

Presidential Address

**Working Committee Meeting,
Calcutta, February 6 & 7, 1987**

Comrades,

We are meeting in this short session of the Working Committee to draw up the agenda and the work of the CITU Conference to be held in Bombay from 11 to 15th May, 1987. (The dates have since been changed to May 18-22-Ed.)

At the outset let me on behalf of all of you and myself congratulate the Maharashtra CITU and its newly elected President Comrade Sanzgiri for undertaking this heavy responsibility on their shoulders inspite of many difficulties facing them. They have done it realising that our strong holds will not have the time to prepare for this conference as they will be busy with the Assembly elections till the end of March. We would have been in a very sad position had they not come forward to undertake the task of organising the Conference.

Comrades, the coming session of the All India CITU has an importance of its own and every thing must be done to make it an organisational and ideological success. We have to plan the discussions and the agenda on the basis of the requirements of present situation and put an end to routinised way of discussion.

Firstly, comrades, it should be our endeavour to develop and deepen our international connections and fraternal relations with the trade union movement of other countries, above all the trade unions of socialist countries. Since our Kanpur Congress which was attended by the representatives of the Soviet and Chinese

trade union organisations, the representatives of the Yugoslavia Trade Unions and the World Federation of Trade Unions, our contacts with the international organisation and the contingent of international trade union movement have increased. We received invitations from world organisations and trade unions of a number of socialist countries and also from the trade union organisations of Italy. We responded to their invitations and attended their conferences. Our representatives have attended the world conference of World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Peace Conference, the Congress of Italian Trade Unions. Now this month Comrade Samar Mukherjee, our General Secretary will be attending the conference of AUCCTU, the organisation of Soviet Trade Unions. We have also received invitation from the Trade union Congress of the German Democratic Republic.

Comrades we wish to reciprocate by inviting representatives of international organisations and national trade union centres from socialist and other countries.

Comrades, we will be meeting in the midst of rapid developments in the trade union movement in our country and in the international world. We will have to plan our discussions taking into consideration the immediate needs of the CITU and the trade union movement to orientate themselves to meet the changing situation.

In our country there is a great upsurge of working class actions dominated by a growing sense of unity. The great strike of Bihar NGOs that has now entered 3rd week preceded by the massive strikes of Rajasthan, UP, and Andhra NGOs, and the magnificent and gigantic action of the public sector workers on 21st January—all point to a rapidly growing sense of unity and urgency. I must take this opportunity to congratulate our CITU unions in the public sector and the federations in which our unions are working for the initiative and persistence they showed in organising the strike. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the strike could have lost its widespread character if our unions has not shown the initiative that was expected of them as CITU unions. I must also congratulate the Bank employees, the LIC, and other employees for joining in this great and mighty action of the public sector workers.

The importance of the strike is seen in the fact that it was not simply a strike in support of some immediate demands of the public sector workers but an action to defend national economy, its self reliance and independence and a call to urge the Government

to reverse its economic policy, its policy of destabilising the public sector. For years the trade union movement has concerned itself only with the partial demands of the workers leaving questions of economic and national policies to be decided by the Govt. The Public Sector workers strike makes a break with this pernicious practice and asserts labour's intention to intervene and shape the direction of the country's economic policy. It is an orientation which India's trade union movement requires if it has to act as a great democratic and socialist force.

The All India protest of the public sector workers, the support it got from the patriotic officers and the sympathy it got from among the patriotic executives should induce the Government to reconsider its policy. A Government sensitive to public opinion will definitely respond to such a protest and have a second thought about its policy, but not the Rajiv Govt. which cares little for public opinion and which has a hostile attitude towards labour and shows utter disregard for workers opinion. It will be the height of folly if the authorities instead of appreciating the motive of the workers and their patriotism decide upon disciplinary measures against the workers' leaders. The entire trade union movement must warn the Govt. against the measures contemplated by some authorities in the public sector.

The battle to save and the strengthen the public sector must be carried on with greater vigour. The strength of the entire trade union movement has to be mobilised for this fight. There is no doubt that the forthcoming meeting of the Co-ordination Committee of the Public Sector organisations will take steps to further consolidate the unity of the workers and overcome whatever weaknesses were seen during the strike.

The public sector workers have done their job with remarkable success. Their victor would have been much greater if some organisations and sections of workers which should have joined them in the common action had not kept away from the strike and let down the workers.

