

AITUC: 100 YEARS OF EXISTENCE

Sindhu Menon

“AITUC is not an abbreviation or a name. It is the evolution of the first national centre of trade unions, beginning with the assertion of workers against exploitation during the pre-independence period. Observing 100 years of AITUC is actually honouring workers’ assertion of rights through strikes, struggles and agitations,” says Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

Ushering in a new revolutionary zeal to the working-class movement in India, AITUC was formed on 31 October 1920. AITUC celebrated its centennial on 31 October 2020 throughout the country, including its headquarters in New Delhi. The year-long centenary celebrations began in 2019 with a meeting on October 31 in Mumbai, followed by various meetings and gatherings across the country.

AITUC’s chronicle is coterminous with the history of the organized labour movement in India. AITUC was formed by the Indian National Congress (INC), the central organ of the independence movement, to give India representation at the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the League of Nations. From its inception, AITUC has played a major role in India’s freedom struggle. Besides the need for representation at the ILO, there were innumerable other factors that brought about its formation. (For more information, read [*AITUC: The Mother of All CTUOs*](#)).

The Working-Class Bondage

Muppidapathy and her husband, Kashiraman, casual labourers of the Karadikkuzhi Estate in Elappara, Idukki district of Kerala, approached AITUC office to help them get Rs 2000 from the management to transport their belongings back to their home in Kadalur, near the holy town of Velankanny, Tamil Nadu. As per the retirement rules, Muppidapathy could not continue working after she became 58 years old. She was asked to leave and vacate the company house with immediate effect. Being a casual labourer, she was not given any worker benefits. Similarly, eight years ago, Kashiraman too retired from his job.

AITUC took up these cases with the management. It was told that there is no legal provision to pay benefits to casual labourers. On hearing this, AITUC decided to fight this decision legally. In a landmark order, the gratuity controlling authority ordered the company to pay them gratuity calculated at the rate of 15 days salary per year. Muppidapathy got around two-and-a-half lakhs as compensation. “I still possess the blank cheque Muppidapathy gave me,” says Comrade Vazhoor

Soman, one of the national secretaries of AITUC and the state vice president of the union, who took up such issues. “I remember what she told me while giving me the cheque, *“Neenga evalavu kaashu venalum eduthukkonga. Naanga randayiram roopa kidkkarthukkaka thaana ungalkitte vandren aana ippol ivalavu kaashu kidarchirkku. Athu ungalaaleyum, unionaaleyum thaana* (Take as much money you need. We approached you to get Rs 2000 but we got much more than expected and it’s all because of you and the union’s effort),” recalls Soman. This was way back in the 1980s. The plantation workers in Kerala got many of the rights they enjoy now, including the right for gratuity, through the ardent struggle and effort of AITUC and its political wing CPI. “Hence, the bond of the plantation workers with the union still remains strong,” he adds.

Be it seeking the intervention of Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Puri to protect the jobs of 2,500 workers employed with ground and cargo handling agency (BILL) at Chennai Airport, be it for ASHA workers or Anganwadi workers, be it the protection of the rights of coal workers or be it protesting the merger or sale of PSUs, AITUC has always been in the forefront to defend the rights of Indian working class. “The union deals with all issues with the same rigour and exactitude,” states Amarjeet Kaur proudly.

AITUC played a very prominent role in the formation (3 October 1945) of World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) after the Second World War. For the last 75 years, AITUC has been supporting and staffing the bodies and structures of the WFTU with top cadres, taking a leading and pioneering role in the international, class-oriented, trade union movement.

Whether it is organising industrial workers, toddy tappers, Anganwadi workers, Asha workers, or domestic workers, AITUC has rallied around the voices of those unheard. The union is in forefront, seeing that all trade unions unite under one banner and raise the issues of working class in one voice. The union’s role in organising united general strikes against the government onslaught on the rights the working class achieved through its struggles is worth mentioning. With workers from different sectors as members, the spread of the union is enormous. As per the provisional data of the labour ministry (2017), AITUC has a membership of 14.2 million workers.

