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TOPIC- DEFINITION OF TRADE UNION, FORMS OF TRADE UNIONS,
FUNCTIONS OF TRADE UNIONS, OBJECTIVES OF TRADE UNIONS,
ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

DEFINITION OF TRADE UNION

According to Webbs, a trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives. Under the Trade Union Act of 1926, the term is defined as “any combination, whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workers and employers, or for imposing restrictive conditions on the condition of any trade or business and includes any federation of two or more unions”. Let us examine the definition in parts.

1 Trade union is an association either of employees or employers or of independent workers.

1 It is a relatively permanent formation of workers. It is not a temporary or casual combination of workers.

1 It is formed for securing certain economic (like better wages, better working and living conditions), social (such as educational, recreational, medical, respect for individual) benefits to members. Collective strength offers a sort of insurance cover to members to fight against irrational, arbitrary and illegal actions of employers. Members can share their feelings, exchange notes and fight the employer quite effectively whenever he goes off the track.

A more recent and non-legislative definition of a union is “an organisation of workers acting collectively who seek to protect and promote their mutual interests through collective bargaining” (De Cenzo & Robbins, 1993).

FORMS OF TRADE UNIONS

There are three forms of trade unions:

1) Classical: A trade union’s main objective is to collectively protect the interests of its members in given socio-economic-political system. Trade Unions are the expressions of the needs, aspirations and wishes of the working class.

2) Neo-classical: It goes beyond classical objectives and tries to improve up other wider issues like tax-reliefs, raising saving rates etc.

3) Revolutionary: Change in the system. Establishing the rule of working class even through violence and use of force etc.

FUNCTIONS OF TRADE UNIONS

Functions of trade unions are:

a) Militant or protective or intra-mutual functions: These functions include protecting the workers' interests, i.e., hike in wages, providing more benefits, job security, etc., through collective bargaining and direct action such as strikes, gheraos, etc.

b) Fraternal or extramural functions: These functions include providing financial and non-financial assistance to workers during the periods of strikes and lock outs, extension of medical facilities during slackness and casualities, provision of education, recreation, recreational and housing facilities, provision of social and religious benefits, etc.

c) Political functions: These functions include affiliating the union with a political party, helping the political party in enrolling members, collecting donations, seeking the help of political parties during the periods of strikes and lockouts.

d) Social functions: These functions include carrying out social service activities discharging social responsibilities through various sections of the society like educating the customers.

OBJECTIVES OF TRADE UNIONS

Unions concentrate their attention to achieve the following objectives:

a) Wages and Salaries: The subject which drew the major attention of the trade unions is wages and salaries. Of course, this item may be related to policy matters. However, differences may arise in the process of their implementation. In the case of unorganised sector, the trade union plays a crucial role in bargaining the pay scales.

b) Working Conditions: Trade unions with a view to safeguard the health of workers' demands the management to provide all the basic facilities such as, lighting and ventilation, sanitation, rest rooms, safety equipment while discharging hazardous duties, drinking, refreshment, minimum working hours, leave and rest, holidays with pay, job satisfaction, social security benefits and other welfare measures.

c) Discipline: Trade unions not only conduct negotiations in respect of the items with which their working conditions may be improved but also protect the workers from the clutches of management whenever workers become the victims of management's unilateral acts and disciplinary policies. This victimisation may take the form of penal transfers, suspensions, dismissals, etc. In such a situation the separated worker who is left in a helpless condition may approach the trade union. Ultimately the problem may be brought to the notice of management by the trade union and it explains about the injustice met out to an individual worker and fights the management for justice. Thus, the victimised worker may be protected by the trade union.

d) Personnel Policies: Trade unions may fight against improper implementation of personnel policies in respect of recruitment, selection, promotions, transfers, training, etc.

e) Welfare: As stated earlier, trade unions are meant for the welfare of workers. Trade union works as a guide, consulting authority and cooperates in overcoming the personnel problems of workers. It may bring to the notice of management, through collective bargaining meetings, the difficulties of workers in respect of sanitation, hospitals, quarters, schools and colleges for their children's cultural and social problems.

f) Employee-employer relation: Harmonious relations between the employees and employer is a sine quo non for industrial peace. A trade union always strives for achieving this objective. However, the bureaucratic attitude and unilateral thinking of management may lead to conflicts in the organisation which ultimately disrupt the relations between the workers and management. Trade union, being the representative of all the workers, may carry out continuous negotiations with the management with a view to promote industrial peace.

g) Negotiating machinery: Negotiations include the proposals made by one party and the counter proposals of the other party. This process continues until the parties reach an agreement. Thus, negotiations are based on 'give and take' principle. Trade union being a party for negotiations, protects the interests of workers through collective bargaining. Thus, the trade union works as the negotiating machinery.

h) Safeguarding organisational health and the interest of the industry: Organisational health can be diagnosed by methods evolved for grievance redressal and techniques adopted to reduce the rate of absenteeism and labour turnover and to improve the employee relations. Trade unions by their effective working may achieve employee satisfaction. Thus, trade unions help in reducing the rate of absenteeism, labour turnover and developing systematic grievance settlement procedures leading to harmonious industrial relations. Trade unions can thus contribute to the improvements in level of production and productivity, discipline and improve quality of work life.

ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

Adopting the model of Prof. Clark Kerr unions assume the following roles:

a) Sectional Bargainer: Interests of the workers at plant, industry, national level multiplicity of unions, Crafts Unions, white Collar Union etc.

b) Class Bargainer: Unions representing the interest of the class as whole as in France Agricultural Unions, Federations of unions, Civil Servants Union.

c) Agents of State: As in U.S.S.R., ensuring targets of production at fixed price. In 1974 Railway strike, INTUC stood behind Government and its agent.

d) Partners in Social Control: Co-determinator in Germany. Also, some examples are found in Holland, France, Italy and Sweden; some half-hearted attempts are being made in India also.

e) Unions role which can be termed as enemies of economic systems, driven by political ideologies than business compulsions. Leftist unions want to change the fundamental structure of economy and want to have control over it. Therefore, they encourage high wages, high bonus etc. without any consideration for the health of the economy.

f) Business Oriented Role: Here unions consider the interests of the organisation along with workers. They think that their members fate is inextricably linked with that of organisation and they swim or sink together.

g) Unions as Change Agent: Lead the changes than to be led by them and thus, performing the pioneering role.