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**Growth and Consolidation
of Kerala Non-Gazetted
Officers' Union: From Its
Formative Years to Union
Militancy Phase**

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GROWTH AND CONSOLIDATION OF KERALA NON-GAZETTED OFFICERS' UNION: FROM ITS FORMATIVE YEARS TO UNION MILITANCY PHASE

Jithin G*

Abstract

The present paper attempts to explain how the Communist Party of India (Marxist) undertook its trade unionism among the government employees of Kerala until 1980 by politicising a large section of the white-collar employees. The party had to adopt white-collar trade union tactics to mobilize and consolidate the government employees towards its fold, that too in a competitive manner due to the presence of multiple organizations sympathising with various political parties working among the government employees. The paper explains how the Kerala NGO union, which is the largest service union of the CPI(M), grew into a militant trade union-like organisation over the years and could successfully negotiate with the state in resolving the issues and concerns pertaining to government employees in the state. With its increasing militancy, the union has been resisting state policies even in unfavourable situations by constantly engaging with the salaried employees, thereby blending them with the larger working class movement.

Keywords: *White-collar trade unionism, civil service, bureaucracy, wage-freeze.*

Introduction

As a political party which operates and frequently assumes governmental power in Kerala, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) can in no way avoid the increasing population of the salaried middle classes in the state. The vast number of government employees in the state bureaucracy poses a challenging task before the party. While functioning as a political party and discharging its governmental responsibilities whenever it gets elected to office it becomes extremely important for the CPI (M) to engage the public service employees in the government bureaucracy who form a considerable section of the middle classes in the state. The party has to adopt white-collar trade union tactics to mobilize and consolidate the government employees in its fold, that too in a competitive manner due to the presence of multiple organizations sympathising with various political parties working among the government employees. The present paper will try to explain how the Communist Party of India (Marxist) undertook its trade unionism among the government employees of Kerala by politicising a large section of the white-collar employees. As the government employees are not a homogeneous category, the paper will focus on the middle and lower level bureaucracy which includes the employees coming under the Non-Gazetted rank by studying the Kerala NGO union, which is the largest public service union of the CPIM in Kerala. The paper covers the trade unionism of the Kerala NGO union until 1980, which means from the formative years of the organization to the phase of union militancy.

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On Collective Bargaining, Need-based Minimum Wage and the Government Employees in India

In the Indian context, the extent of unionisation and the attainment of trade union assertiveness by the industrial working class were far more expansive than among the government employees. The situation in Britain was better where the civil service organisation was able to take part in negotiations with the governmental department concerned. The Whitely Council model of labour negotiation methods adopted in Britain helped to avoid arbitrations to a large extent. The labour movements across the globe began to get official recognition by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) after its formation of under the League of Nations in 1919. Following this, the Foreman's Association of India became the first service union to get official recognition in India, but only with certain preconditions to follow. The demands for political rights to government employees continued to be a mirage as even the independent Indian state did not show any interest to alter the clauses in the Conduct Rules for the employees. Article 310 and 311(2) A, B & C of the newly adopted Indian Constitution also was indifferent towards the democratic rights of government employees. This Pleasure Doctrine in the Constitution has given tremendous powers to the government to dismiss government employees without citing any reason or even giving the dismissed employees any opportunity to show cause (Saxena, 1986).

With the ever worsening economic conditions and working conditions, the trade unions as a whole started pressing for a need-based minimum wage system. The 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference, 1957, has a significant role in shaping the trajectories of both white and blue collar trade unionism in the country (Sen, 2010). The Conference tried to mediate between the capital, labour and the government regarding the concept of minimum wage; after deliberations headed by the Labour Minister of the union government, it reached certain conclusions agreed upon by the representatives of all the three categories. It was hoped that the acceptance of a comprehensive legislation on a need-based minimum wages policy might increase the bargaining capacity of the public service unions.

In the Indian context, though it can be said that the recognized civil service associations can take part in negotiations, this right was not constitutionally granted to the government employees. Associations representing the employees and participating in the negotiations were primarily dependent upon the benevolence of the government or the departmental authorities. There was no obligation fixed on the government to initiate negotiations with the presence of recognized service associations. It was only after several waves of agitations by the government employees in the 1960s that the government of India introduced the Joint Consultative Machinery in 1966 as a mechanism for negotiations between the government and the white-collar employees (Kumar, 1994). The institutional arrangements for negotiation provided by the Joint Consultative Machinery were only available to the central government employees, whereas the vast majority of the state government employees were not protected through this mechanism (Kumar, 1994). It means that the government employees in the states are working in an extremely undemocratic system which in no way promotes unionism among the employees.

Though the state government employees are not protected with any working legislation on collective bargaining in the public services and are not having any constitutional rights to go for strike action, the mobilisation, consolidation and the eventual politicisation of these white-collar state

employees are increasingly happening by their questioning the laws. Sukomal Sen notes that the “growing might of the government employees’ organisations in India gave rise to a number of strikes of these employees” by inviting “immense sufferings for the employees in the form of both police atrocities and large-scale victimisation” as these strike actions are “illegal” in the eyes of the government (Sen, 2010). It is in this context that the various struggles, protest demonstrations and even militant strikes waged by the state government employees have been getting academic attention.

Kerala NGO Union: Formation and Initial Years

The Kerala NGO union was formed in 1962 at a conference convened in Thrissur. Though the conference unanimously accepted a charter of demands, the newly formed Kerala NGO union could not materialize it as it failed in organising strugglesⁱ. There were no struggles for almost one year, even though the situation was favourable for organising the government employees against the state. The union faced a major challenge from the category and departmental organisations while mobilising the employees in the Non Gazetted rankⁱⁱ. These organisations were trying to stoke the parochial category-departmental sentiments, by asserting the grievances of particular sections alone, which were comparatively easy to sell among the government employees. Most of the time, these specific category-wise articulations of the demands might appear against the interests of certain other categories which in turn would affect the larger unity of the white-collar workers in the service. It was a win-win situation for the government as the larger unity of the employees became a distant reality. Thus the task before the Kerala NGO union was to overcome the category-departmentalism prevalent in the white-collar labour relations in the state.

