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Organizing the Un-organized: The Story of United Nurses Association (UNA)

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Abstract

Informal Unisom is relatively a new development within the working class movement which is generally understood as a response to the failure of traditional organization of workers to address the problems of those who are in the unorganized/informal sectors. It also reflects those contradictions produced by the forces of globalization and its neo liberal policies. The agitations by registered nurses working in various private hospitals in Kerala under the leadership of United Nurses Association, one of the initiatives towards informal unionism seems to be a decisive factor shaping the nature of contemporary working class politics in Kerala. This study is an effort to analyze the unique style used by United Nurses Association to organize the nurses in the unorganized structure with a view to improve their working conditions and also to resist the negative impact of informalization of workplace by the agents of globalizations.

Key words: Informal Unionism, Social Movement Unionism, Unorganized Sector, Nurses Movement, Disaffiliation

Introduction

The waves of globalization and its neoliberal policies have resulted in an expansion of health care industry leading to a disproportionate supply and an increasing informalization of nursing labor in the state of Kerala. According to one statistics there are 2, 53, 925 registered and auxiliary nurses in this region produced mainly by the new generation self-financing institutions established in the post liberalization era (Jacob, 2016). Out of this, approximately 70000 nurses are working in various private hospitals across the state and they constitute one of the most underprivileged groups deprived of most of the basic human rights supposed to be guaranteed to workers by a civilized society. The main stream political parties and the traditional organization of workers paid little attention to these issues and found reluctant to organize the nursing community. It was in this background, United Nurses Association (UNA), was formed and started organizing the nurses in a unique manner in the hitherto working class history of Kerala.

Review of Literature

Victoria Carty (2006) has made an attempt to study the evolution of social movement unionism with the help of a case study from United States. The UNDP background paper on “organizing informal workers: benefits, challenges and successes” (Chen, 2015) summarizes the history and forms of organizing informal workers in various sectors and countries. Grootjans and Newman (2013) has done a

work on the challenges of nursing profession in general and have identified educational constraints and professional issues as the main issues. The problems faced by the nursing community in Kerala rarely appear in academic discussions (Sreelekha, 2012). However, there are some significant attempts to explore the issues in this sector. Santhalakshmi, K (2012) has studied the expansion of the role of nurses from health care provider to a variety of other forms such as educator, advisor, counselor, administrative assistant, researcher etc. The Balaraman committees Report (2012) and Veerakumar Committee reports (2013) present valuable information about the conditions of nursing profession in Kerala. In its report, the Balaraman Committee submits 50 recommendations to the government of Kerala. The Veerakumar Committee mainly focused on working contexts of nurses in private sector and has made some proposals such as a making of 'comprehensive law covering the service conditions of the nurses, maintaining a prescribed staff strength, especially sufficient number of qualified nurses as identified by Indian Nursing Council, ensuring the payment for overtime duty, and shift system' (Jacob, 2016, pp12-18.). Earlier in 2013, B. L Biju has made a pioneer attempt to study the nature of nurses movement in Kerala with a focus on class formation. He has also noticed the signs of 'labor-community coalitions' in the process of collective bargaining. (Biju, 2013). It is in this context, the present study tries to analyze the style of unionism being pursued by United Nurses Association in fulfillment of their long left demand for a dignified professional status from the theoretical perspective of informal and social movement unionism.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to analyze the nature of nurse's movement in Kerala for minimum wages and to make their work a descent profession. It also wanted to study the role played by United Nurses Association in organizing the registered nurses working in different private hospitals in Kerala as well as its role in mobilizing the support of civil society in their favor. This study will also consider the techniques used by the UNA in tackling the challenges of informalization of workplace due to the influence of globalization and neo-liberal policies.

Theoretical framework

The study is carried out within the theoretical framework of Informal unionism and social movement unionism; the two major popular concepts in contemporary union renewal literature. At the outset, these ideas represent the intellectual initiatives to interpret those efforts to represent the genuine interest of the working class in a globalized social context. They are also relevant as the analytical tool to explain the working class movements outside the traditional trade union framework. Obviously, informal unionism is a byproduct of informalization of workplace due to the impact of neo-liberal policies and hence a response to the inability of traditional trade unions to accommodate the new generation workers in the unorganized sector.

