
FROM COLONIAL RESISTANCE TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: THE EVOLUTION OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

Diksha Patel, Amity University Chhattisgarh

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical evolution and contemporary significance of trade unions in India, tracing their development from the late 19th century to the present. Initially formed during British colonial rule, early trade unions emerged as welfare-oriented associations to confront the widespread exploitation of industrial workers. Over time, these informal efforts matured into structured movements advocating for workers' rights, fair wages, and improved working conditions through collective bargaining. The enactment of the Trade Unions Act of 1926 marked a turning point, granting legal recognition and formal status to unions and setting the stage for nationwide labour organisation.

Following independence in 1947, trade unions became central to India's industrial relations framework, particularly within the public sector, where they influenced wage policy, labor legislation, and workplace standards. The rise of politically affiliated unions, such as INTUC, AITUC, and CITU, also highlighted the deepening intersection between labor and politics. However, the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s fundamentally altered this landscape. Privatization, informalization, and the decline of permanent employment undermined traditional union bases and exposed limitations in their outreach and adaptability.

In recent decades, trade unions have responded by expanding into previously underrepresented areas, including the informal sector and the growing gig economy. New models of organizing, such as cooperatives, digital campaigns, and worker collectives, have emerged to meet the needs of precarious labor. The introduction of the 2020 Labor Codes further intensified debates around labor rights and union power.

By mapping this historical and institutional journey, the study emphasizes the enduring relevance of trade unions as advocates for equitable labor practices in an increasingly fragmented and deregulated economy. Despite structural challenges, their role remains vital in ensuring worker representation and dignity in the modern labor market.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trade unions are organized collectives of workers formed to protect their shared interests in the workplace. Traditionally, they exist to negotiate better wages, secure safe working conditions, and advocate for job security. But beyond the workplace, trade unions have historically played a larger role in shaping labor legislation, pushing for social justice, and acting as a political force on behalf of the working class.

Globally, the roots of trade unionism can be traced to the industrial revolutions in Europe and North America, where workers began to resist exploitative conditions by organizing for fair treatment and collective bargaining rights. Over time, these efforts led to foundational labor reforms—including minimum wage laws, limits on working hours, and protections against arbitrary dismissal. International institutions like the International Labor Organization (ILO) later helped embed these standards into national frameworks, reinforcing the role of unions as essential to democratic and equitable labor relations.

In India, the significance of trade unions goes beyond labor economics. From the colonial era to the present day, they have been intertwined with the country's political and social transformation. During British rule, trade unions emerged in response to harsh industrial conditions and quickly became aligned with the nationalist movement. After independence, they were instrumental in shaping labor policy and advocating for workers within the framework of a planned economy. Even today, in a labor market increasingly defined by informal work and platform-based employment, trade unions continue to serve as key actors in the struggle for fair wages, job security, and basic dignity at work.

This paper examines the historical evolution and current relevance of trade unions in India, focusing on their legal foundations, political affiliations, institutional challenges, and ongoing efforts to adapt in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

II. EARLY ORIGIN OF TRADE UNIONISM IN INDIA (BEFORE INDEPENDENCE)

Trade unionism in India took shape during British colonial rule, rooted in exploitative labor practices and unregulated industrial expansion. With the advent of modern industries such as textiles, jute, and railways in the late 19th century, workers were subjected to harsh conditions—long hours, meager wages, and unsafe environments—without any legal means of

protest or negotiation.¹ The colonial state prioritized industrial productivity and revenue over labor rights, leaving Indian workers vulnerable and voiceless.

The initial worker movements were scattered and informal. As early as the 1870s, there were spontaneous strikes in Bombay's textile mills and railway workshops, driven by wage cuts and excessive workloads.² However, these uprisings lacked organization or political support, limiting their impact. It was only in the early 20th century that organized labor began to emerge as a formal movement.