Besides organising workers and holding innumerable successful struggles, AITUC also holds the credit of appointing a woman comrade—Amarjeet Kaur—as its general secretary, the first woman to hold the key position in independent India.

On 31 October 2020, the year-long centenary celebration concluded by honouring veteran trade union leaders. As part of the celebrations, union offices were

Talking to Labour File, Comrade Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary of AITUC and the first woman leader to hold such a post in the post-independent India, reflected:

AITUC did not bloom in a day. It was a progressive evolution of the workers and peasants of India to fight against exploitation, the pathetic working and living conditions, poverty, hunger and untold misery.

It was the working class that gave the inspiration for beginning of the political opposition to foreign rule. It paved ways for mass agitation and opposition. AITUC, being the only national centre till 1947, played a pivotal role in the freedom movement. It was the first to ask for complete freedom from British rule. AITUC stood for the right to democracy and freedom of expression besides workers' rights to working hours, wages, maternity benefits for women, and schools and creches for children.



For me, AITUC is not an acronym or a name. It is the strength and power of the working class. It is the evolution of the workers' movement, their agitation and struggle...all encompassed in a single organisation—AITUC.

As general secretary of AITUC, I have the great responsibility of carrying forward its legacy and being a significant part of the united trade union movement in India.

The situation, at present, is the worst to befall the working class of India ever. The challenges are very big. There is a clear onslaught by the present government, which is hell bent on taking away all labour rights and labour laws achieved by the working class over this period. The nullification of labour laws by bringing in four labour codes, the move for privatization of our PSUs, the structural changes in the agricultural economy by bringing in farm laws—all these will have to be defied and resisted by the workers unitedly. At present, under the pretext of the Covid-19 lockdown, many disastrous moves, which are totally against the interest of the working class are being pushed through by the central government.

As a woman and a mother, I feel concerned for the families affected by the policies pursued by the central regime, pushing back the economy and worsening the living standards of families. Adding to these are the woes created by the pandemic. The woman in me felt dejected when I listened to the tragic stories of hundreds and thousands of migrant workers stranded, women and children struggling for livelihood, with no transportation and walking several hundred kilometres to return to their villages. The leader in me felt ashamed watching the mismanagement of the migrant crisis and the treatment of its poorest citizens during this unprecedented crisis.

Forging unity amongst central trade unions and acting unitedly is the need of the hour. AITUC will work towards this and join hands with other unions, to fight every onslaught on workers' rights. Such will be the general strike of 26 November 2020. We call upon all the working classes, to set aside their ideological conflicts and come forward to fight for the cause and make the strike a success

Strengthen AITUC...strengthen the united trade union movement...once again, picking up the same spirit we had when fighting the British regime...fight and defend our rights till we win them back.

illuminated and decorated. Adhering to the Covid 19 protocol, processions were taken out and meetings held in different parts of the country. A booklet: '[AITUC Centenary Celebrations: 31 October 1920–2020](#)' was released on the occasion.

Commemorating the role of AITUC and the leader who established the union—Lala Lajpat Rai, the postal department released a five-rupee stamp on the occasion of the centenary.



The meeting held at AITUC headquarters on 31 October 2020 witnessed the participation of eminent trade unionists from almost all central trade unions. The meeting chaired by Sukumar Damle, national secretary, AITUC was addressed by Ashok Singh (vice-president, Indian National Trade Union Congress, INTUC), Harbhajan Singh Sidhu (secretary, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, HMS), Tapan Sen (general secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, CITU), Satyavan (secretary, All India United Trade Union Centre, AIUTUC), Rajiv Dimri (general secretary, All India Central Council of Trade Unions, AICCTU), Vrijesh Upadhyaya, (ex-general secretary, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, BMS), Lata (secretary, Self Employed Women's Association, SEWA) Shatruijit Singh (United Trade Union Congress, UTUC).

