement unionism’ Peter Waterman, ‘Adventures of Emancipatory Labour Strategy as the New Global Movement Challenges International Unionism’, *Journal of World Systems Research*, 10, 1, Winter 2004, pp.217-253.

<sup>8</sup> M. Gillan, ‘Strange company? Organised labour and the politics of liberalisation in India’, *Labour, the State, Social Movements and the challenge of neo-liberal globalisation* Eds. Andrew Gamble, Steve Ludlam, Andrew Taylor, and Steven Wood. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Vivek Chibber, ‘From Class Compromise to Class Accommodation: Labor’s Incorporation into the Indian Political Economy’, in M. Katzenstein and R. Ray, *Social Movements and Poverty in India*, Rowman and Littlefield., 2005.

competition.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, trade unions were characterised by their limited scope and strategic ambitions - with most major union organisations restricting their activities to narrow definitions of 'workers' and 'work'. In effect, most union members were predominantly male, full time, permanent workers in the 'organised' sector- especially large-scale public sector enterprises and public services. This narrow scope of activities and coverage, excluded the majority of workers situated in precarious and 'informal' employment relationships.<sup>11</sup>

Despite union fragmentation and competition, Left trade union federations have combined lobbying (representative politics) with contentious campaign activity (movement politics). These union strategies have mainly focused on resisting restructuring in public sector enterprises and central government policy initiatives via mass demonstrations and limited (political and of short duration) strike actions. While such mobilisations have been important demonstrations of strength, several union leaders have also recognised the need to extend their activities into the informal/unorganised sector and to more effectively co-ordinate resistance given a plurality of representative trade union organisations.<sup>12</sup>

The immense challenge posed by neoliberal restructuring has thus provided some impetus for organisational change and strategic reorientation. Most leading national trade union organisations in India are now committed to renewing their membership base and expanding the scope of their activities. This has involved real efforts to prioritise women, casual/contract and 'unorganised' sector workers in union discourses, public campaigns, and new organising initiatives. Indeed, in the context of these organising initiatives, official government statistics released in 2007 on verified trade union members within

---

<sup>10</sup> C. Candland 'The Cost of Incorporation: Labor Institutions, Industrial Restructuring, and New Trade Union Strategies in India and Pakistan' in C. Candland and R. Sil (ed.) *The Politics of Labor in a Global Age: Continuity and Change in Late-industrializing and Post-socialist Economies*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001

<sup>11</sup> K.R. Shyam Sundar, 'Organising the unorganized', *Seminar*, Issue 531, November 2003, Available from <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/531.htm>; Pravin Sinha, 'Representing labour in India', *Development in Practice*, Vol. 14, Nos 1 and 2, February 2004, pp.127-135.

<sup>12</sup> There is a move to dilute labour laws, Interview with Gurudas Das Gupta, general secretary, AITUC, *Frontline*, Vol. 20, No. 18, 12 September 2003 [<http://www.flonnet.com>]

central trade union organisations has revealed a dramatic increase in membership. Despite the evident flaws in the verification process (the potential for underrepresentation and overrepresentation of members across different union types and sectors) in 1989 the aggregated membership of all central trade union organisations was 12.2 million while the 2002 verified union membership is 24.6 million. As J. John notes this suggests a “general picture of an overall increase in membership of CTUOs as well as an increase in membership by all CTUOs is in sharp contradiction with the axiom that unionisation is decreasing under neo-liberalism”.<sup>13</sup>

### **Trade Unions, Social movements and NGOs: Coalitions and their limits**

The major central (national) trade union organisations articulate ideological and programmatic objectives that can only be understood with respect to their party political affiliations, and it is these party/political movement associations which have been the main vehicle for their practice of politics and mobilisation. Nonetheless, over the last decade major Left trade unions have demonstrated some willingness to experiment with participation in campaigns and selective coalition building with non-party organisations and social movements. As will be discussed below, these experiments in campaign and coalition building with social movement and non-government organisations increased with the advent of the World Social Forum (henceforth WSF) networks and events from 2003 onwards.