The Madras Labor Union, formed in 1918 by B.P. Wadia and V. Kalyan Sundaram Mudaliar, is considered the first registered trade union in India.³ This union was a response to the mistreatment of workers at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras (now Chennai), where efforts to improve working conditions had failed through negotiation. Wadia, influenced by Theosophist ideals and Gandhian politics, brought a more structured and rights-based approach to labor organising.⁴

The movement gained momentum with the formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 in Bombay.⁵ AITUC was the first national-level federation of trade unions in India and included a diverse array of leaders—nationalists, socialists, and communists. Lala Lajpat Rai was its first president, underscoring the union's close ties to the independence movement.⁶ AITUC quickly became a platform not just for worker advocacy, but also for political mobilization against colonial rule.

Prominent national leaders recognized the role of trade unions in both economic and political liberation. Subhas Chandra Bose, for example, was actively involved in labor issues during his tenure as Mayor of Calcutta and later participated in AITUC meetings.⁷ C.R. Das, a lawyer and freedom fighter, also supported trade union efforts. Their involvement lent legitimacy to the movement and helped align labor rights with the broader nationalist agenda.

The legal environment began to shift with the passage of the Trade Unions Act of 1926.⁸ This

¹ K.M. Kapadia, *The History of Trade Union Movement in India* 15 (1948).

² S. D. Punekar & R. Variceal, *Labor Movement in India* 27 (1978).

³ *Id.* at 39.

⁴ A. Sivananthan, "B.P. Wadia and the Madras Labor Union," *Indian Historical Review*, 43(1), 2016, at 88.

⁵ Sukuma Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830–1990*, 103 (1997).

⁶ *Id.* at 105.

⁷ Arun Chandra Guha, *Subhas Chandra Bose: The Man and His Mission* 57 (1964).

⁸ Trade Unions Act, No. 16 of 1926, India Code (1926).

act was a landmark development, granting unions the right to register and function as legal entities. It provided protections to union members against civil and criminal liability for collective action taken during industrial disputes.⁹ While the Act did not guarantee collective bargaining rights or prevent employer retaliation, it marked the first formal recognition of trade unions by the colonial legal system.

The relationship between trade unionism and nationalism intensified during the 1930s and 1940s. Strikes and demonstrations were increasingly seen as acts of political defiance against the British Empire. Unions participated in broader campaigns such as the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Quit India Movement, even as British authorities responded with crackdowns and arrests.¹⁰ Despite repression, trade unions became a vital part of India's push for sovereignty, channeling worker grievances into political activism.

By the time of independence in 1947, trade unions had become entrenched in both industrial and political life. The groundwork laid before independence—through pioneering unions, legal reforms, and political integration—created a foundation for the postcolonial labor movement.

III. GROWTH AND DIVERSIFICATION POST INDEPENDENCE (1947–1990s)

With independence in 1947, India entered a new era of state-building, economic planning, and democratic institution-building. Trade unions were seen not only as protectors of worker rights but also as partners in nation-building. The Indian Constitution explicitly recognized the right to form associations and unions under Article 19(1)(c), signaling a commitment to labor rights.¹¹

The state took steps to institutionalize industrial relations. The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 provided a legal mechanism for dispute resolution between employers and employees, including the establishment of works committees, conciliation officers, and labor courts.¹² These frameworks aimed to reduce industrial unrest through legal means rather than direct confrontation, though strikes and protests remained common.

In the decades following independence, the trade union movement expanded significantly,

⁹ Id. §§ 13–15.

¹⁰ S. Bhattacharya, *Trade Unionism in India: The Emergence of a Movement* 211 (2000).

¹¹ India Const. art. 19(1)(c).

¹² Industrial Disputes Act, No. 14 of 1947, India Code (1947).

especially within the growing public sector. Nationalized industries such as steel, coal, banking, and railways became major union strongholds.¹³ Employment in these sectors came with job security and relatively better conditions, allowing unions to negotiate effectively for worker benefits such as pensions, housing, and healthcare.¹⁴

However, this expansion also brought political entanglements. Most major trade unions became affiliated with political parties, often functioning as their labor wings. The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was aligned with the Indian National Congress and supported state-led economic planning.¹⁵ The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), associated with the Communist Party of India (CPI), continued its radical agenda for workers' rights.¹⁶ The Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), formed in 1948, was associated with socialists, while the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), established in 1955, aligned with the RSS and later the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).¹⁷ In 1970, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) emerged from the CPI(M), further deepening ideological divisions.¹⁸

