

# A Brief History of Trade Union Movements and Social Consciousness towards Child Labour Eradication in Karnataka

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**Abstract:** *Workers' organizations have been the historic pioneers in promoting international labour standards, including those on the prohibition of child labour. It was workers' organizations in the 1860's that first called for campaigns against child labour. Child labour remains an affront to the objectives of trade unions everywhere and is therefore a key entry point for developing workers' organizations. As mass membership organizations, trade unions bring many strengths to efforts to eliminate child labour. Collective bargaining – as part of social dialogue – is one of the main trade union strategies to combat child labour. According to the ILO C.182, trade unions can play an important role in helping to develop the national list of hazardous child labour. Through its members, a trade union can bring together hazardous work definitions and practices and identify where such types of work exist, to help with the compilation of the national list. The national list of hazardous child labour states what forms of work must not be carried out by children below the age of 18, focusing on work which by its nature, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. Similarly, trade unions can help to disseminate information on, and raise awareness of, the national hazardous child labour list and promote its implementation. National trade union centres can distribute information on the list to their sectoral trade union member organizations. Sectoral trade unions can then distribute information to their local members and workplace representatives. The paper tries to explore the ways how the two largest trade unions of Karnataka have responded towards trying to end the menace of child labour.*

**Keywords:** Child labour, Trade union, Movement, Organization, Policy

## 1. Introduction

Child labour is a reality in India and it has been part of economic production, largely in the informal sector. It's estimated that more than 20 percent of India's economy is dependent on children, the equivalent of 55 million youngsters under 14 [1]. Second is the possible impact on employment due to non-compliance with ethical business practices that many retailers follow now. Such practices take thousands of employments away along with substantial business opportunities. Child labour reflects the evil in the society that robs children of their innocence. India has the largest number of child labourers in the world today even though there is a law against it that stipulates two years in jail and a fine of Rs.20, 000 for the violator the exploitation of children for labour continues.

According to International Labour Organization [2] (ILO), the term "child labour" is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.

It refers to work that:

- Is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and
- Interferes with their schooling by:
  - Depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
  - Obliging them to leave school prematurely; or
  - Requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

The Government of Karnataka in their policy document (Action Plan to eliminate child labour in Karnataka, 2001) recognizes that '... any child out of school may be treated as child labour ...'. The document further states that 'all work, labour which may harm the overall growth and development

of the child is child labour, irrespective of whether it is wage or non-wage employment'. The report of the National Commission for labour (2002) has also accepted the broader definition of child labour as 'any child not attending primary school or employed in any establishment'. This excludes '... children mediated by parents at home for family activities or employed in employment or occupation in which a child is permitted to be employed under (law) ...'.

According to the 2001 census, there were 12.7 million working children (age group 5 to 14) in India, with Uttar Pradesh recording the highest number at 1.93 million, closely followed by Andhra Pradesh at 1.36 million. Karnataka has 0.82 million of them, making it the state with the seventh highest number of child labourers - following Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. It has been more than two decades since child labour was banned in India. But the practice is still on.

Amid growing concerns over the impact of the economic downturn, the International Labour Office (ILO) has warned that efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour are slowing down and called for a "re-energized" global campaign to end the practice.

In its Global Report on child labour, the ILO has said that the global number of child labourers had declined from 222 million to 215 million, or 3 per cent, over the period 2004 to 2008, representing a "slowing down of the global pace of reduction." The report also expressed concern that the global economic crisis could "further brake" progress toward the goal of eliminating the worst forms of child labour by 2016.

The new ILO global report, titled *Accelerating action against child labour*, presents detailed estimates. Progress was

greatest among children aged 5 - 14, where the number of child labourers fell by 10 per cent. Child labour among girls decreased by 15 per cent. However, it increased among boys (by 8 million or 7 per cent). What's more, child labour among young people aged 15 to 17 increased by 20 per cent, from 52 million to 62 million.