Producing a space for cross movement pollination, the post globalization era demands for a widespread support from workers in various industries to move in solidarity with community groups and other movements in a collective struggle for justice (Waterman, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Taylor and Marthes, 2002 and Bergmann,

2003). Social movement unionism, the new style of working class behavior is considered central to the labor movement's short term and long-term survival in the context of globalization. This led to a shift from the class content to the non-class content of working class struggle with a strong tendency to transform the nature of traditional working class movement into a kind of workers new social movements. Recognizing the importance of third parties in the process of industrial democracy, the new trend has provided a large role for students, youths and other activist in the working class movement. It also proposes for a multi class and multi identity coalition. For Waterman, social movement unionism is not simply a different union model but a different understanding of the role of the working class and its typical organization in the social transformation (Waterman, 1988).

Methodology

The study has used both historical and analytical methods for the purpose of gathering information about the struggle for improving the working conditions of nurses in Kerala particularly the role of United Nurses Association. It has also used a wide range of empirical data collected from in-depth interviews, official websites, newsletters, internal documents, newspaper articles and information collected from other primary and secondary sources. Interviews were held in person as well as by phone.

The data used in this study are mainly from primary and secondary sources. The Primary sources included interview with the leaders of United Nurses Association, various publications by UNA, and reports submitted by committees appointed by Government of Kerala and various government orders and communications. The secondary data mainly includes articles, books and newspaper reports.

United Nurses Association (UNA): Origin

The suicide of Beena Baby, a registered nurse from the state of Kerala who was working in a private hospital in Mumbai seems to play the key role in the formation of United Nurses Association (UNA). Beena Baby, a victim of 'bonded labor' could not survive the hard realities of nursing profession and killed herself in her flat in the suburb of Santa Cruz, the residence she shared with eight other nurses. On the second day of this incident, Jasminsha, a young male nurse from Tirur (Malappuram District, Kerala) convened a solidarity meeting of nurses, batch mates, friends and acquaintances in Thrissure on 12th October 2011. Meanwhile, another equally important incident happened, an SOS type call by an impoverished nurse working in Hyderabad telling that she has decided to choose the path of Beena Baby due to bankruptcy. This disturbing news seems to be another factor that influenced Jasminsha and his friends to form a common platform for the nursing community. The UNA came into existence on 16 November 2011. 136 registered nurses mainly from central Kerala attended the first general body meeting held in Thrissure. Sudeep Krishna, a former nurse who had quit nursing profession to become a rubber tapper was elected as the first General Secretary of UNA (Paul,2018).

Major Agitations

UNA led agitation could be classified into two categories. Various strikes organized against individual managements for improving the working conditions of nursing

community fall under the first category whereas the statewide or sometimes nationwide campaign for progressive rulemaking in favor of nursing profession particularly for those working in private hospitals comes under the second category. The formation of UNA in 2011 was followed by a series of strikes against the anti-nurse policies of hospital managements across the state. Major demands raised by the association in these strikes were provisions for minimum wages, removal of bonded labor, introduction of shift system, and reappointment of nurses who were either suspended or dismissed due to the alleged involvement in the agitations. Days long strikes were held in private hospitals such as Prasanthi Hospital, Manjeri, Metropolitan Hospital Thrissur, Lakeshore Hospital, Ernakulam, Little Flower hospital, Ankamali, Elite Hospital Thrissure, Amrutha Hospital Kochi and MOSC hospital, Kolencherry during the last five years. In April 2018, the UNA planned a nurse's long march from Alappuzha to Thiruvananthapuram but was dropped when the government of Kerala issued pay revision orders on 23 April 2018. (Paul, 2018)

A disaffiliated union

Disaffiliation, an important feature of informal unionism seems to be a unique feature of United Nurses Association. They do not want to get affiliated to any of the main stream trade unions in the country. 'Together we are strong' is the slogan of the association and thus feels that any move towards affiliation may spoil the unity of nurses. This decision of the association has some serious reflections on the bitter experience of disunity among the working class due to partisan affiliations and the resultant inability to combat the negative impacts of neo-liberal policies particularly the ongoing process of labor deregulation.