Other Unions Reflect on AITUC

Along with a hardcore trade union movement, AITUC's direct involvement with the national freedom struggle too intensified since its formation. The very next year (1921), about 400 strikes were organised, of which a majority was successful.

“The foundation of AITUC was not an accidental or a sudden event; it was the maturation and culmination of the inevitable need to fight against unbearable poverty and misery, against the unscrupulous exploiters and the causes of exploitation themselves,” stated a message, on the occasion, from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Appreciating the efforts of AITUC to organise the working class and address their problems, WFTU said that they are in solidarity with AITUC in its fight to defend labour rights, the withdrawal of farmer bills, the anti-worker labour codes and the safeguarding of democracy, the right to dissent and the freedom of expression. It further said: “The 100th anniversary of AITUC is a lighthouse of the working class of India and of the world, for the future struggles until the final victory, the abolition of the man-by-

man exploitation. We support your efforts to eliminate discrimination, based on gender, caste, creed, religion, region, culture and language.”

On the occasion of the centenary, AIUTUC greeted AITUC and reminisced that “AITUC, was the only platform of the Indian working class founded 100 years back during the course of the freedom movement, irrespective of different political views and affiliations. Till the achievement of political freedom from the yoke of imperialist rule, AITUC was the only central trade union organisation in the country. However, in the post-independence period, unfortunately AITUC suffered a split due to partisan political considerations. We strongly think that whatever may be the political-ideological differences and even conflicts, there should have been *only* one single platform or forum of the workers for conducting united working-class movements.”

The All-Pakistan Federation of United Trade Unions (APFUTU) and its members, in a message, paid tribute to the leadership of AITUC and saluted the members on their efforts and struggle. “October 31 is a day of great joy for all of us; today the labour organization, AITUC, of our region is completing 100 years life. We pray that AITUC, until the Day of Judgment, will continue to represent the working class of the subcontinent.”

Comrade Ashok Ghosh, general secretary, United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), recollected the glorious role of AITUC in the freedom struggle of India and in the determination of workers’ rights. UTUC appreciates AITUC’s struggle as a classic example of how a trade union movement should be taken forward unabated. “The working class remembers it with all humility and gratitude. UTUC is confident that AITUC will go ahead in a determined way to give confidence to the working class and meet their ideas and aspirations.”

“This is a celebration of a century of struggle for the entire working-class movement of our country,” says Gautam Mody, General Secretary, New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI). In his greetings, he said that the founding of the AITUC brought forth the understanding of democracy as the central core of the working-class struggle. The undivided AITUC and the country’s entire working class fought not just the rising tide of fascism throughout the world but stood up, with all its strength, in the fight for independence and self-determination.”

When the first Factories Act came up in 1881, it was made applicable to all manufacturing premises employing more than 100 workers and working for more than four months in a year. But the legislation did not come up to the expectations of the labour. Regular unions were formed in Ahmadabad, Madras, Mumbai, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of the country. Recollecting the earlier

situation, which led to the beginning of the trade union movement in India and to the formation of AITUC, Dr. Sanjeeva Reddy, national president, INTUC said that when AITUC was formed by the Indian National Congress, it claimed 64 unions, with a membership of 1,40,854 whereas today, it has more than 14.3 million membership to its credit.”

The Way Ahead

Along with greetings and wishes to AITUC, the union leaders who addressed the meeting expressed their anguish on various government decisions that betrayed the Indian working class. The speakers commiserated that all the hard-won rights of the workers are slowly being rolled back, leaving the working-class community helpless and hapless. A government which undermines tripartism/bipartism; which forgoes international labour standards and even the ratified ILO convention —has failed to provide justice to its working class.

All the speakers unanimously called upon the workers to make the forthcoming nationwide strike on 26 November 2020 a grand success. This strike will be the most powerful tool for them to express their rejection of the labour law codification, the farms bills, the sale of public sector enterprises and natural resources, and the attack on the democratic rights of the people.

The speakers reiterated that the need of hour is trade union unity.