The leadership of the INTUC by refusing to join the protest to defend national economy has done a big disservice to the cause of the people, the country and the workers. Some of them are now openly joining hands with the Govt. to decry the strike. The leaders of AIRF and the Defence Workers Federation have not added to their stature by refusing to take an active and supporting part in the

protest. The Defence Federation is facing the same problem: privatisation, transfer of works to contractors and they have protested against this also. If both these organisations had rallied their mass of workers to join insolidarity demonstration and meetings it would have added to the strength of the protest and cemented the working class unity on a wider scale. But traditional reformist, economic and sectarian outlook of some leaders is doing great harm to the trade union movement and obstructing it to discharge its responsibility to the country and the people.

It should be remembered that besides raising the question of disbandment of the public sector and penetration of multinationals the workers have demanded ban on introduction of modernisation, computerisation, without prior approval of the trade union movement. Even this demand which protects the jobs of workers in all industries failed to evoke solidarity support from the reformist leaders.

The four strikes of the State Government employees and the gigantic strike of the public sector workers demand a much wider basis for embracing trade union unity. At present the major instrument of trade union unity is the National Campaign Committee. But all these wide mass actions of recent time have been organised and conducted by mass organisations which do not have an effective say in the working of the National Campaign Committee. The National Campaign Committee and its unity mainly hinges on the unity or participation of five or six central trade union organisations. The big federations some of whom are bigger than many members of the National Campaign Committee have the status of invitees in the activities of National Campaign Committee. It is now necessary to widen the basis of the National Campaign Committee enabling these big federations to have an equal say in the matter of convening meetings and deciding on issues of common policy and actions. The National Campaign Committee has rendered very big service towards the development of unity and common understanding in the trade union movement. That task has to be furthered by widening the composition of the National Campaign Committee and inviting the participation of the new developing forces in the trade union movement in the decision making process of the Campaign Committee. Taking into consideration the existing situation in the trade union movement, the inevitable differences on certain matters because of different politi-

cal outlook, the CITU long ago suggested the formation of a Confederation of all Trade Union Centres and federations where decisions can be taken unanimously and where all issues concerning labour and the economic policy can be discussed freely. It is time that we at our conference reiterate our proposal for a confederation and decide to pursue it with greater vigour.

Comrades, the period since our Kanpur Conference has to be examined and our activities had to be assessed not only in terms of the struggles we have led but also whether the required orientation of our movement was given by us, by our state committees and leaders of trade unions. It is a fact that in spite of the tremendous upsurge of working class resistances, the struggles we have led, the harrowing conditions of workers under the impact of the crisis and growth in our trade union influence, membership of our organisation very rarely corresponds to the work we have done, the sacrifices we have made and the influence we exercise. On the other hand, in the weaker areas there are instances where the reformist leaders are able to lead big mass actions leaving us high and dry. All this is due to the fact that we have not yet succeeded in getting out of the traditional rut of conducting the affairs of the trade unions. These weaknesses have been repeatedly pointed out but we are not yet able to get out of old habits. The weaknesses relate to lack of democratic functioning of the unions which prevents the active and vigorous participation of the rank and file workers in policy making decisions. This has its consequences in the inability of the unions to be in contact with mass all the time and results in restricted membership of the other weaknesses are failure to take into consideration the demands and plight of the non-permanent workers, of women workers, and confine union activities mainly to the defence of the interests of the permanent workers. A very important lacunae in our functioning relates to the total absence of consideration of the special problems of the minority and oppressed caste workers. We all know that without the special attention and drawing these sections into the common struggles real blow cannot be given to divisive forces. Yet, we hardly find any mention of this activity in any of our report.

You all know that unemployment is growing day by day and there are lakhs of people fresh from the school or the rural areas or the training institutions who have never seen a job. Yet, inspite of constant guidance by the CITU most of the State Committees and

trade unions have refused to take note of this problem. This is the dangerous situation because this new generation of unemployed has no links with the organised trade union movement and its anger can be easily directed by the ruling classes against the organised trade union movement itself. The elementary consciousness that the unemployed are part of the working class and that it is the duty of organised working class to protect their interests is lacking. It is due to this neglect that in many places the anger of unemployed is directed into chauvinistic channels against workers from other states. This is one more divisive force which is getting license because of the failure of the trade unions.