Role of Media

Wide and effective use of media particularly social media is another important feature of the nurse's movement led by UNA. Alarmed by the information shared by the manager of one of the nationalized banks in Kerala, the founders of UNA started a Facebook community as a common platform for the registered nurses in Kerala. In three days, more than 2000 nurses from different parts of the world joined the group. Furthermore they created several WhatsApp groups and maintained proper contact with nurses in different parts of the world. The social media was mainly used for membership campaign and mobilizing public support. Moreover it was used for publicizing demands, action plans, action taken reports and major success stories. It was with the help of social media UNA has become the vanguard of registered nurses in Kerala. The official website of the association has also played an important role in this regard. Newspapers, Television Channels and the Radio came up to support the movement. It is argued that the incredible support of mass media was the reason behind a significant change in the attitude of main stream political parties and trade unions in favor of UNA (Ibid).

Participation in Electoral Process

The decision to contest Lok Sabha elections held in the year 2014 is another important development which reflects the unique nature of nurse's movement in Kerala under the leadership of UNA. In the words of Jasminsha, 'more than a process of choosing the representatives, the elections serves many purposes. It brings ample opportunities for interest articulation. It is one of the best democratic spaces for an

effective mobilization of public support in favor of struggles such as nurse's movements. Moreover it will bring like-minded people together and will broaden the social base of the movement. The election campaign of UNA was mainly focused on the need for strengthening the collective movement to fight the injustice deep-rooted in the unorganized sector which is becoming more and more predominant after the inception of neo-liberal policies.

Role of Auxiliary Organizations

It is interesting to note that several similar organizations' were formed in order to make the struggle a collective movement of other underprivileged sections of workers such as hospital staff, nursing students, nursing faculty and the parents of these neglected groups. They include United Hospital Staff Association (UHSA), United Nursing Students Association (UNSA), United Nursing faculty Association (UNFA), and Indian Nurse's Parents' Association (IPSA). These associations organized several struggles in support of the demands of nurses in Kerala of which the programmes organized by INPA under the leadership of D Surendranath, a human right activist and an active organizer of workers in the informal sector deserves a special reference. The Dharnas organized by INPA in front of district headquarters found to be a success in evoking a positive response in favor of nurse's agitation (Achuthan,2018).

Support of Mainstream Organizations

Contrary to the fact that the new initiatives like informal unionism or social movement unionism reflects disagreements with the mainstream organizations and traditional trade unions, the success of many agitations against hospital managements across the state seems to be attributed to the support of major political parties and their auxiliary organizations particularly youth organizations. The role played by Democratic Youth Federations of India(DYFI), Youth Congress, Yuva Morcha and several other youth organizations were instrumental in supporting the nurses movement in Kerala. For example, the members and sympathizers of Communist party of India (Marxist) and Democratic Youth Federation of India enthusiastically supported the strike at Amurutha Hospital , Kochi.(Paul, 2018). The Left Democratic Front (LDF), a coalition of political parties which rule the state urged the Government to take necessary steps to end the state wide nurse's agitation. The convener of LDF, Vaikkaom Viswan described the 'wage hike demand of the nurses as reasonable' (New Indian Express, 2017). Ramesh Chennithala of Indian National Congress and Opposition Leader in the state assembly wrote a letter to the Chief Minister asking the government to resolve the problems created by the indefinite strike launched on 28 June 2017. He said "even the construction workers are getting 900-1000 as daily wages in the state. At the same time, nurses, who are involved in life saving activities are given only 400-500 as daily wages" (Indian Express, 3 July 2017). V. Muraleedaran, Member of Parliament (Rajyasaba) and leader of BJP also came up to support the nurse's agitation. He alleged that 'the LDF government is supporting the hospital lobby. The Modi government at Centre had already enacted a law which ensures at least Rs 2000/-as monthly wages to the nurses working in 50 bed-hospitals. The state government is not implementing this law despite repeated directives of the Supreme Court this law in this regard.(ibid).

Role of Government

It is important to note that the government of Kerala has responded positively to the nurse’s movement in Kerala. It appointed two major committees; Balaraman Committee and Veerakumar Committees to look into the problems faced by those who are working in health care institutions. The reports of these two committees have become important documents on the present condition of health care system in Kerala. Their recommendations seem to endorse the demands raised by the United Nurses Association.