The first official state conference of the Kerala NGO union held in Alappuzha in the year 1964 discussed the problems the organization was facing while engaging with the employees. As the union could not convene its conferences in previous years, there were self-critical assessments of the concrete situation which prevented the organisation from obtaining a comfortable base to go on with the decided programmes and objectives. The official flag for the union was decided upon in this conference. There was resistance from the part of few delegates against fixing the red flag and some of them went to the extent of walking out from the conference (Panikkar, 1982).

During President’s rule in 1964, the union was successful in channelising the anger of the white-collar employees against the price rise and food crisis by organising widespread protests across the state and submitting a detailed memorandum to the Advisor who was in charge of the state administration. The long-pending issues of pay revision and DA were the major demands put forward by the union in its memorandumⁱⁱⁱ. The union also sought interim relief for the government employees to come out of the economic crisis that the country as a whole was facing. Members of Parliament AK Gopalan and Devaki Gopidas were able to raise these issues in Parliament (Panikkar, 1989). The state could not digest the sudden growth of the employees’ movement over the few years and in order to dilute the fighting spirit of the white-collar trade unionism, the Advisor even tried to tempt the employees by announcing that an interim relief could be expected as a New Year gift^{iv}. But the employees rejected this allure and continued to go on with their systematic organisation building through various strike actions across the state.

As the government was very adamant and was not conceding to any of these demands articulated by the employees, the union decided to opt for strike ballot in all the office spaces of the state. The popular newspapers and other print media were wholeheartedly supporting the employees' demand to a great extent and were sympathetic to the causes of the strike ballot. The response to the strike ballot call was astonishing, as 96 percent of the NGOs joined the strike ballot and about 89 percent of them supported the move to intensify the fight against the government with a strike (Raveendran & Bhaskaran, 2007). Seeing the writing on the wall, the government was quick to award the interim relief package in the form of DA (Rs 7.5 to 15) on 25th January, 1965. The formation of a new Pay Revision Commission was also announced thereafter in a news release by the government with KM Unnithan as the chairman. The Kerala NGO Union was skeptical about the terms of reference of the commission as it narrowed, to a greater extent, the possibilities of understanding and enquiring into the larger questions in the civil service^v.

Until then, the union had been demanding parity with central government employees in terms of wages, but with the passage of a need-based minimum wage policy at the centre, it decided to change its slogans and began to focus on achieving a need-based minimum wage for the employees as well. The memorandum submitted to the State Pay Revision Commission headed by KM Unnithan also reflected this line of thinking^{vi}. The union could clearly assess that the mere mechanical linking of state employees' salary with the central scale would not benefit the employees in the Kerala State Service as the central scales were still being calculated on the basis of fixing the base year for life index as 1954. The Second Central Pay Revision Committee also had given their report by then. The union sought its implementation in the central as well as the State Civil Service as it was far more scientific in measuring the minimum wage. The union was of the opinion that the government employees need to fight for need-based minimum wage which was scientifically calculated rather than demanding mechanical parity with the centre. But the interim report of the Unnithan Commission and its recommendations were largely against the interests of the NGOs in the state (Varadarajan, 2000). The disparities in the allocation of DA to different sections of the NGOs were enough to fuel the employees' anger. The Kerala NGO Union, through addressing the larger issues of the white-collar workers and their common concerns, thus capitalized on the concrete situation in the Civil Service and intensified its struggles within it.

The second annual conference of the union in 1965 at Kozhikode adopted a policy declaration resolution. It asserted that the union was committed to strengthening white-collar unionism among the government employees of Kerala and it would strive to achieve the need-based minimum wage required for the employees and at the same time try to achieve a Civil Service free of corruption^{vii}. The split in the Communist Party in 1964 had created differences of opinion among the Kerala NGO Union leadership also. But it was not evident in the Kozhikode conference where E Padmanabhan, a CPI (M) loyalist, was elected to the post of General Secretary and a CPI loyalist EJ Francis was elected as the President (Nair, 1982). P Anandan, former General Secretary of the NGO Union, explains that the division in the party but did not affect the routine campaigns and demonstrations of the union:

Soon after the Kozhikode Conference, the union decided to intensify its reservations against the Unnithan Commission through a series of struggles. Finally the Unnithan Commission submitted its

report in October, 1965. The demands for weightage in the pay revision got replaced by fixation possible through the Kerala Service Rules 28 A. Against this, the union was quick to reach out to the employees through office level meetings, pamphlet circulation, corner meetings and protest demonstrations by exposing the government. The primary demand of the union was on resolving the discrepancies in the Pay Revision Commission. There was a widespread anger against the state on this regard among the government employees and the union was successful in capitalising it.^{viii}

It was in 1966 that the All India State Government Employees' Federation (AISGEF), to which the Kerala NGO Union was affiliated, convened its first National Conference in Thiruvananthapuram and finalized a new charter of demands for the state government employees all across the country (Sen, 2010). The first demand was for a national formula for calculating the DA with which the DA can be scientifically measured for both the central and state employees^{ix}. The second demand was about giving a need-based minimum wage as per the 15th Indian Labour Conference(ILC) policy directives and extending the corresponding pay revision to the state employees^x. The AISGEF, as a third demand, asked the government to reconsider its policy on the white-collar strikes and other demonstrations^{xi}. It condemned the victimisation and the police repression of employees and demanded that the government reinstate the employees who were subjected to hard punishments such as dismissals^{xii}. The concern of AISGEF was to remove the ordinances which allow the authorities to victimize the employees. The fourth demand was to give full trade union rights to the government employees. In line with the AISGEF's demands, the Kerala NGO Union intensified its trade unionism among the government workers with various methods of demonstrations.