This political diversity reflected the pluralism of Indian democracy but also led to intense inter-union rivalry, especially within large industrial units.¹⁹ Multiple unions would compete for recognition in the same workplace, often prioritizing political loyalty over worker unity. As a result, the trade union landscape became fragmented and occasionally counterproductive, weakening the collective bargaining process.²⁰

Despite these divisions, trade unions played a significant role in shaping industrial policy and labor standards. They were instrumental in securing wage revisions, implementing the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and ensuring worker safety regulations in high-risk industries like mining and manufacturing.²¹ Mass mobilizations and strikes were common tactics, with notable examples including the railway strike of 1974—the largest recorded industrial action in Indian history, involving 1.7 million workers.²² Led by George Fernandes, the strike was a

¹³ S. Bhattacharya, *Trade Unionism in India: The Emergence of a Movement* 245 (2000).

¹⁴ Rudder Datt, *Indian Economy* 357 (S. Chand ed., 71st ed. 2020).

¹⁵ J.C. Hanson, *Labor Relations and Industrial Disputes in India* 112 (1972).

¹⁶ S. D. Punekar & R. Variceal, *Labor Movement in India* 123 (1978).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 124.

¹⁸ Sukuma Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830–1990* 188 (1997).

¹⁹ Binoo K. John, "Unions at War: Rivalry and Red Tape," *India Today*, Aug. 31, 1989.

²⁰ R. Balasubramaniam, "Multiplicity of Unions in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23(6), 1988, at 301.

²¹ Minimum Wages Act, No. 11 of 1948, India Code (1948).

²² D.N. Dhana Gare, *Peasant Movements in India: 1920–1950* 297 (1983).

direct challenge to the Indira Gandhi government and was met with repression, reflecting the growing power of organized labor and the limits of state tolerance.

During the 1970s and 1980s, trade unions consolidated their influence in the public sector, which accounted for a major portion of formal employment. Unions became entrenched in state-run enterprises, participating in wage boards and industry-wide negotiations.²³ In many cases, they functioned as intermediaries between workers and management, helping to resolve conflicts and ensure stability. However, this stability came at a cost—unions in the public sector were sometimes criticized for protecting inefficiency and resisting modernization.²⁴

At the same time, trade unions failed to adequately expand into the informal sector, which employed the majority of Indian workers. Women workers, agricultural laborers, and workers in small-scale industries remained largely outside the formal union framework.²⁵ Additionally, the bureaucratic functioning of many large unions, dominated by full-time leaders with political aspirations, alienated rank-and-file members and reduced grassroots participation.²⁶

As India approached the 1990s, the trade union movement stood at a crossroads. While unions had become institutional players in the industrial ecosystem, their relevance was increasingly questioned. The coming era of economic liberalization would expose these vulnerabilities further and challenge the traditional structures of organized labor.

IV. LIBERALIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADE UNION (1991-PRESENT)

The economic liberalization reforms of 1991 marked a seismic shift in India's economic and labor landscape. Faced with a balance-of-payments crisis, India adopted policies that reduced state control, encouraged privatization, and opened the economy to global markets.²⁷ These changes weakened the traditional pillars of trade unionism, particularly in the public sector, and posed challenges the movement had not previously encountered.

The decline of state ownership and the rise of private and foreign investment led to

²³ J. Krishnamurthy, "Trade Unions and the Public Sector," *Indian Journal of Labor Economics*, 35(2), 1992, at 152.

²⁴ B.L. Maheshwari, "Unionism and Productivity: A Contradiction?" *Indian Management*, Jan. 1986, at 20.

²⁵ Neera Handhole, "Women Workers and Trade Unions in India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 1(2), 1994, at 145.

²⁶ Jan Berman, *Footloose Labor: Working in India's Informal Economy* 98 (1996).

