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Definition of Trade Unions

According to Webbs, a trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives. Under the Trade Union Act of 1926, the term is defined as “any combination, whether temporary or permanent, formed primarily for the purpose of regulating the relations between workers and employers, or for imposing restrictive conditions on the condition of any trade or business and includes any federation of two or more unions”.

Let us examine the definition in parts.

Trade union is an association either of employees or employers or of independent workers.

It is a relatively permanent formation of workers. It is not a temporary or casual combination of workers.

It is formed for securing certain economic (like better wages, better working and living conditions), social (such as educational, recreational, medical, respect for individual) benefits to members. Collective strength offers a sort of insurance cover to members to fight against irrational, arbitrary and illegal actions of employers. Members can share their feelings, exchange notes and fight the employer quite effectively whenever he goes off the track.

A more recent and non-legislative definition of a union is “an organisation of workers acting collectively who seek to protect and promote their mutual interests through collective bargaining”

(De Cenzo & Robbins, 1993).

Objective of Trade Unions

a. Wages and Salaries: The subject which drew the major attention of the trade unions is wages and salaries. Of course, this item may be related to policy matters. However, differences may arise in the process of their implementation. In the case of unorganised sector the trade union plays a crucial role in bargaining the pay scales.

b. Working Conditions: Trade unions with a view to safeguard the health of workers demands the management to provide all the basic facilities such as, lighting and ventilation, sanitation, rest rooms, safety equipment while discharging hazardous duties, drinking, refreshment, minimum working hours, leave and rest, holidays with pay, job satisfaction, social security benefits and other welfare measures.

c. Discipline: Trade unions not only conduct negotiations in respect of the items with which their working conditions may be improved but also protect the workers from the clutches of management whenever workers become the victims of management's unilateral acts and disciplinary policies. This victimisation may take the form of penal transfers, suspensions, dismissals, etc. In such a situation the separated worker who is left in a helpless condition may approach the trade union. Ultimately the problem may be brought to the notice of management by the trade union and it explains about the injustice met out to an individual worker and fights the management for justice. Thus, the victimised worker may be protected by the trade union.

d. Personnel Policies: Trade unions may fight against improper implementation of personnel policies in respect of recruitment, selection, promotions, transfers, training, etc.

e. Welfare: As stated earlier, trade unions are meant for the welfare of workers. Trade union works as a guide, consulting authority and cooperates in overcoming the personnel problems of workers. It may bring to the notice of management, through collective bargaining meetings, the difficulties of workers in respect of sanitation, hospitals, quarters, schools and colleges for their children's cultural and social problems.

f. Employee-employer relation: Harmonious relations between the employees and employer is a sine quo non for industrial peace. A trade union always strives for achieving this objective. However, the bureaucratic attitude and unilateral thinking of management may lead to conflicts in the organisation which ultimately disrupt the relations between the workers and management. Trade union, being the representative of all the workers, may carry out continuous negotiations with the management with a view to promote industrial peace.

g. Negotiating machinery: Negotiations include the proposals made by one party and the counter proposals of the other party. This process continues until the parties reach an agreement. Thus, negotiations are based on 'give and take' principle. Trade union being a party for negotiations, protects the interests of workers through collective bargaining. Thus, the trade union works as the negotiating machinery.

h. Safeguarding organisational health and the interest of the industry: Organisational health can be diagnosed by methods evolved for grievance redressal and techniques adopted to reduce the rate of absenteeism and labour turnover and to improve the employee relations. Trade unions by their effective working may achieve employee satisfaction. Thus, trade unions help in reducing the rate of absenteeism, labour turnover and developing systematic

grievance settlement procedures leading to harmonious industrial relations. Trade unions can thus contribute to the improvements in level of production and productivity, discipline and improve quality of work life.