Kerala NGO Union: The Consolidation Phase

The state of Kerala witnessed its first organized indefinite strike of the government employees in 1967, when the state was under the Advisor's rule. As per the charter of demands finalized in the AISGEF All India Conference in 1966, the Kerala NGO Union decided to polarize the white-collar employees against the Advisor's rule which was dubbed anti-employee in all respects (Krishnan, 2000). The memorandum submitted by the union to the Advisor on 16th October, 1966 also sought certain positive interventions from the government (Nair, 1982). The union was precise in outlining its understanding of the politics of the economic crisis and the rise in the prices of essential commodities. The union assessed that the wrong policy prescriptions of both the central and state governments were responsible for the sorry state of affairs of the economy. There was no hesitation for the union to ask for interim relief or DA as a protective measure against the erosion of their real income due to the relentless price rise. But the Advisor just ignored the demands for DA and rejected the charter of demands submitted by the union.

As a token of protest, the union called for a salary refusal campaign in 1st December across the offices in the state. The employees were asked to inform the office head in writing about their decision to refuse the salary (Panikkar, 1982). A co-ordination committee was formed for intensifying the preparatory works for the strike action with many likeminded organisations working in the administration. NGO Federation, Secretariat Association and the Typists and Stenographers Association who stood with the NGO Union initially withdrew their support in the subsequently. P Anandan recalls

the incidents during the struggle by which the union tried to protect the unity of white-collar employees amid the confusions and infightings within the civil service:

They (NGO Federation, Secretariat Association etc.) even went on to campaign against the strike call given by the union. But at the same time, they were not in a position to oppose the demands raised by the Kerala NGO Union as they feared the backlash from their constituencies. Furthermore, they were compelled to conduct separate demonstrations asking the same demands that the union was fighting for. NGO union did not want to create any disruption to the larger unity in the white-collar employees and they gave complete solidarity to the various categorical protest calls given by the affiliate organisations of NGO Federation.^{xiii}

The government on December 22 banned the strike of employees through an extraordinary gazette notification. An additional ordinance was issued to inform about the potential punishments for those who persuade the employees to go for strike or who help the striking employees (Varadarajan, 2000, Panikkar, 82 & Panikkar, 89). The government also decided to establish a service-break for the striking employees. After a one-day quit work demonstration, the coordination committee gave the strike notice to government and informed them about their decision to go for a strike from 6th January onwards (Nair, 1982). The CPI (M) leaders were active in supporting the employees to equip them to wage a longer struggle against the mighty state.

It was reported that about 85 percent of the employees joined the strike. Victimisation of the union leaders and vindictive measures against the agitating employees were carried out on a large scale during the strike^{xiv}. But the fighting spirit of the employees was tremendous so that the government was increasingly finding it difficult to handle the situation. The persuasion attempt by Union Home Minister YB Chawan also failed, as his assurances were not satisfactory for the employees (Panikkar, 1982). EMS and other opposition leaders met the Governor many times and discussed for hours on resolving the issue. As a result, finally, the Governor showed his willingness for talks with the NGO union leaders and the issues were settled after the detailed deliberations^{xv}. The 12 day long strike helped the NGO union to consolidate a large section of the government employees. The growth of the organisation into a striking force was marked by this strike.

The EMS government which returned to power in 1967 reinstated the right of the Civil Service unions to organise the employees in Kerala and began to take progressive steps on the service and salary benefits of the state government employees. The government recognized the Kerala NGO Union officially, which the previous governments had never done^{xvi}. Sympathising with the series of struggles that the Kerala NGO Union and its fraternal organisations had undertaken during the Governor's rule, the EMS Ministry responded positively to the government employees. The government was very quick in providing DA at the central rate for the employees (Krishnan, 2000). The employees who were dismissed from the service due to the victimisation policies of the previous government could get back to service with the intervention of the Ministry. The government also decided to withdraw all the cases leveled against the employees and stopped the usual practice of police verification before recruiting into the state civil service.

When the central government employees went for an indefinite strike in 1968, the state government was not ready to follow them in suppressing the striking employees^{xvii}. The EMS

government made it clear that it did not want to curtail the central employees' right to strike (Sen, 2010). Though the second Central Pay Revision Commission report made it very clear to the central employees that resorting to strike would not be entertained, they were determined to go for strike action. The central government in turn gave instructions to the states to use repressive measures to control the strike (Rajendran, 2013). This refusal of the state government to apply the special powers to suppress the strike was a testimony to the CPI (M)'s approach towards the white-collar unionism and their rights to articulate their demands through strike actions.