²⁷ Montel S. Ahluwalia, "Economic Reforms in India Since 1991: Has Gradualism Worked?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(3), 2002, at 67.

restructuring, downsizing, and privatization of many public sector units (PSUs).²⁸ This directly affected unionized workers who had previously enjoyed job security and collective bargaining power. Voluntary retirement schemes (VRS), outsourcing, and contract labor became widespread, reducing the number of permanent employees in formal industries—historically the core constituency of trade unions.²⁹

Alongside this structural shift was the **explosion of informal and unorganized employment**. By the early 2000s, more than 90% of India's workforce was in the informal sector, characterized by low wages, no job security, and lack of social protections.³⁰ Traditional unions, which had focused on formal, industrial labor, were slow to respond to this shift, losing both membership and relevance.

At the same time, new industries emerged—particularly in **information technology, telecommunications, and services**—with workforces that were young, skilled, and often hostile to traditional forms of unionism.³¹ These sectors prioritized flexibility and individual negotiation over collective action, often seeing unions as outdated. As a result, most IT and tech firms operated with little or no union presence.³²

Facing these challenges, many trade unions tried to adapt. Some began organizing informal workers, including domestic workers, construction laborers, and street vendors. Organizations like the **Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)** emerged as models of how to unionize informal labor.³³ Founded in 1972 but gaining prominence in the post-liberalization era, SEWA combined union activities with cooperative banking, skill training, and legal aid, redefining the boundaries of worker organization.³⁴

Other unions shifted their focus to **rights-based advocacy**. Rather than traditional collective bargaining within single firms, they began lobbying for broader labor protections—such as minimum wage enforcement, access to healthcare, and pension schemes for informal workers.³⁵ Protests and strikes continued, but their targets often shifted from individual

²⁸ Rudder Datt, *Indian Economy* 395 (S. Chand ed., 71st ed. 2020).

²⁹ Aseem Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India* 215 (2005).

³⁰ ILO, *India Labor Market Update* (July 2016), at 3.

³¹ Ananya Bhattacharya, "Why India's IT Sector Has Almost No Unions," *Quartz India* (May 2017).

³² *Id.*

³³ Ela Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many: The Story of Self-Employed Women in India* 56 (2006).

³⁴ *Id.* at 72.

³⁵ Ravi Srivastava, "Social Protection for Workers in India," *International Labor Review*, 149(4), 2010, at 409.

employers to government labor policies and legislative changes.

The role of **international institutions** like the International Labor Organization (ILO) also became more prominent. Indian unions began engaging with global labor forums, using transnational pressure to influence domestic labor laws.³⁶ At the same time, labor law reforms at the national level reflected growing tensions. While the government promoted ease of doing business and labor flexibility, unions resisted what they saw as dilution of worker rights.

The **rise of the gig economy** in the 2010s added a new layer of complexity. Millions of workers began working for app-based platforms like Uber, Ola, Swiggy, and Zomato—classified as “independent contractors” with no job security, benefits, or legal protection.³⁷ Initial attempts at organizing were scattered, but over time, delivery workers and ride-share drivers began forming informal collectives and staging strikes to demand better pay and working conditions.³⁸ While these groups were not always legally recognized as trade unions, they represented a revival of worker activism in a new form.

Some established federations responded by attempting to bring gig workers into their fold. For example, the **Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT)** emerged as a coalition pushing for legal recognition and labor protections for platform workers.³⁹ These efforts signaled a shift in union strategy—adapting to new economic realities by embracing non-traditional forms of work and organizing.

The **introduction of four new Labor Codes in 2020** consolidated 29 existing labor laws. While the government claimed this would streamline compliance and boost investment, trade unions criticized the reforms for weakening safeguards on layoffs, diluting the right to strike, and undermining collective bargaining.⁴⁰ Nationwide protests followed, including joint actions by central trade unions across ideological lines.⁴¹ The codes have not yet been fully implemented, largely due to resistance from states and unions.

Despite declining membership and reduced bargaining power, trade unions remain active in

³⁶ Nandita Sharma, “Global Labor Rights and India’s Trade Union Response,” *South Asia Research*, 22(1), 2002, at 55.

³⁷ Meena Menon, “App-Based Workers and the Fight for Rights,” *The Hindu*, Aug. 25, 2021.

³⁸ Aditi Suires & Ajay Narayanan, “Striking the Algorithm,” *EPW*, 54(26–27), 2019, at 23.

³⁹ Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT), *Policy Brief: Gig Work in India* (2021).