The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) was created in 1992 to enhance the ILO's response to its long - standing goal of the effective elimination of child labour. Since then, IPEC has grown to become the biggest dedicated child labour programme in the world and the largest technical cooperation programme within the ILO with over \$60 million expenditure in 2008. Some other facts about IPEC [3]:

- By 2009, IPEC was operational in 92 countries in all regions of the world.
- During the biennium 2008 - 09, IPEC activities benefited some 300, 000 children directly and over 52 million indirectly. In 2008, IPEC set out its vision for the next five years:
- Consolidate its position as the leading centre of knowledge and expertise on action against child labour;
- Maintain and further strengthen its research and data collection capacity,
- Which form the basis for both targeted interventions and policy advice;
- Continue to be the central technical cooperation programme for action against child labour;
- Facilitate country - to - country technical cooperation within regions and across continents;
- Strengthen the worldwide movement against child labour and assume for the ILO a leadership role in the movement;
- Continue the integration of IPEC activities within ILO programming, most importantly within Decent Work Country Programmes.

In ILO's global report, the social partners, particularly trade unions, have a crucial role to play in sustaining national, regional and global activities to tackle child labour. In order to reinforce the involvement of trade unions in child labour elimination and prevention and to build on their experiences and expertise in this area, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour has also developed a Trade Union Manual on Child Labour which will underpin ongoing efforts to disseminate knowledge and understanding and build capacities. It is in this light that Trade Unions in India have started operating at different levels in their quest to eliminate the menace of Child Labour. Karnataka is a key state towards achieving this end and the two most popular and powerful Trade Unions namely the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) have embarked upon this noble journey of making the world a better place to live for the children. In the past few years of their activities in the state of Karnataka it become extremely important to evaluate their work to find out a realistic picture on the impact of their intervention and where they could be more effective in the future.

#### **Trade Union Movement [4]**

Though Karnataka has a number of modern industrial units by the close of the First World War, labourers were not organised in the State till then. The Railway workers had organised themselves at Hubli and Mysore in 1920s. The Trade Unions Act that was passed in 1926 at the Centre was not extended to the erstwhile princely Mysore State till 1941. As a result, Trade Unions in erstwhile Mysore, were registered as charitable institutions. The first labour union was organised by Congressmen in Bangalore. The early leaders were A. M. Ramasharma, a Journalist, and K. T. Bhasyam who organised the Binny Mill workers in the 1920s. The Binny Mill firing of 1926 in which some persons were killed, resulted in the Congress conducting an enquiry by appointing a private Commission headed by C. V. Narasimha Murthy. This incident helped to strengthen the morale of the workers. The Raja and Minerva Mill workers were also organised by the congress leaders. In 1929, Bangalore Textile Trade Union was founded and it became powerful. By 1938, it had acquired strength for compelling the State government to intervene on behalf of the Management Act similar to the Central Act 1926 which was passed in 1941.

Trade Union Movement was strong in many other districts of the state, like Gokak Falls, Hubli and Mangalore. In 1929, the Mysore Railway Men's Association was established under the Presidentship of M. Venkatakrishnaiah. During 1930s, V. V. Giri, General Secretary of All - India Railwaymen's Federation visited the state to strengthen Trade Union Movement.

In Belgaum district, the Trade Union Movement was militated even before the passing of the Trade Union Act 1926. Some of the earliest Trade Unions as per the available sources were Presidency Postmen's and Lower Grade Staff Union (1918), the Belgaum Divisional Postal Union (1920), and the Belgaum District Postmen's and Lower Grade Staff Union (1925).

In Mangalore, the Tile and Cashewnut workers and Beedi workers had also organised themselves in 1937, with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya being one of the leaders. The Bharat Mills of Hubli and Gokak Mills of Gokak Falls organised such similar Trade Unions prior to the Second World War.

The textile worker's long strike in Bangalore during 1940 forced the Mysore Government to recognise labour unions by an Act of 1941. The Trade Unions all over, struck work for many days to support the Quit India Movement in 1942. Up to 1940, labour movement was more or less confined to textile industry. In the engineering industry which constitutes the second largest sector of the State, the movement emerged only after the Second World War.

The Hindustan Aircraft Employees Union was founded in 1946. An employee of HAL who organised labour was dismissed in 1951. The Union was received by outside leadership in 1954. This pattern was followed in other 450 units and gradually the Trade Unions in the Industries, also admitted outside leadership.

The Trade Union Movement was gradually becoming stronger in its membership and also in the number of unions

year by year. By the end of 1980, there were 1, 636 trade unions which increased to 3, 905 in 1999. By 2004 - 05, the number of registered trade unions was 4, 012 and the total membership was 5, 41, 950. There are 4 Industrial Tribunals functioning in the state, two at Bangalore, and one each at Hubli and Mysore. There are 12 Labour Courts, 4 at Bangalore, two at Hubli, one each at Mangalore, Mysore, Chikmagalur, Gulbarga, Bijapur and Madikeri.