Democratising the labour relations within the Civil Service was an immediate objective for the new government. It tried to eliminate the feudal relations existing between the higher echelons of the bureaucracy and the lower ranks (Panikkar, 1982). It became important for the CPI (M) to problematise the hierarchy which the bureaucracy internalises. The EMS government found that without revising the colonial rules and procedure pertaining to the civil service, the democratisation attempt would be of no use. Paloli Muhammad Kutty, Central Committee member of CPI (M) and the former Minister for Local Self Administration describes thus the democratisation attempts of the EMS government:

The lower grade workers were subjected to inhuman practices of servitude and suppression. The EMS government left no stone unturned to curb this undemocratic attitude of the higher officials in the bureaucracy. Stringent measures were adopted to prohibit all sorts of labour exploitations in the administration. A Rules Revision Committee was formed under the chairmanship of former Kerala Legislative Assembly Speaker Shankaranarayanan Thampi in order to revise the rules and regulations, code of conduct, and other related things to the employees in the Civil Service. The committee included representative from the part of the employees as well.^{xviii}

By 1968, the union had come to the conclusion that the employees' struggles should be supplemented by an intense campaign among the general public too as it was important to gain the confidence of the larger society. The fifth conference of the union convened in Palakkad in the year 1968 adopted a political line to fight the category-departmental organisations working in the civil service^{xix}. It was during the inaugural speech of the fourth state conference of union that the Chief Minister EMS reminded the delegates about the dangers of category organisations. EMS compared the category-departmental organisations with the craft organisations in the factories. He then urged the conference to take a pragmatic line on the question of category-departmentalism^{xx}. The revised programme of the union adopted at the fifth conference described these category-departmental organisations as the "hiding place of the class enemy"^{xxi}. The union was approaching towards a theoretical clarity in terms of identifying the role of the category-departmental sentiments within the civil service. The union was also convinced that these organisations by weakening the class unity among the government employees, especially among the NGOs, leave a possibility of governmental capture of the white-collar trade unionism itself. The categorical issues need to be addressed, but it should be seen in a larger context and struggles should be organized by mobilising all categories of employees irrespective of whether the issue affects them or not. Categorical and departmental issues are part and parcel of the common problems faced by the employees and its solutions too should be sought from a larger perspective, as isolating these issues from the larger issues would help the class enemy, that is the government.

Towards Adopting a Political Line on the Question of Category- Departmentalism: The Split in the union

The split that happened in the Communist Party in 1964 had a bearing on the Kerala NGO union as well. To a large extent, this division was not seen in public till 1968. The then state president of the union EJ Francis and his aides travelled all across Kerala in their capacities as the union's state leadership and tried to capture various branch and district conferences (Raveendran & Bhaskaran, 2007). The local and district leadership resisted these moves in many places and reported it to the general secretary E Padmanabhan. The differences of opinion among the union leadership came to the fore at the Palakkad conference in 1968 (Panikkar, 1989). The division within the leadership of the Kerala NGO Union also manifested in an ideological warfare between the CPI and the CPI (M). Finally, the split happened along with the formation of a new organisation, Joint Council of State Service Organisations (JCSSO), which adopted the category departmentalism as their political line. Meanwhile, the CPI joined with Indian National Congress and destabilized the EMS government. A new government was formed with CPI leader C Achutha Menon as the chief minister in 1969. The approach of the new ministry towards the government employees and their right to strike were undesirable^{xxii}.

The Kottayam Conference of the Kerala NGO Union in 1970 modified its position with regard to the category-departmental organizations (Panikkar, 1989). Soon after the Palakkad Conference, where the union adopted a solid political line on the category-departmentalism, the category/departmental organisations working within the revenue department went on an indefinite strike. The Achutha Menon government was very harsh on the protesters and did not initiate any talks with them. In line with the Palakkad Conference decision, the Kerala NGO Union did not join the struggle, but the category organisation could mobilize a large section of employees in the revenue department. A majority of revenue department employees began to disassociate themselves from the union as they felt extremely unhappy with the stand taken by the union during the struggle called by the category association. This compelled the union to go for introspection on its stand towards the category issues^{xxiii}.

The Kottayam Conference resolution assessed that the category issues cannot be dealt with in a careless manner as mistreatment may weaken the existence of the union in certain departments as and when the issues pop up. This necessitated an amendment in the Palakkad resolution. The new resolution retained all the theoretical observations on the category organisation taken in the Palakkad resolution and it also reasserted that the categorical and departmental sentiments ought to be defeated. At the same time, the revised resolution allowed scope for cooperation with the category organisations as and when they press for strike action with genuine demands. Here, the Kerala NGO Union showed its maturity in terms of the ability to take a dialectical position with regard to the category organisations. This shows the clarity with which the union works within the complex labour relations of civil services in Kerala. Then onwards, the Kerala NGO Union was very cautious in addressing the issues related to category organisations. At the same time, the union was very critical of opportunistic categorical formations and fought them tooth and nail.

Politics of Coalition Building: Towards Achieving Larger Unity among the Service Unions

After the elections to the state legislative assembly in 1970, Achutha Menon formed the government again with the help of the Congress party. The civil services in India then were witnessing a major campaign for pay revision and dearness allowance. The Third Central Pay Revision Commission was constituted in 1968 after the central employees' strike. The interim report of the Third Central Pay Revision Commission was submitted to the Government of India in 1970-71 and, though DA was not declared, interim relief was granted to the central employees (Sen, 2010). This interim relief was in accordance with the rise in the price of essential commodities and the rise in the life index. But the state government in Kerala did not show any interest to grant interim relief for its employees. The Kerala NGO Union initiated the formation of a Joint Action Committee of the service unions working among the non-gazetted officers, teachers and the local government employees, including the JCSSO, to intensify the struggle for achieving interim relief.^{xxiv} This was the first time in the history of the state that a larger unity was being established among the civil service unions. With parliamentary elections round the corner, the JAC believed that the strike action was sufficient to pressurize the government (Reddy, 1972). A defence committee was also formed with trade union and political leaders to help the striking employees with financial, legal and political support (Krishnan, 2000). The initial talks with the government and the JAC did not yield any result as the government could not agree with the demanded rate of relief which was putting an additional burden of Rs 90 million per year on the state. The government was only ready to offer a package worth of Rs 40 million a year in this regard (Reddy, 1972).