⁴⁰ The Code on Industrial Relations, No. 35 of 2020, India Code (2020).

⁴¹ “All-India Strike Sees Participation from Over 25 Crore Workers,” *The Hindu Business Line*, Nov. 27, 2020.

shaping labor discourse. Their ability to adapt—by organizing informal workers, embracing digital tools, and engaging in broader policy advocacy—has kept them relevant. However, the struggle to represent a fragmented and precarious workforce continues.

V. CURRENT SCENARIO OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

Trade unions in India today face a paradox: while their influence within traditional industries has declined, their presence is expanding into new areas of the labor market. The current landscape is marked by a mix of legacy federations, emerging worker associations, and digital activism—all responding to the evolving nature of employment in India.

The formal sector, including public services, banking, and heavy industry, continues to be the stronghold of established trade unions. Federations such as INTUC, AITUC, CITU, BMS, and HMS remain active, especially within state-run enterprises.⁴² These unions regularly engage in collective bargaining, organize protests, and influence wage negotiations through tripartite mechanisms. However, membership in these traditional unions has been shrinking, partly due to job cuts, outsourcing, and the general decline of permanent employment in government-owned sectors.⁴³

The most significant development in recent years has been the mobilization of informal and precarious workers. Over 90% of India's workforce remains outside the formal sector.⁴⁴ These workers typically lack contracts, benefits, and bargaining power. Unions and civil society groups have begun organizing these workers under new banners and models. For example, SEWA continues to serve self-employed women with a focus on financial inclusion, healthcare, and legal aid.⁴⁵ Similarly, street vendors, construction laborers, sanitation workers, and domestic workers are increasingly forming cooperatives and federations.

A notable trend is the rise of platform worker mobilization. With the spread of gig and app-based work, workers who were long considered “unorganizable” have begun forming associations. The Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), the Gig Workers' Collective, and similar groups have staged protests, filed petitions, and demanded

⁴² Raghuram Rajan, *The Third Pillar* 242 (2019).

⁴³ Rina Agarwal, “From Work to Welfare: Informal Workers' Organizations and the State in India,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 48(4), 2013, at 445.

⁴⁴ ILO, *India Labor Market Update* (July 2016), at 3.

⁴⁵ Ela Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many* 95 (2006).

recognition under labor laws.⁴⁶ These groups challenge traditional notions of trade unionism by operating informally, digitally, and often without employer recognition.

Social media has become a powerful organizing tool. WhatsApp, Telegram, and Twitter are used for mass communication, coordination of strikes, and even digital petitions. During the COVID-19 lockdown, gig workers used these platforms to raise awareness about withheld payments, unsafe conditions, and algorithmic discrimination.⁴⁷ This shift to digital organizing has enabled unions to connect across regions and sectors, often without physical infrastructure.

The legal and policy environment remains contentious. The four new Labor Codes, passed in 2020, aim to consolidate existing laws and ease compliance.⁴⁸ However, trade unions argue that these codes dilute worker protections, particularly around union formation, layoffs, and dispute resolution.⁴⁹ Although not yet fully implemented, the proposed changes have sparked widespread resistance and multiple general strikes. Unions have criticized the requirement for a minimum of 10% worker representation to register a union, arguing that it raises the barrier for new unions, especially in small enterprises.⁵⁰

Despite these challenges, trade unions are not irrelevant. They remain key players in policy debates, labor court litigation, and public discourse on inequality. In states like Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, unions continue to influence electoral politics and labor administration.⁵¹ The future of Indian trade unionism lies in its ability to adapt structurally and ideologically—by embracing informal labor, utilizing digital tools, and aligning with broader social justice movements.

The Indian labor movement is now diverse and decentralized. While it lacks the centralized strength of the post-independence era, it continues to evolve. In an economy marked by precarious work and growing inequality, the role of worker organizations—whether traditional unions or informal collectives—remains vital.

⁴⁶ Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), Policy Brief: Gig Work in India (2021).

⁴⁷ Aditi Suires, “Digital Labor Platforms and New Forms of Organizing,” *EPW*, 55(6), 2020, at 25.

⁴⁸ The Code on Social Security, No. 36 of 2020, India Code (2020).