This strategic shift was undoubtedly related to the emergence of a multitude of social movements and non-government advocacy organisations focused on, variously, the injustices of caste, communalism, environmental destruction, gender discrimination and violence, poverty and rural livelihoods, and the social costs and displacement generated by large scale State-led and promoted ‘development’ projects (dams, special economic zones).<sup>14</sup> These social and political movements, however, are often interrelated with and,

---

<sup>13</sup> J. John, ‘Overall Increase and Sectoral Setbacks: Lessons from Central Trade Union Verification 2002’, *Labour File*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January-April 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Power and Contestation: India since 1989*, Zed Books, London and New York, 2007.

to a certain extent, supported by non-government organisations (NGOs) who often have a more ‘professional’ and bureaucratic organisational structure, funding from both internal and external sources, and a specific developmental agenda. This has led to concerns as to the potential for ‘cooption’ and ‘depoliticisation’ of social movement organisations<sup>15</sup>, especially as the rapid growth of the NGO sector is seen as compatible with the neoliberal objective of rolling back all forms of direct State intervention and the promotion of ‘entrepreneurial’ activity and market based solutions to social problems and development goals. The broad nature of the category perhaps requires greater definition, with some observers in the Indian context favouring distinctions between ‘social service’, ‘developmental’, and ‘activist’ NGOs,<sup>16</sup> although most organisations combine several of these characteristics in their regular activities.

Before considering the question of alliance building with social movements and activist NGOs, it is important to note that the two most prominent central trade unions on the Left, the AITUC and the CITU, are embedded in a wider network of Left affiliated ‘mass organisations’ that target and work within particular social constituencies. In this regard, the *primary* way that the parties of the Indian Left attempt to work in/through civil society is by promoting ‘independent’ yet affiliated organisations that are participants and actors within specific social movements (student/youth movements, peasants, anti-communal politics, women’s organisations etc.). These are closely connected in both personnel and ideology to the relevant Left party, although internal party documents and debates have suggested that enhanced organisational autonomy and member inclusion in decision making structures may be required to enhance their vitality and effectiveness.

The acknowledged limitations of Left linked civil society organisations in terms of both geography (with union membership and other organisations concentrated in West Bengal and Kerala) and social diversity has thus provided impetus for attempts to reinvigorate these organisations alongside the tentative exploration of selective alliances and

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Venkata Ratnam and Anil Verma, ‘Non-governmental Organisations and Trade Unions- The Case of India’, in Anil Verma and Thomas A. Kochan, *Unions in the 21st Century: An international Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2004, pp.250-262.

coalitions with social movements and non-government organisations. The latter strategy entails the potential for developing common ground with non party political social movements and organisations on relevant issues (social security and employment generation, anti-communal politics, gender equity, privatisation and the defence of common resources etc.), thereby broadening the social diversity and political influence of all. The possibilities of such alliances are tempered by a history of mutual suspicion, if not outright antipathy and competition, between Left-party linked trade union and other fronts and the ‘non-government’/non-party political organisations associated with emerging social movements.

The CPI(M) and the CITU consider NGOs with considerable caution. While there is a recognition that such organisations vary in their ideological positions and internal composition, and are important actors in a wide spectrum of social sectors and issues (rural development, women, tribal and Dalit peoples, education, environment, social welfare etc.), party and union leaders tend to reflect deep suspicion as to the motives of NGOs. This is often related to the sources of NGO funding and their rapid growth, and the generally ‘de-politicising’ effect of their activities which are seen to be compatible with “..the neo-liberal prescription that the State should hand over many such functions to NGOs and “civil society”.<sup>17</sup> For Left trade unions such as AITUC and CITU, there are specific concerns that some labour NGOs, lacking accountability, are agents of accommodation rather than active resistance. More importantly, many NGOs are seen as working to displace the influence and role of trade unions themselves.<sup>18</sup> Such fears of ‘competition’ from NGOs for influence are particularly evident with respect to workers in the unorganised sector, with trade unions denying that they are less successful than NGOs in organising and representing the interests of these workers.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the established

---

<sup>17</sup> Communist Party of India (Marxist), Political Organisational Report adopted at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, April 6-11, 2005, New Delhi, CPI(M) Publication, New Delhi, pp.38

<sup>18</sup> GL Dhar, National Secretary, All India Trade Union Congress, Personal Interview, 16 January 2007; Report of the General Secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Twelfth Conference, January 17-21, 2007, Bangalore, Karnataka.

<sup>19</sup> Report of the General Secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Twelfth Conference, January 17-21, 2007, Bangalore, Karnataka. The report states that “government, media, and even the ILO are trying to create a wrong impression that the trade unions are neglecting the workers in the unorganised sector and only the NGOs are working among them. This is nothing but a ploy to malign the trade unions and wean the workers away from their influence” (P. 43) but does acknowledge that relative failure of trade unions

trade union centres remain convinced of their preeminent role in representing labour (both in the formal and informal sector) and the significance of their historical legacy. According to one senior AITUC leader:

“...all those laws which we got for informal sector and today all those laws which we have- who got them? These NGOs that were born 5 years ago or ten years ago or two years ago? We fought for it...”<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the same senior representative has suggested that in particular industries (particularly in the informal sector) and on wider rights based campaigns there often is a productive local coalition between central trade union organisations and activist NGOs.

