

**Organizing the Unorganized: Case study of ‘Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatana (NMS)’
– a construction workers union in Maharashtra, India.**

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Acknowledgement: This research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation (SGS/37325).

We gratefully acknowledge their financial support for this project.

Abstract:

An important aspect of the labour market debate surrounding the economic reforms policies in India is the plight of unorganised workers in the unregistered or 'informal sector' of the economy. By and large there are two strands of arguments that are put forward, both in the academic literature and the popular press. Firstly, the economic reforms have exacerbated the outsourcing of work from the formal sectors of the economy to the informal sectors which has resulted in a sharp rise of workers employed on low wages, hired as casual or contract labour with little or no protection from the existing labour laws and very little if any unionization. The latter largely because unions in India as in most other parts of the world have concentrated their activities in organizing workers in large public and private sector enterprises and hitherto had little sympathy for contract labourers whom they perceived as 'outsiders' (see Shyam Sunder 2009; D'Souza 2010).

Secondly, it is suggested that in India politically affiliated trade unions and their federations had little interest in the unorganised or informal sector workers largely because of resource intensive nature of organising them, but more importantly because of the blunting of the 'class agenda' and the growing importance of enterprise level business unionism especially since the 1980s (e.g. Roychoudhary 2008). Consequently, organizing these vulnerable informal sector workers in India has largely been the domain of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which work amongst the urban poor and rural communities (e.g. the case of Self Employed Women's Association –SEWA, in the state of Gujrat India which is well documented in the academic literature by Venkataratnam and Verma 2004).

What is unclear from this rather sparse literature on the informal sector workers is precisely how unions or NGOs mobilise these workers, how they frame their issues and engage in collective actions to secure their rights through social and political advocacy. We try to address this gap by examining the case of a construction workers union – Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatana (NMS) operating in the federal state of Maharashtra.

Construction industry in India generally and in Maharashtra particularly has seen exponential growth since the 1990s. As an industry it is peculiar in at least two ways. First, in most other industries, the worker is stable while the product moves on. In the construction industry however, the product is stable while the worker moves on from one site to another. In other words, the capital is stable while the labour is mobile. Secondly, and as a consequence of the first characteristic, a large majority of workers in the construction industry in India are migrant workers – usually agricultural workers who migrate from rural areas to cities and towns in search of work.

Organizing such migrant groups of workers who are mobile by virtue of their jobs is an uphill task. The NMS has adopted a unique approach which combines the elements of social movement unionism and the critical educational approach of ‘praxis’ (action and reflection) and ‘dialogics’ advocated by the noted Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire in the 1970s. Using this combined approach the union has developed its mobilization capacity and membership strength resulting in tangible benefits for construction workers through mass agitations, political advocacy and, negotiations with state agencies and employers. More importantly the union has developed sustainable rank-and-file leadership which has contributed to its success. We analyse our findings in the context of the socio-political structures which influence the process of organising these unorganised workers.

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