⁴⁹ Labor Law Changes Weaken Workers’ Rights, Say Trade Unions,” *The Hindu*, Oct. 2, 2020.

⁵⁰ The Code on Industrial Relations, No. 35 of 2020, § 9.

⁵¹ K.R. Shyam Sundar, “Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(48), 2020, at 42.

VI. THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND FUTURE OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

Trade unions in India have a long and complex history, shaped by colonialism, industrial policy, and the shifting nature of labor markets. From their early foundations during British rule to their formal recognition post-Independence, trade unions have played an essential role in articulating workers' rights and shaping labor legislation. However, the context in which they operate has drastically changed, especially in the past three decades. Globalization, privatization, and the rise of informal labor have weakened the traditional base of unionism. This essay examines the comparative perspective of trade unions—drawing lessons from other countries—and evaluates their future trajectory within India's evolving socio-economic landscape.

Historical Context

The roots of Indian trade unionism trace back to the early 20th century. The formation of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 marked a formal start to organized labor movements.⁵² Initially focused on securing basic working conditions and legal recognition, unions gained strength as industrialization expanded. The post-Independence era saw the enactment of labor-friendly laws, such as the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, that institutionalized collective bargaining and dispute resolution mechanisms.⁵³

Yet, from the outset, Indian unions were deeply politicized. Major national parties sponsored and aligned with different federations—e.g., the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) with the Congress party and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This politicization fragmented the labor movement and often shifted the focus from economic demands to political agendas.

Current Challenges Facing Indian Trade Unions

India's labor market is highly informal. Over 90% of workers are employed in the unorganized sector, where unions have little presence or bargaining power.⁵⁴ The traditional base of

⁵² See K.R. Shyam Sundar, *Industrial Relations in India: A Practitioner's Handbook*, 1st ed. (SAGE Publications India 2021).

⁵³ The Industrial Disputes Act, No. 14 of 1947, INDIA CODE (1947), <https://indiacode.nic.in>.

⁵⁴ Int'l Labor Org., India Labor Market Update (July 2022), <https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi>.

unionism—formal sector manufacturing—has been shrinking in relative terms. With the liberalization of the economy in 1991, there was a shift toward service-sector growth, technological disruption, and increased contractualization of labor.⁵⁵ Employers increasingly prefer flexible work arrangements, making it difficult for unions to organize workers or secure long-term protections.

Moreover, many existing unions still rely on outdated strategies. There is limited innovation in membership models or organizing tactics. Younger workers, especially in tech and gig sectors, see unions as irrelevant or ineffectual. The emergence of platform-based labor (e.g., ridesharing, food delivery) has created new forms of employment that fall outside the protective net of existing labor laws and unions.

Comparative Perspective

Looking abroad, the experiences of trade unions in other countries offer insights for India. In Western Europe, especially in countries like Germany and Sweden, unions have adapted more successfully by embracing social partnership models. German unions work closely with employers and the state through co-determination frameworks that include workers on corporate boards and in works councils.⁵⁶ This collaborative approach maintains labor peace and protects workers' rights in a changing economy.

In the United States, union density has declined sharply, from over 30% in the 1950s to under 11% today.⁵⁷ But new movements such as “Fight for \$15” and efforts to unionize tech workers at Amazon and Google reflect a resurgence of labor activism in nontraditional sectors. These movements use social media, grassroots mobilization, and legal strategies to reach fragmented workforces.

In South Africa and Brazil, where informal labor is also significant, unions have had to find ways to engage with informal and precarious workers. Some have formed alliances with NGOs

⁵⁵ Rina Agarwal, *From Formal-Informal to Precarious-Dependent: The Changing Face of Labor in India*, 65 *Indian J. Labor Econ.* 6 (2022).

⁵⁶ S. Wolfgang Strick, *Re-Forming Capitalism: Institutional Change in the German Political Economy*, 1st ed. (Oxford Univ. Press 2009).

⁵⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members Summary* – 2023,

and community organizations to support broader labor and social justice goals.⁵⁸

These international examples highlight two key lessons. First, unions must modernize their tactics and communication to stay relevant. Second, they need to broaden their agenda to include precarious, gig, and informal workers. Rigid structures and outdated strategies can make unions obsolete in a fluid economy.

