



The Alphabet Workers Union aims to ensure employees work at a fair wage.

Even India's tech workers are interested in employee unions

3 min read . Updated: 08 Jan 2021, 06:32 AM IST

Rashmi Menon

The Alphabet Workers Union is a manifestation of the active activism the workers have been doing to make the management more accountable and ethical in its dealings inside and outside the organization

Earlier this week, over 400 engineers and other employees at Google announced they were forming a union in the US. It's a highly rare development in the tech industry, considering how averse organizations are towards employee unions. In a way, the Alphabet Workers Union is a manifestation of the active activism the workers have been doing to make the management more accountable and ethical in its dealings inside and outside the organization.

Although the union's membership is a small number compared to the tech giant's 2.6 lakh full-time employees and contractors, the development is being watched with interest by labour economists in India. Employee unions in the country have been largely active among the blue-

collar workforce and public sector undertakings (PSUs), but there seems to be a growing demand for unionism in white collar, service sector workers as well.

Ajay Singh Solanki, leader, labour and employment practice, at Nishith Desai Associates, says that since 2017, some trade unions, specifically catering to the IT/ ITeS sector, like Karnataka State IT/ITeS Employees Union (KITU), have been registered in tech hubs like Bengaluru. "It was a misconception that white collar employees in India cannot unionize and that the trade union laws don't apply to them. Surprisingly, they do," Solanki says.

Members of the Kolkata-based All India IT and ITES Employees' Union (AIITEU), formed in 2018, have been following developments at the Silicon Valley, where tech workers are trying to organize.

Affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), AIITEU has about 15,000 members across India. Its focus is on illegal retrenchment, discrimination, problems with remote working, among others.

Closer home, forming a union in the tech sector has been challenging, says Saubhik Bhattacharya, general secretary, AIITEU. Having said that, he adds, "You would be surprised to see how many IT employees and workers are open to the idea once we reach out to them. Especially with the mass terminations, wage cuts and overwork perpetrated during the covid-19 crisis, more and more tech workers are realizing that they need a union to represent their own interests as distinct from the interests of management."

According to K.R. Shyam Sundar, labour economist and professor at Xavier School of Management (XLRI), Jamshedpur, there is a growing awareness among tech workers for a need to have a collective identity, instead of engaging with employees individually, which the modern human resource management practices seem to have encouraged. "This (Alphabet Workers Union) cannot be brushed aside as a minor incident in some corner of the world. It may be a droplet but it has the potential to turn into a canal and gather critical mass," explains Sundar.

It's interesting Sundar raises the point of individualization because in her comment to the media, Kara Silverstein, director of people operations at Google, said, "Our employees have protected labour rights that we support. But as we've always done, we'll continue engaging directly with all our employees."

With this statement, it indicates that the organization's boardroom is talking about it, points out Sundar.

Although in certain Indian cities tech workers unions have been active, they has been unable to scale up. Why? The high pay levels and incentives in the IT/ITes industry, fear of being blacklisted or sidelined by employers, and the fear of being perceived as too adversarial or political, as most unions are backed by political parties or have political affiliations, says Solanki.

To generate scale, however, it is important that unions in India modernize. Unlike traditional unions, Sundar says, unions need to keep up with times where employees are concerned about wider issues like segmentation of labour, ethical practices, workplace equity, climate change, etc. "The unions have to expand from functional needs to become labour market exchanges."

Forming a company-specific union, like has happened at Google, is still a far-fetched idea in India, though. "In the current scenario as we see, subject to the probable risks that employees perceive, they may well think of associating with the industry-specific unions, if at all, rather than establishing their own organization-specific unions," Solanki says.