

India's trade union density lower than Brazil, South Africa; organisers are victimized

Saturday 22 September 2018, by [SHAH Rajiv](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2018).

In what might sound as music to India's corporate honchos and their political supporters, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has calculated that the trade union (TU) density in India among wage workers, both casual and regular/salaried, has fallen since 1993-94, by 3 percentage points to 13.4 per cent. Worse, the top Union Nations (UN) body, headquartered in Geneva, has further notes, the "density among regular/salaried workers has fallen precipitously since 1993-94, by 17.7 percentage points to 28.8 per cent."

Pointing out that, on the other hand, the density of self-employed workers "has increased to around 8 per cent, ILO, in its just-released [India Wage Report: Wage policies for decent work and inclusive growth](#), regrets, "Overall, trade union density in India is relatively low compared to other emerging economies such as Brazil and South Africa, which indicates the limited scope unions have to bargain for improvements in working conditions."

The report says, "Although trade union numbers are quite high in absolute numbers, the tendency to effectively bargain is quite low due to a lack of statutory support to promote collective bargaining in India", adding, "While unions represent a higher proportion of regular/salaried workers than any other category, the salaried workers comprised only 18.5 per cent of the workforce."

The report states, "The decline in trade union density among these workers over the past decade shows that a large proportion of them are in the private sector", adding, this happened despite the fact that "since the opening up of the economy in the 1990s, the trade union movement mounted resistance to major reforms, especially privatization, and in collaboration with consumer and environmental organizations."

The report agrees, as a result of the resistance to privatization, there were reversals of "the government's decision to privatize some large companies", demonstrating "the ability of politically affiliated unions to resist the Indian government's reforms when they united across party lines". However, the report laments, none of this "led to an increase in unionization among wage workers". Giving reasons, the report says, "Since the economic reforms there has been a tendency towards shifting production to ancillary units or less developed areas where labour is cheaper and unions are almost completely absent, and towards subcontracting and outsourcing." It cites a survey of 101 firms producing auto components in different regions of the country, which "revealed that only 6 per cent of the firms reported having unions and the workers were dissuaded from forming a union." Secondly, notes the report, "Employers have been offering existing union members incentives to leave and non-members incentives not to join." Thus, "A study involving 447 workplace union representatives of the INTUC, the second largest trade union federation, showed a high level of employer sponsored action to break legitimate unions in the private sector, and many instances of management actively offering incentives to workers to dissuade them from joining a genuine union." Thirdly, says the report, there is a "tendency towards victimization and dismissal of union members", with a study showing that "over 60 per cent of the union representatives in private manufacturing and services - and almost half of those in public services - reported victimization of union representatives by management."

It adds, "Over half of all the union representatives surveyed reported that workers were dismissed during strikes in the private manufacturing and services sectors. In the automobile sector in the National Capital Region (NCR), workers were reluctant to form a union as they feared that the labour commissioner's office, to which they had no direct access themselves, would inform employers of their intention and that potential union leaders would be dismissed."

Rajiv Shah

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Counterview

<https://www.counterview.net/2018/08/indias-trade-union-density-lower-than.html?m=1>