The strike started on 10th February, 1971 and during the first week of the strike itself, E Gopalakurup, MLA of the CPI and one of the conveners of the defence committee, initiated mediation talks with the government without the knowledge of the JAC (Raveendran & Bhaskaran, 2007). This was questioned by the other conveners of the defence committee and the JCSSO got cornered in the JAC. The government, on the other hand, tried to turn the youth and job aspirants against the employees, but every attempt went in vain. The strike continued to gather more support from the employees as it progressed (Panikkar, 1989). The JAC worked out all available plans to mount political pressure on the government. The Gazetted Officers Association, which was not in a position to strike due to the legal constraints, gave its "moral and financial support" to the NGOs' strike (Reddy, 1972). With the gazetted officers being sympathetic to the NGO strike, there was no "intimidation" of striking employees by the higher officials (Reddy, 1972). This helped the JAC and they could convince a large section of the confused employees to join the strike. Finally, the government went on to offer a minimal interim relief for name sake^{xxv}. But the fact was that the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was about to face a general election soon, had offered a special package to the state government for solving the interim relief fiasco. The government did not reveal it and kept it as an official secret. Moreover, the government used the Joint Council and a few Congress-led teachers' organisations to pressurize the JAC to wind up the strike. The bargaining power of the JAC began to collapse with these developments and the strike was unlikely to continue with the same vigour that it had in the initial period^{xxvi}. "The non-Marxist unions, which were mostly affiliated to the parties in the government,

threatened to pull out of the strike if it was extended to the essential services of hospitals and water and drainage facilities. This marked the beginning of the downward swing in the bargaining power of the JAC, which looked formidable when the strike started. Also, it marked the beginning of the upswing in the government's bargaining power" (Reddy, 1972). With these organisations threatening the JAC about their decision to discontinue the strike, the Kerala NGO union and other members of the JAC were forced to terminate the struggle as they did not want to disrupt the existing unity among the employees' associations^{xxvii}. As a result of the negotiation before the settlement of the strike, an interim relief package of Rs 52 million per year was announced for the NGOs in the state (Reddy, 1972).

The Alappuzha state conference of NGO union in 1972 deliberated much on the failed strategies of the previous years in establishing larger unity within the civil service (Panikkar, 1982). The union assessed that every attempt at achieving employees' unity was being damaged by the opportunistic attitudes of some organisation or the other. The unity achieved through mere talks and deliberations between the leadership would not be sustained for a long time, thereby weakening the movement and what the situation demanded was a concrete unity in terms of politicising the individual employee about the demands of the struggle rather than mechanical unity. This means that the unity should be built from bottom to top as against the previous practice of top to bottom command^{xxviii}. The conference demanded the constitution of a Pay Revision Commission and grant of interim relief for the state employees. As the employees in the public sector such as electricity board employees were getting a far more reasonable scale of wage and other benefits, the union claimed an interim relief of Rs. 100 for the NGOs in Kerala and decided to go for an indefinite strike (Krishnan, 2000).

The JCSSO could not convince its constituent category organisations as a few of them too demanded a hike in the wages including the release of DA and immediate formation of a Pay Commission^{xxix}. But the JCSSO was categorical in rejecting the demand for the formation of a new Pay Revision Commission as they did not want to give trouble to their political leadership. Still, in order to satisfy their affiliated category unions, the JCSSO decided to slightly shift their focus towards the central government and demanded that the state employees be brought within the ambit of the Central Pay Revision Commission^{xxx}. There was no doubt that the demands were pretty valid, but the intention was to rescue the state government from the employees' anger. Further, the JCSSO declared a one-day token strike on December 15, 1972. This strike was declared only to counter the indefinite strike called by the Service Co-ordination Committee led by the NGO union^{xxxi}. The token strike called by JCSSO was not able to gather much support (Pathmanabhan, 1973).

At the same time, the government was preparing to counter the indefinite strike called by the Kerala NGO Union-led front of the employees' organisations. The government declared that the strike was politically motivated and the NGO union leaders were being used by the CPI (M) for its political gain (Pathmanabhan, 1973). The chief minister warned the employees of dire consequences in case they joined the strike. The Congress leaders in the state also started giving public statements against the employees' strike. Home minister K Karunakaran reiterated that the government in no way was willing to have talks with the union leaders (Raveendran & Bhaskaran, 2007). The state general secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade unions (CITU), E Balanandan, offered the union its full support in the strike and asked the government to settle the issues at the earliest (Balanandan, 1973). When the

government and the ruling parties in the state started initiating a public trial against the union, the CITU general secretary gave a call to its members to defend the employees from the attack unleashed by the state.

As per the decision on the Alappuzha conference, the NGO union took the lead in convening a meeting between 21 organisations working in the civil service and formed a seven-member Central Struggle Committee with E Padmanabhan as its convener and decided to go for an indefinite strike from 10th January, 1973^{xxxii}. Defence committees were also formed in different parts of the state with eminent advocates anticipating the legal help that the striking employees might require later. The leaders and activists of CITU were in the forefront in coordinating the activities of the defence committees. Former state general secretary of CITU, MM Lawrence, describes the preparatory stage of the struggle:

It was during the preparatory phase of the NGO strike, the employees in Transport Corporation, Plantation Corporation, Electricity Board, and Rubber Board were provided with a wage revision. This had catalyzed the morale of the NGO's to wage a struggle though the government was very adamant on its stand. Reacting to the intense campaigns undertaken by the employees for the success of the strike, the Government declared the Essential Service Ordinance on 8th January which had the provisions by which strike actions or persuasion in the essential services are non-bailable offenses and can invite arrest without any warrant, and further imprisonment up to one year.^{xxxiii}

The indefinite strike started on 10th January, with the employees resisting intimidation from the government. A confrontational situation was prevailing in almost all the government offices with the police forces unleashing physical assaults on the protesting employees^{xxxiv}. The police got clear instructions from the higher echelons of power to resort to intense lathi-charge on the protesters when they tended to picket the strike breakers.