Comrades, our CITU Session will not be fruitful if these problems do not occupy major attention in our discussion. Now that we have got the reports from all states about their activities we do not need further elaboration of them in our all India Conference. What we do require to go ahead is a proper assessment of how we have been tackling these concrete problems of orientation in the course of our activities. It is therefore necessary that at the all India CITU Conference our speakers from various states speak on these questions giving a factual account of what has been done. In my opinion it is necessary to devote one session specifically to the question of working women and our work. It is necessary therefore that each state sends a larger number of working women in its delegation. In fact we should have held a separate conference of working women alongwith the CITU Session. But in the present situation with lack of finance etc it was not found possible to spare an extra day for the working women's conference. It is also necessary to devote special attention in one session to discuss the problems of unemployment and minorities.

Comrades, I do not wish to discuss in detail the political development in our country as well as international developments. We will be drafting our resolutions for the conference taking all these into consideration. We will be also dealing with them in our speeches and reports. I will now suggest that the Resolution Committee should be formed here so that it can meet in time and prepare all the resolutions.

Finally, I have to say a few words about what is happening to our country. It is matter of great satisfaction that Comrade Gorbachev's visit to this country produced a Joint Declaration which strengthened the cause of peace and protest against nuclear

war preparations of imperialist powers. The Joint Declaration has made people aware of the menace of war and who is responsible for it. It has also made the people aware of the great importance of the policy of non-alignment pursued by our country and its Government and every effort should be made by the working class to strengthen and deepen the policy of non-alignment. The visit of Com. Gorbachev has also deepened the friendship between India and the USSR, a symbol of which is the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship which also guarantees the security of India. The working class and trade union movement consider this as a big advance. It is our responsibility to see that wide mass of our people is drawn into the struggle to defend non-alignment and world peace.

Internally the situation in our country is deteriorating rapidly. As against the good developments on foreign policy issues and the issues of non-alignment the economic policy of the Rajiv Government threatens to undermine our self-reliance. The working class through the public sector workers' strike has already protested against it. Simultaneously the attack of the divisive forces against the integrity of the country, the helplessness and paralysation of the Central Government before it, create the danger of growing dissention and destabilisation. In Punjab, the extremists and the communal fanatics have mounted a new offensive whose aim is to drive out the Barnala Government and rally all Sikhs on religious basis. This offensive seems to be tuned to the delicate situation on the Indo-Pakistani border with massive concentration of Pakistani troops in combat readiness in the border areas. There is also the disruptive movements for Gorkhaland which is again intended to divide the people and carry on secessionist activities. If its suspension for two months really means a rethinking and return to the democratic path then things might prove easier. But considering the financial supporters and ideologies of the movement, it is difficult to imagine that sanity, loyalty to the nation and the country are reasserting themselves in the minds of the leaders. The mass of Nepali speaking people is a part of our toiling mass and we must always defend its democratic interests. This is what the left front Government has been doing.

Along with these challenges comes the challenge of communal forces. The Cong(I) Party notwithstanding its tirade against those who are supposed to be communal is not prepared to leave its alliance with the Muslim League in Kerala. The compromising

policies pursued by the Congress towards communal parties, the complicity of the administration during the riots are all playing into the hands of Muslim communalists. The great task of saving the country from communal and secessionist danger devolves on the working class and its organisations. Our capacity to play our role in this issue is totally underestimated often by ourselves and always by our opponents who consider the trade union movement to be a great evil. The fact that our strikes like the gigantic strike of public sector workers, the strikes of State Government employees in four states can draw lakhs of people from all castes and communities into the common front is of great importance today when every effort is made to eliminate the common class consciousness of the people. These common actions and the massive mobilisation of student, youths, and women in common organisations irrespective of caste and faith constitute our reply to the challenge of divisive forces. Our working class contingents in Assam, Darjeeling Dist. and in Punjab have already shown how a determined class can wage a fight against the divisive forces. That example should be followed by all our units so that the working class is able to play its role in defending national unity.

Finally comrades, I will ask all of you to remember that West Bengal and Kerala, the people and the working class of these two states will be seen engaged in a political battle against the ruling party and its allies. It will be a battle between the advancing democratic forces and the authoritarian forces which would like to reverse the progress of the people. It is also a battle between forces which compromise with communalism, ally with communal unity and forces which take a firm stand for national unity fighting against all communal and secessionist forces. Every effort is to be made to see that we win these two battles and register advance of the entire democratic movement in India. It is the duty of all our trade unions to render help to the left forces in the elections to ensure the victory of the left front in West Bengal and Left and Democratic Front in Kerala.

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