Recent Developments and Reforms

India's recent labor reforms—particularly the consolidation of 29 central labor laws into four new labor codes—aim to simplify compliance and improve labor market efficiency. However, critics argue these codes weaken workers' rights, especially in areas like trade union registration, dispute resolution, and industrial safety.⁵⁹ For example, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020 raises the threshold for establishments that must seek government approval before retrenching workers, thus excluding many small and medium enterprises.⁶⁰

Unions have protested these reforms but with limited impact, indicating a decline in their negotiating power. Yet, these reforms also open a window of opportunity. If unions can adapt to the new legal architecture and push for effective implementation, they could play a role in holding employers accountable within this framework.

The Future of Trade Unions in India

The future of trade unions in India depends on their ability to reinvent themselves. Four strategic shifts are crucial:

1. **Reaching the Informal Sector:** Unions need to extend their reach beyond the formal workforce. This may involve working with self-help groups, cooperatives, and local NGOs to build trust in communities and organize informal workers.
2. **Leveraging Technology:** Digital platforms can help unions communicate with workers, especially in sectors like gig work where physical workplaces are absent. Apps and

⁵⁸ 7. Sokhela Buhlungu, *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa* (Univ. of KwaZulu-Natal Press 2010).

⁵⁹ India Code, The Industrial Relations Code, No. 35 of 2020,

⁶⁰ 9. *Ibid.*, § 77.

online tools can be used for membership drives, grievance redressal, and policy advocacy.

3. **Inclusive Unionism:** Unions must become more inclusive of women, young workers, and marginalized communities. This also means addressing issues beyond wages—like health, education, and housing—which are critical to workers' quality of life.
4. **Political Independence:** While engagement with politics is necessary, excessive political alignment undermines credibility. Unions should prioritize workers' interests over party loyalty to build public trust and internal cohesion.

There are early signs of change. Organizations like the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) and the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union have begun organizing platform workers.⁶¹ While small in scale, these movements show potential for a more responsive and inclusive labor movement.

VII. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of trade unions in India mirrors the nation's broader socio-economic transformation—from colonial subjugation to postcolonial state-building, and from state-led planning to globalized liberalization. At each historical stage, trade unions have played a dynamic, if uneven, role in representing workers' interests and shaping labor relations.

During the colonial period, the emergence of trade unions was not merely a response to industrial exploitation but also a component of the larger nationalist movement. Leaders like B.P. Wadia, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Subhas Chandra Bose infused the labor struggle with political meaning, laying the foundation for worker mobilization that aligned with the freedom movement. The legal recognition of unions through the Trade Unions Act, 1926, formalized this space for worker resistance.

Post-independence, trade unions gained institutional legitimacy. With labor rights enshrined in the Constitution and codified through legislation like the Industrial Disputes Act, unions became powerful actors, particularly within the expanding public sector. Their ability to influence wages, working conditions, and government policy peaked during this era. However,

⁶¹ Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT)

deep political affiliations and inter-union rivalry often fragmented their unity. Moreover, the movement failed to adequately include the majority of India's informal workforce—women, agricultural laborers, and migrant workers.

The economic reforms of 1991 fundamentally disrupted the structure of Indian labor. Privatization, contractualization, and the rise of service and gig economies undermined the traditional union base. Faced with shrinking formal sector jobs and growing informal employment, trade unions had to reimagine their strategies. New models emerged—like SEWA for self-employed women and associations of gig workers—marking a shift from factory-centric organizing to broader social and economic advocacy

Today's trade union landscape is decentralized, pluralistic, and under pressure. The introduction of new labor codes, while framed as reform, has raised legitimate concerns about weakening worker protections and collective bargaining rights. In response, unions are exploring digital organizing, legal advocacy, and coalition-building as new tools of resistance.

Looking ahead, the future of trade unionism in India hinges on its adaptability. To remain relevant, unions must evolve to represent the full spectrum of India's working class—across formal, informal, and digital platforms. Their survival and impact will depend on inclusivity, innovation, and a renewed commitment to worker dignity in an economy defined by rapid change and inequality.