The monthly wages of registered nurse was meager prior to the formation of UNA. According to an informal estimation the actual monthly wages of a nurse was 3000 -4000 just half of the minimum wages fixed in 2009. As the class formation of the nursing community strengthened after the formation of UNA the government revised the minimum monthly wages of registered nurses to an amount of Rs. 13000/- (Sujanapal, 2018).. The agitations continued to take place across the state with a growing support in favor of demands raised by the association, the newly elected LDF government issued a preliminary notification to start the process of rule-making for revision of wages. A preliminary notification was issued in 2017 which was followed by a series of discussions and litigations. It is alleged that several forces within the government have attempted to thwart the process. When the decision making delayed, UNA declared that ten thousand nurses would become a part of a long march from Alappuzha to Thiruvanthapuram. It was this declaration that put government under pressure to issue fresh orders for pay revision, the extract of which is given below. . Here it is interesting to note that there is a strong feeling that the role of Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala is significant in making the efforts of UNA a success. It is held that Pinarayi has an open mind to recognize the role of UNA in creating class consciousness among registered nurses and was bold enough to neglect the internal pressures urging ‘not to succumb to the pressure tactics of an apolitical union’.(Ibid).

Revised Pay Scale for Registered Nurses as per G.O (P)No.33/2018/Labor, Government of Kerala dated 23 April 2018			
Sl No	Group	Category	Salary Scale
1	Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurses Manager(MSc Nursing with 5 years’ experience/BSc Nursing with 10years experience • Nurses Director/Nursing Officer 	22650-460-24950-500-27450
2	Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursing Superintend (BSc Nursing with 5 years’ experience) • Matron (BSc/GNM with 10 years’ experience. 	22090-450-24340-490-26790
3	Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Nursing Superintend/ Deputy Nursing Superintend (BSc Nursing with 5 years’ experience/GNM with 10 years’ experience) 	21550-440-23750-480-26150

4	Group 4	• Head Nurse/Clinical Supervisor / Sister in charge/ group captain/ leader	21020-430-23170-470-25520
5	Group 5	• Tutor nurse/ Clinical instructor(EMT/Ambulance)	20550-420-22650-46024950
6	Group 6	• Staff nurse-GNM/BSc/Registered NM Special. Grade(with 10 years' experience)/EMT/Ambulance nurse	20000-400-22000-440-24200
7	Group 7	• ANM Grade 1(with 5 years' experience)	18570-380-20470-410-225520
8	Group 8	• ANM grade 2	17680-36019480-390-21430

Source: G.O (P)No.33/2018/Labor, Government of Kerala dated 23 April 2018

Conclusion

United Nurses Association stands as example for working class movement in the informal sector. The reluctance or failure of traditional organization of workers to save thousands of registered nurses from their pitiable working conditions and the inherent instinct of these organizations to divide the working class on partisan lines seems to constitute the context of this informal unionism. Prima facie, it looks like an apolitical movement but a in-depth study of the policies and programmes of UNA reveals that on the one side, it has been performing the role of an agent of political socialization and on the other side it was instrumental in creating class consciousness among the unorganized workers in the health care system of Kerala. The decision to avoid affiliation with traditional unions or mainstream political parties is not apolitical but a strategic decision to keep the underprivileged nurses in Kerala. The slogan of UNA vindicates this. Contrary to the traditional style of the trade union activity the UNA has attempted to build up cross movement alliances as a strategy for mobilizing public support. As a result the nurse's agitation in Kerala took the shape of social movement unionism and proved to be a success in rejuvenating the working class movement in the state, especially in the unorganized sector. The public support received by UNA is mainly attributed to the role played by media. As a powerful channel of communication it made people aware of the tragic conditions of nursing community in Kerala. They indirectly induced the hospital managements to change their inhuman attitudes towards their employees. It is also held the media influence was there behind the government decision to support the movement. The support of civil society seems to be another important factor shaping the nature of nurse's movement in Kerala. The study concludes with a suggestion for conducting an in-depth analysis of the role played by UNA as an agent of political socialization and the effectiveness of those efforts to create class consciousness among the unorganized workers in the health care system in the state of Kerala.

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