#### **Advantages of Trade Unions in fighting Child Labour**

- Massive representation across the country and state enabling easy access to work spot
- Networking at global, national, state, district and local levels
- Can influence policy making and bring about legislations at different levels in International laws and local governmental policies
- Decimate information at different levels to different stakeholders
- Provide training, monitor implementation of policies and laws
- Bring about a social dialogue as they enjoy a good bargaining power at different levels among employees and employers

#### **Child labour as a Trade Union issue**

- Child labour promotes unorganized sector and undermines the dignity of labour of labour
- Child Labour takes away the job opportunities of skilled adults increasing unemployment among adults
- Child Labour undermines and reduces the bargaining power of Trade Unions towards labour rights
- Child Labour reduces the standard wages limit affecting the role of Trade Unions
- Trade Unions are better equipped to monitor child labour and prevent them

#### **Trade Unions and responsibility of eradicating child labour as a human rights issue**

Trade Unions world over have fought for the cause of liberation of the underprivileged sections of the society. They are human rights organizations among the working classes as they have stood for the dignity and basic human rights of the working classes all over the world. Child labour is a gross violation of all forms of basic human rights of a child. Thus it becomes the responsibility of the Trade Unions to eradicate it for the good of the society and their own well being as well as promote harmony and equality among the working classes.

#### **Possible areas of Trade Union interventions**

- Educate Trade Union members on the hazards of Child Labour
- Network at global, national, state, district and local levels to fight the menace of child labour
- Promote education among members and the general society to prevent child labour
- Rehabilitate child labourers through psycho - social intervention
- Form fact finding teams to investigate child labour abuses

- Advocacy programmes through awareness campaigns, mobilization of support among workers and campaigning for eradication of child labour
- Bargain with different stakeholder
- Promote International Labour Standards on Child protection
- Influence policy making at different levels
- Train volunteers and form teams to build anti - child labour teams

#### **Activities that can be taken up by Trade Unions in partnership with the state and other agencies**

Trade Unions can take up a few focused activities that can help in the elimination of child labour.

- Lobby your government to ratify and fully apply ILO Conventions 138 and 182.
- Target sectors and areas where children work.
- Pressure the authorities in your country to enforce laws on education.
- Conduct internal trade union activities to increase awareness and set up action plans, and build community alliances to fight child labour.
- Campaigning to increase trade union membership and bargaining rights – strong unions are the best way to stop child labour.
- Build alliances with other organisations in your country and in solidarity with unions abroad.

“The issue of child labour cuts across policy boundaries and is the consequence of poverty, displacement, migration, illiteracy and adult unemployment. This implies that child labour cannot be addressed in isolation and what is important is to address the root causes that result in child labour,” said V. Susheela, convener of the Karnataka chapter of the Campaign Against Child Labour. [5]

The State Government of Karnataka, India has prepared an action plan to eliminate child labour by 2011 - 12. It released Rs.19 million during the last nine years (2001 - 02 to 2009 - 10) for implementing various programmes towards this end.

Minister for Labour in Karnataka B. N. Bachche Gowda said the action plan was being implemented for declaring Karnataka as “Child Labour Free State” by 2011 - 12.

The Central Government too had extended the project on child labour for the 11th Five Year Plan period (2007 - 08 - 2011 - 12). Officials devoted a week in a month for conducting raids on hotels, garages, factories, construction sites and hazardous industries.

## **2. Conclusion**

The Karnataka government has also been implementing the central and state government programmes in almost all the districts to combat the problem of child labour. Called the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) and State Child Labour Project (SCLP), these programmes aim to identify and release child labourers, rehabilitate them in bridge schools and main stream them in the regular schools. In addition, there are programmes started by the external agencies such as UNICEF

- NORAD, which aim to deal with the problem of child labour in a very comprehensive manner.

The ILO IPEC effort is a commendable one towards establishing a partnership with the Trade Unions as the rights of the Child can be emphasized in an better way, thus with some minor readjustments in the programme designing involving the Trade unions may be able to deliver the desired results as Trade Unions act as a lever for implementing any programme aimed at the abolition of Child Labour as women, children and trade unions cannot be separated in the world of the working class as each one of them are inter - related towards the commitment for the dignity of the working class.

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