“...we have a good relationship with some of the NGOs. Sometimes on major issues or on international campaigns or on campaigns of international women’s day or issue based campaigns or on political representation of women in assemblies or parliament or the question of violence or atrocities on women or the question of workplace harassment.. we do come together. Even trade unions, women’s organisations and NGOs come together. Sometimes women’s organisations and trade unions come together- there is no difficulty so far as that is concerned. But not with all the NGOs.”<sup>21</sup>

This sense of both competition and selective coalescence at the grassroots of labour organising and representation is linked to the emergence in the 1990s of activist NGOs, self-help associations and “new” unions built upon an almost exclusive focus upon the welfare, social security, and workplace rights of informal sector workers. The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) has achieved the most prominent international profile for its organising, welfare, and advocacy activities. As noted by Sinha<sup>22</sup>, however, the National Centre for Labour (NCL) has also played a significant role within a ‘sector’

---

over previous decades to effectively organise and represent the concerns of unorganised sector workers has allowed a “larger space” for NGOs.

<sup>20</sup> Amarjeet Kaur, national secretary, AITUC, personal interview, 5 October 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Pravin Sinha, ‘Representing labour in India’, *Development in Practice*, Vol. 14, Nos 1 and 2, February 2004, pp.127-135.

that, in fact, encompasses the vast majority of Indian workers. Formed in 1995 by activists and ‘independent’ unionists, the NCL provides a national coordinating and representative function for organisations (unions, cooperatives, NGOs etc.) working in informal industry sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, fisheries, small scale enterprises, forest workers and the self-employed.<sup>23</sup>

There has also been the emergence of new trade union federations that project a consciously progressive/Left social and political agenda but also claim to be independent from party politics. In particular, the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) encompasses 200 affiliated unions and claims to represent 500,000 members across India.<sup>24</sup> The NTUI goal is to use a small but an established base in the organised sector to organise the unorganised, with a commitment to internal democracy, international solidarity initiatives, and gender equality. Notably, it has consciously sought to highlight the significance of ‘coalition building’ with various social movements and civil society actors to better represent the rights and interests of workers.<sup>25</sup> While the NTUI clearly represents a significant new initiative to build a federation of non-party affiliated ‘independent’ unions that are linked to a coalition of social movements and organisations, they, as with the labour related non-government organisations, suffer from a limited organisational base and relatively circumscribed industrial and political influence as compared to the established trade union federations. Therefore, for both the established unions and the ‘new’ unions and labour activist organisations there are reasons to be both cautious and critical in their interactions or even to compete for members and influence.

This did not preclude, however, engagement with the ‘World Social Forum’ processes as a possible space for dialogue and organisational alliances. Evidence of the interest of Left

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Sinha notes that the NCL soon gained ‘observer’ status at the Indian Labour Conference (the Government of India’s annual forum for dialogue and consultation with labour organisations) and subsequently forwarded the first memorandum on behalf of informal sector workers to demand an extension of the minimum wages act. The NCL also claims to have achieved great success with specific organising initiatives with forestry and construction workers.

<sup>24</sup> New Trade Union Initiative, *For a New Trade Union Initiative- Globalisation and :Labour*, Available from <http://ntui.org.in/>

<sup>25</sup> New Trade Union Initiative, *NTUI Intent Document, 16 December 2001*, Available from <http://ntui.org.in/>

unions and party organisations in engaging with social movement organisations emerged in early 2003 when the first ‘Asian Social Forum’ was held in Hyderabad. Built upon the ‘common ground’ of opposition to ‘neoliberal globalisation’, the Asian Social Forum was a week long event, which attempted to follow the organisational principles of the World Social Forum. Left trade unions (CITU; AITUC; All India Insurance Employees’ Association) and a diverse range of NGOs, social movement and action groups played a key role in sponsoring and organising the ASF event.<sup>26</sup>

In the wake of the successful ASF meeting, planning commenced for a much more ambitious and large-scale event: the World Social Forum- the first of these forum events to be located away from Porto Alegre, Brazil. Planning for the WSF included 190 Indian based organisations who appointed representatives to the WSF Indian General Council, a body convened to determine all major organisational matters. This body nominated the main executive- the WSF Indian Organising Committee, on which Left trade unions played a significant role. For unions, labour activists and social movement organisations, a commitment to participate in the WSF made necessary a greater degree of engagement, debate, and dialogue in order to plan for a series of labour themed special sessions and workshops.