As per the intelligence report, the NGO strike was near total and it was expected to continue. There was an unprecedented state repression on the striking employees with force (Pathmanabhan, 1973). The government decided to suspend the arrested employees and to replace them with a fixed number of new recruits. At the same time, the government began to contradict its own position by terming the strike as a total failure and advertising in the newspapers about the "high" rate of attendance^{xxxv}. The government was totally in chaos as the striking employees decided to invite mass suspension so that they could get compensation for livelihood as per the service rules. The government then sought changes in the service rules in order to discontinue the provision of giving livelihood allowance for the suspended employees. The Kerala NGO union tried its best to expose the ideological credentials of the chief minister. They were vocal in questioning the inconsistencies that the CPI as a political party had at that point of time. The comments by the former president of the NGO union KV Rajendran are revelatory in this regard:

The Bihar NGOs too were waging a relentless struggle against the state government on almost the same demands as their Kerala counterparts. The CPI which had a considerable base in the state of Bihar was supporting the strike. We were using this point to corner the CPI-Congress government and the Joint Council, who were trying to suppress the strike in whichever way it was possible. Veteran leader of CPI (M) AK Gopalan asked the government to resolve the issue at the earliest by conceding to

the employees' demands and was very harsh in criticising the CPI by exposing its contradictory stands in Bihar and Kerala.^{xxxvi}

The resolve of employees to fight the government gave much trouble to the normal functioning of the administration. As one month passed, the struggle became a people's movement with the growing voluntary help provided by the local level relief committees. Many of the striking employees were living in near-poverty as they were devoid of their monthly salary. It became highly difficult for them to purchase essential things from the market since the merchants did not give them the provisions in advance as was the case earlier. Understanding the financial condition of the employees, the government used many tactics to exploit the situation. In order to divert the focus and to confuse the employees, it issued a press release which said that they were ready for deliberations with the striking unions once the Central Pay Commission report was out (Panikkar, 1989). On the one hand, the government seemed to be yielding to the striking employees, but on the other hand, it was using the JCSSO to disrupt the strike.

Once the strike was about to enter the month of March, it became increasingly difficult for some ruling front organisations to sustain in the struggle and they decided to withdraw the strike on 28th February (Krishnan, 2000). The government appealed to the remaining employees' unions to call off the strike. The government assured them that the moderate cases levelled against the employees would be withdrawn and one month's salary would be given as an advance, which had to be repaid in installments from April onwards, to those employees who took part in the strike for more than seven days^{xxxvii}. Later, in the joint meeting of all the three struggle coordination committees on 3rd March, they decided to withdraw the strike from 5th March onwards (Pathmanabhan, 1973). The government assured once again that there would not be any victimization of the employees who went for a 53-day long strike.

1973: The Lessons Learned

The Achutha Menon government "declared the strike as illegal and arrested thousands of employees. In this respect, he has surpassed even the Congress government in different states. The government instead of conceding the just demands of the government employees tried to use disruptive elements in the movement to break the morale of the employees but failed in its vainglorious attempt.... The Kerala Bandh organized on 21st February was a demonstration of unity of the working class of Kerala with the fighting state government employees", wrote BT Ranadive^{xxxviii}, president of CITU, to the general secretary of NGO union in a congratulation letter after the 1973 strike. Though the NGO union and its allies were not successful in achieving any of the agreed demands, the 53-day strike changed the entire course of the white-collar trade unionism in the state. It had a bearing on the ideological shaping of white-collar unionism as the salaried middle-class employees realized that they were no longer a part of the state machinery but just tools in the hands of the state. This was an important realisation. The strike helped the employees to realize that the support of the larger working class and the people are essential for achieving any genuine demand from the state. The average government employee who always used to keep a certain distance with the manual workers thus realized the importance of the larger unity of the working population. The struggle reassured the Kerala NGO Union that it is a part of

the working class in India and it can in no way resolve the service issues without the help of the larger working class.

The Kerala NGO Union's maturity as a trade union-like organization is more visible in the resolution adopted by its state committee on 18-3-1973^{xxxxix}. It reviewed the 53-day long strike scientifically. The resolution adopted unanimously began with appraising the decisions arrived at during the previous Alappuzha conference. Though the union was more or less able to implement most of them, there were lacunae in forging sustainable unity among the civil service unions working in the state. It was true that a far stronger unity had been achieved than in the previous strikes, but the government could disrupt this unity by using the ministers and the political party leadership. The ground-level politicisation of the employees did not reach a saturation point as the union couldn't do proper division of labour among the service unions who joined the strike. There was a lack of coordination among the leadership of different service organisations which in turn reflected among the average employees as well^{xl}.

Another important lesson the union learned from the strike was regarding the political content of the struggle. As the employees raised economic issues, it was expected that the government would respond to it in a typical fashion by either giving lame excuses or resorting to suppression using force. As was anticipated, the union resisted the massive repression bravely. But it could not question the politics with which the governments were undertaking such economic decisions by pushing the employees into despair. The resolution adopted by the state committee appealed to the union members to engage with the salaried employees in the wake of any protest action so that the political content of the struggle would get attention. The resolution also underlined the importance of popular support for the sustenance of any strike action. As the defence committees and relief committees which include the trade union members and agricultural labourers were instrumental in safeguarding the employees from the political assaults unleashed by the state, the union felt the increasing need of forging a larger solidarity with their issues as well. It was the working class blue-collar employees who stood with the salaried employees when they were subjected to legal actions. The union thus urged its membership to establish organic links with the toiling masses by engaging with them in their vital struggles^{xli}. This resurgent understanding of the union can be seen in its activities in the post-1973 scene.