The WSF in Mumbai was held in January 2004 and attracted over 100,000 delegates, at least 15,000 of whom were international attendees. Central trade unions, independent unions, labour related NGOs and international trade unions united under the banner of “Labour in WSF 2004” and the logo of this joint forum was prominently displayed on flags, banners, and posters throughout the site.<sup>27</sup> “Labour in the WSF” created a separate stream within the larger meeting with a series of profiled seminars and public events.

---

<sup>26</sup> Among the diverse NGO’s were: Jubilee South Asia Pacific, All India Peoples Science Network; Action Aid, Asian Peace Alliance, Greenpeace, Focus on Global South, All India Democratic Women’s Association, National Alliance of Peoples Movements, Third World Network and many others. *Another World is Possible! A Collection of Participants’ Accounts, Reports and Documents on Asian Social Forum held at Hyderabad from Jan 02 to Jan 07, 2003*, Adhyayana Prakashana, Karnataka, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Waterman and Jill Timms, ‘Trade Union Internationalism and a Global Civil Society in the Making’, pp. 178-202 in Anheier, Helmut, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (eds.). *Global Civil Society 2004/5*, London: Sage, 2004. The authors also note that most international trade union organisations were represented at the WSF, and that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had hitherto been ambivalent about engaging with the forum, was a prominent participant.

These included a number of seminars organised by the central trade union federations on ‘international solidarity and imperialist globalisation’, ‘privatisation and disinvestment’, ‘communalism, religious fanaticism and sectarian violence’, and ‘unorganised sector workers and trade unions’ and a special joint conference on work and labour was addressed by senior representatives from major international trade union confederations.<sup>28</sup> The Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) also convened a meeting in this WSF stream, with speakers drawn from South Africa, Brazil, India, South Korea, and Sri Lanka.<sup>29</sup> The Labour in WSF 2004 stream was held to have been significant not only in terms of the actual event but also in fostering dialogue and engagement at state and sectoral level between participating organisations thereby allowing for a “wider process of social mobilisation of diverse sections.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, when the WSF returned to Brazil in January 2005, the ‘Labour in WSF-India’ group organised special thematic sessions on ‘informalisation’ and subcontracting and the role of labour movements in safeguarding peace and democracy, panels that featured participation from the established Left trade union centres and “independent union and labour support organisations.”<sup>31</sup>

In between the WSF events, however, there were only isolated and sporadic examples of joint action and alliances between social movement organisations and the organised Left and their affiliated central trade union organisations. As noted above, these occasional examples of engagement and cross-organisational support are based on specific thematic (gender, communal harmony etc.) or sectoral (construction, domestic, plantation workers etc.) campaigns. Between 2005 and 2008 there has been considerable attention from all

---

<sup>28</sup> ‘Trade Unions In The WSF’, *People’s Democracy*, Vol. 28, No.6, 8 February, 2004. These seminars included the participation of leaders from the major Left national trade union centres. Notably, the seminar on communalism was addressed by G. Sanjeeva Reddy, President of the Congress party affiliated INTUC, which has a history of refusing to join in any common platform, strike, or campaign with Left unions or organisations.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. According to this report (in a CPI(M) affiliated journal) there were greater than 700 trade unionists from outside India and CITU alone had more than 300 representatives at the “Labour in the WSF” stream.

<sup>30</sup> Centre for Education and Communication, *Labour in WSF-India World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 26-31, 2005*, Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi, Available from [www.cec-india.org](http://www.cec-india.org)

<sup>31</sup> Centre for Education and Communication, *Labour in WSF-India World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 26-31, 2005*, Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi, Available from [www.cec-india.org](http://www.cec-india.org)

organisations to direct campaigning (rallies, public events) and lobbying for the introduction of legislation to provide for minimal social security/social insurance protection for workers in the ‘unorganised’ sector. Once again, however, the raising of common demands and joint participation in umbrella rallies and campaigns to pursue this agenda has not precluded ongoing competition, mutual suspicion, and diverging policy and political positions on the best means of achieving social protection for unorganised workers.