By underlining the importance of forging a larger unity within the civil service, all the 19 service unions under the three struggle coordination committees which fought the strike in 1973 joined together and formed a common platform right after the historic strike to wage similar kind of struggles in the days to come. The platform thus created was called the Federation of State Employees and Teachers Organisations (FSETO) and it was committed to address the common issues of the civil service^{xlii}. The class unity and solidarity shown during the strike period were the critical mass for FSETO to intensify its struggle within the civil service.

Wage as an Instrument for Mobilisation: The Politics of Wage Freeze in India

This section discusses the politics of wage-freeze undertaken by various governments which later became the central point of white-collar trade unionism in the country. The Kerala NGO Union, after

achieving its militancy, began to problematise the politics of wage freeze and thus the wage became an instrument of mobilisation among the white-collar employees. Trade unions have a greater role to play in wage fixation. The history of wage policy in the country tells of the constant struggles and interventions on the part of the trade unions both in the industrial and non-industrial sectors. Trade unionism could check the constant efforts from the capital and the state to lower the wages and other benefits. It was mentioned in the first Central Pay Commission, 1947 that the state, which directs the private employers to pay minimum wage to their employees, also had a responsibility in providing with minimum wage legislation for the government employees. But there were no genuine efforts from the governments at implementing a comprehensive wage policy for the government employees. Their counterparts in the industrial sector could attain considerable wage revision due to their proliferated trade unionism and the collective bargaining prevailing in the industrial sector. This prompted the government employees to get organized and demand their rights from the government who was their employer.

The recommendations of the 15th Indian Labour Conference were expected to benefit the government employees in the central as well as state services as this new legislation argued for a need-based minimum wage for the workers. But in the all-India trend the percentage of expenditure on the wage bills of the government employees continued to show a decline as compared to the total revenue spending of the state governments. In this regard, the decision taken with regard to a need-based minimum wage policy in the 15th Indian Labour Conference of 1957 seldom got reflected in the actions of various state governments^{xliii}. The central as well as state governments did not do any genuine effort to implement the need-based minimum wage legislation; instead, they continued to find new opportunities by which they could go for a potential wage freeze policy.

The attempt by the government to freeze the wages was carried out in a systematic way. The two ordinances passed by the central government in 1974 were based on the logic of wage freeze as both of them tried to confiscate the earned service benefits, such as the increment in bonus and DA, of the government employees^{xliiv}. The message was made clear with the aggressive position taken by the Planning Commission documents also. The Approach Paper to Fifth Plan, 1974-79 prepared by the Planning Commission was a direct attack against the government employees. The Approach Paper declared that the trend in which the salaried employees try to advance their wages in an organized way must be resisted and defeated (Sen, 2010).

The Committee on Wage Policy headed by Sukhomoy Chakravorty was submitted to the central government in 1974^{xliv}. This report was an ideological offensive on the white-collar employees by the state. It went beyond the objective of wage freeze and pushed the government to further its wage reduction policies. The report openly advocated the rationalisation of the wage structure in the country. A direct wage cut was suggested by the Sukhomoy Committee Report, that too by a "systematic attempt to play one section of the workers against another by pointlessly pointing to the disparities in payment of different sections" (Sen, 2010). Also it tried to "cut down the earnings of some highly skilled section of the workers and employees in the name of introducing proper differentials in regard to the lowest paid categories"(Sen, 2010). Thus, it can be summarized that the report was completely going against the spirit of the 15th ILC recommendations.

It was also during the 60s that the militant struggles by the industrial workers compelled the central government to pass an ordinance which ensured a minimum 8.33 percent bonus for the workers in the year 1965. This concept of the bonus as a measure of deferred wage was not applicable to the government employees including both the state and central employees. During the Emergency, all such provisions for bonus even in the industrial sector was stopped and the working class in the country had to face an all-round attack from the state. In addition to it, there were efforts to curtail other service benefits such as DA and the compensation like interim relief for the government employees^{xlvi}. The Janata Party which replaced the Congress after the General Elections of 1977 promised the employees that the party was committed to revive legislation on the need-based minimum wage policy once the party was elected to power (Rajendran, 2013).

After assuming power at the Centre, the Janata government constituted a Study Group on Wages, Incomes and Prices under the chairmanship of S Bhoothalingam in 1977. The AISGEF had assessed the Bhoothalingam Committee as an extension of the previous committees on wage freeze as the basic logic of the committee was to rationalize the wages at a much lower level on the pretext of sympathising with the agricultural labourers (Rajendran, 2013). The terms of reference also said that “the wages in agricultural sector are low because the wages in the organized industries are comparatively higher, which in other words means that the wages of agricultural workers can be raised only by reducing and rationalising the wages of organized employees” (Sen, 2010). The intention of the Bhoothalingam Committee was clear as it contained another objective of fixing the minimum wage. This indicated that the government was in a mood to deviate from the concept of need-based minimum wage policy approved by the 15th ILC and to adopt new methodology for fixing the criteria of minimum wage.

Further, the recommendations of the Bhoothalingam Committee were another declaration of war on the employees and it invited protest from the service unions. In the opinion of the committee, the bonus can no more be treated as deferred wage for the working class. The committee also recommended to alter the criteria of the minimum wage and increasingly pushed the government for an economic policy based on wage freeze^{xlvii}. Meanwhile, the Parliament passed the Industrial Relations Bill in 1978 which had a devastating effect on the trade union movement in the country (Rajendran, 2013). The Bill contained certain provisions which “were outlawing strike and official meddling with the workers’ right to choose their union and workers’ right for collective bargaining”(Sen, 2010). It was in this context that the CPI (M)-led government of West Bengal in 1977 initiated a trend towards recognising the rights of government employees to claim bonus. The West Bengal government approved an ex-gratia payment of Rs100 to all the government employees as bonus (Rajendran, 2013).