The established Left unions continue to doubt the motivations and strategic orientations of non-government and social movement organisations. Meanwhile, the latter reject any direct or sustained linkage with political parties or their affiliated organisations and remain suspicious of party influence. This sense of distrusting the links of the major Left central trade union organisations to the State and formal party politics intensified following the direct conflict and state-led coercion and violence in 2006-2007 that accompanied attempts by the CPI(M)-led ‘Left Front’ government in West Bengal to acquire and clear land for the purposes of constructing a large-scale automobile manufacturing complex (in collaboration with the Tata industrial conglomerate) in Singur and a special economic zone (in collaboration with foreign capital) in Nandigram. Economic liberalisation has intensified inter-regional competition for domestic and foreign investment and state-level policy initiatives to promote development objectives. Left parties have governed in several states, most prominently West Bengal and Kerala, and this has shaped political opportunities and constraints for both party-affiliated and independent trade unions to intervene in the local politics of economic liberalisation. Moreover, several of the social movement organisations are explicitly engaged in a critique of the existing model of ‘development’ in India (large-scale, market driven industrial and infrastructure projects) which they regard as resulting in environmental destruction, displacement of local peoples and the impoverishment of the socially vulnerable. In the context of the severe and ongoing conflict in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal this has led to a strong critique from the non-party affiliated Left that the CPI(M) in government has “swung far on the pendulum from its own history and become

a captive audience to neo-liberal development.”<sup>32</sup> and campaign intervention from a spectrum of social movement organisations, citizens groups, and public intellectuals, with notable public interventions from high profile activists like Medha Patkar who attempted to document and support the resistance of local citizens, farmers and sharecroppers to land acquisition.<sup>33</sup>

In response to these critiques and actions, CPI(M) leaders at state and national level, along with affiliated organisations such as the CITU, have accused the non-party Left of failing to appreciate the constraints and compulsions of state level governance in a federal political structure within a capitalist economy, and, consequently, of impeding needed capital investments for industrialisation and ‘development’.<sup>34</sup> Even more pointedly, critics from the non-party Left were accused of “Left sectarianism” and of aligning with right wing opposition parties (the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and the Hindu nationalist BJP) who have sought to make political capital from the Singur-Nandigram conflicts.<sup>35</sup> The CPI(M), and affiliated organisations such as the state branch of CITU, also launched popular mobilisation campaigns to contest the issue,<sup>36</sup> although their critics and opponents argued that the mobilisation of party cadres in the affected areas only exacerbated coercion and conflict.

## Conclusion

As this paper has discussed, in India there is evidence of new forms of union engagement with civil society, and, in particular, tentative explorations of possible alliances with social movement and non-party affiliated organisations. Analysis of these developments nonetheless suggests the complex and contradictory nature of relations between established Left trade unions and ‘new’ non-party labour organisations and social

---

<sup>32</sup> Dia Da Costa, ‘Tensions of neo-liberal development: State discourse and dramatic oppositions in West Bengal’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41, 3, 2007 pp.317; see also Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Power and Contestation: India since 1989*, Zed Books, London and New York, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Praful Bidwai, ‘India’s Left going the Lula way’, *Inter Press News Service*, 7 December 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Prakash Karat ““Double-Speak” Charge: Maligning The CPI(M)’ *People’s Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 04, January 28, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Biman Basu, ‘Organise A Massive Campaign Against The Anti-Development Forces’ *People’s Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 05, February 4, 2007;

<sup>36</sup> W.R. Varada Rajan ‘Nandigram: Facts vs Fictitious Slanders’ *The Working Class*, May 2007, Available at [www.citucentre.org/monthly\\_journals/sub\\_topic\\_details.php?id=37](http://www.citucentre.org/monthly_journals/sub_topic_details.php?id=37)

movements. For both unions and movement organisations, there is a clear imperative for exploring collaboration and dialogue, while, at the same time, there are deep-rooted ideological tensions and organisational differences, and instrumental political logics that shape their interactions and that limit the durability of alliances. Their ‘parting of the ways’ emerges, in part, from ideology and alternative visions of what constitutes development and progress, but, to an even greater extent, divergence is also related to the relative structural linkages of the organisations to the State, governance, and the formal political sphere. As a result, Left central trade unions that are less directly implicated in governance (for instance, the NTUI; HMS; AITUC) may be in a position to sustain broad campaign alliances and network based dialogue with social movement and activist NGOs. In the context of the furore and political ruptures of Singur-Nandigram, the inverse is most likely to apply to the CPI(M) affiliated CITU, although ongoing grassroots interaction on campaigns related to specific occupational sectors and labour rights violations will most likely continue- albeit with mutual caution and concern.