The FSETO and the Kerala NGO Union were determined to fight the onslaught on the employees in the form of wage freeze and rationalisation of pay structure by explaining the differences in the approach of the central government and the West Bengal state government towards the white-collar employees. The NGO union was quick to realize the importance of larger unity among the working population and tried to reach out to the masses by explaining the economic rationale behind the wage freeze. The industrial trade unions were also trying to form larger platforms to wage struggle against the anti-working class policies pursued by the central government. A convention of all central trade

unions was organized in Delhi to prepare the working class in the country to face the state offensive in November 1978 and subsequently, a massive Parliament March too was conducted^{xlviii}. The AISGEF to which the Kerala NGO Union was affiliated could perform a leading role in the formation of this united platform of trade unions (Raveendran & Bhaskaran, 2007). It was the first time the white collar unions joined hands with the blue collar industrial and manual worker unions in a programmatic way. Kerala NGO Union played a significant role in formulating the decision of the AISGEF with regard to the attainment of the overall unity of the larger working population including blue and white collar workers.

Conclusion

We have seen how the Kerala NGO Union grew into a militant trade union-like organisation which could successfully negotiate with the state in resolving the issues and concerns pertaining to the government employees in the state. The political content of the union was evident in all the struggles and campaigns it has undertaken in the past. It should be noted that the union achieved this strength by working in a space where the colonial Pleasure Doctrine still exists. The collective bargaining has not yet been materialized in the case of public service employees. Whatever mechanism was established in its place like the Joint Consultative Machinery, were intended at disciplining the employees by avoiding the scope of occurrence of strike action.

The Kerala NGO Union with its increasing militancy has been resisting the state policies in this unfavourable situation by constantly engaging with the salaried employees, thereby blending them with the larger working class movement. This being not an easy task, the union had to overcome the challenges faced by the category-departmental tendencies in the white-collar labour relations in public service. We could also see how the union, over a period of time, attained the trade union consciousness of larger class unity while waging militant struggles through its constant learning and un-learning exercises. It was ready for any sort of compromises to preserve the unity achieved among the service unions. By becoming a close ally of the industrial trade union movement in the country, the Kerala NGO Union was successful in domesticating a large section of government employees into working class consciousness.

Notes

- ⁱ See the report of the 1st State Conference of Kerala NGO Union held at Alappuzha on 23,24,25 May-1964
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See the report of the 2nd State Conference of Kerala NGO Union held at Kozhikode on 8,9,10 May-1965
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} See the memorandum submitted by Kerala NGO Union to the State Pay Revision Commission headed by K.M. Unnithan on March, 1965.
- ^{vii} See, the Policy Declaration Document adopted at the 2nd state Conference of Kerala NGO union held at Kozhikode on 8,9,10 May-1965.
- ^{viii} Field Interview by the author.
- ^{ix} See the Charter of Demand adopted at the first National Conference of AISGEF at Thiruvananthapuram on 2-4 November-1966.

- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Field Interview by the author.
- xiv See the Annual Report of the Kerala NGO union presented by the General Secretary at the 4th state Conference held at Kollam on 13,14,15 May-1967.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi See, the Kerala Service Magazine June-1967 issue which carried Chief Minister EMS's inaugural speech at the 4th state Conference of union.
- xvii See "Strike by Government Employees: Law and Public Policy" by ArjunAggarwal
- xviii Field Interview by the author.
- xix See the minutes, organisational report and the resolutions passed/adopted at the 5th state Conference of Kerala NGO union in Palakkad on 8,9,10 June-1968.
- xx See, the Kerala Service Golden Jubilee Souvenir, p.100-102
- xxi See the Organisational Report adopted at the 5th state Conference of Kerala NGO union in Palakkad on 8,9,10 June-1968.
- xxii See the report presented by NGO union General Secretary at the 7th state Conference at Kottayam on 8,9,10 August, 1970.
- xxiii See the organisational report adopted at the 7th state Conference of union.
- xxiv Annual report presented at the 8th state Conference of Kerala NGO union held in Thiruvananthapuram-1971.
- xxv Ibid.
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii Ibid.
- xxviii See the organisational report of 9th state Conference of NGO union, Alappuzha, May 13,14,15 -1972 and Kerala Service Magazine, May-1972 Vol XI, No.6
- xxix See Kerala Service Magazine, November-1972 Vol.XI No.12
- xxx See the editorial of Kerala Service Magazine, October-1972 Vol. XI, No.11
- xxxi See Kerala Service Magazine, January-1973, Vol.XII No.1
- xxxii See Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol.XII No.2,3&4
- xxxiii Field Interview by the author.
- xxxiv See Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol.XII No.2,3&4
- xxxv Ibid.
- xxxvi Field Interview by the author.
- xxxvii See the 10th state Conference Report of NGO union held at Trissur on 26,27,28 May-1973
- xxxviii See, Message from BTR in Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol. XII No. 2, 3&4.
- xxxix "Anubhavapadam Ulkkolluka, Varggabodhathote Samarathinu Thayyaaretukkuka", Resolution adopted by the NGO union at the state Committee held on 18-3-1973. For this see Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol. XII No. 2, 3&4.
- xl Ibid.
- xli See Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol.XII No.2,3&4
- xlii See Kerala Service Magazine, April-1973, Vol.XII No.2,3&4
- xliiii Ibid.
- xliiv Ibid.
- xliv Ibid.
- xlvi Ibid.

xvii Ibid.

xviii See the Organisational Report adopted in the 5th National Conference of AISGEF at Patna on 13-16 June 1982

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