

From Mass Movement to Patchy Protest: The Changing Face of Trade Unionism



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The 12 February "Bharat Bandh," called by a joint forum of central trade unions, was projected as a nationwide shutdown meant to demonstrate the enduring strength of organised labour. In reality, the day revealed how far that national influence has receded. While union leaders claimed substantial participation, reports from several states described largely normal commercial activity in most cities, functioning public transport in many regions, and only sporadic industrial disruptions. Outside a few pockets where unions retain dense political and institutional networks, daily life proceeded much as usual. Even in industrial belts where stoppages were reported, many units operated with partial attendance. The dissonance between the sweeping rhetoric of a "Bharat Bandh" and the uneven ground impact suggested that the all-India strike fell well short of its intended signal.

The outcome reflects something deeper: India's labour market has long been shaped by informality, and this pattern persists strongly today. A very large share of workers — roughly 85–90% — remain in informal employment arrangements without the protections and long-term stability associated with formal factory jobs. At the same time, recent labour force surveys show that a majority of employed persons are self-employed rather than regular wage earners, underscoring how limited the traditional, unionised workforce has become. The fastest-growing segments of work lie in services, small enterprises, contract arrangements, and platform-based gig employment. In such a landscape, the traditional union model — built around large worksites and long-term collective bargaining — touches only a limited fraction of the workforce. When workers are delivery partners, freelancers, small traders, or micro-entrepreneurs, a centrally coordinated strike often bears little connection to their immediate economic compulsions.

The February 12 bandh made this disconnect visible. In Kerala, the shutdown approximated a near-total halt, yet the disruption was accompanied by public criticism and allegations of coercive enforcement. In parts of western and northern India, the impact was described as uneven, with only select factories observing closures. Elsewhere, reportage focused more on preventive detentions and attempts to block roads or rail tracks than on voluntary worker participation. A movement that must rely on blockades and symbolic disruption to demonstrate vitality risks appearing detached from the organic consent of the broader workforce.

For ordinary citizens, such strikes frequently translate into inconvenience and economic loss rather than solidarity. Commuters face uncertainty, small businesses forfeit a day's revenue, and essential services are delayed. For daily wage earners and contract workers, participation can mean forfeiting income without any assurance of long-term benefit. Hospital visits, examinations, and routine transactions are disrupted. The bandh, once regarded as a dramatic instrument of democratic mobilisation, is increasingly perceived as an imposed interruption of everyday life.

Several factors explain this widening gap between unions and the wider public. Employment structures have evolved far more rapidly than union strategies. Informal and gig workers do not fit easily into conventional organising frameworks. Union leadership often remains concentrated in legacy sectors and public enterprises, where institutional leverage is stronger but representative breadth is narrower. Strike demands frequently focus on resisting reforms or opposing privatisation without advancing financially viable or administratively credible alternatives. This reactive posture can create the impression of resistance to change rather than constructive engagement. Fragmentation among unions further dilutes coherence and blurs public messaging, while the precarity of modern employment discourages workers from prolonged agitation.

This reckoning comes at a strategically consequential moment. The global trading environment is increasingly fraught, with protectionist impulses resurfacing and supply chains being reconfigured. Yet India has managed to conclude a series of free trade agreements and position itself as an increasingly credible manufacturing and services partner. At a time when cross-border commerce is becoming more uncertain, India's ability to secure new trade partnerships represents both opportunity and responsibility. The country cannot afford to miss this industrial inflection point — not after watching China seize a similar opportunity three decades ago and emerge as the factory of the world through sustained reforms and global integration.

None of this diminishes the normative importance of collective worker organisation. On the contrary, as India advances initiatives such as Make in India and seeks deeper integration into global value chains, questions of worker welfare, skills, productivity, and social security become even more central. But legitimacy in a modern, globally connected economy rests less on the capacity to halt activity and more on the capacity to shape reforms responsibly. Trade unions would strengthen their moral authority by engaging with economic liberalisation through detailed proposals on skilling, portability of benefits, workplace safety, and dispute resolution — rather than defaulting to maximalist shutdowns.

The fading resonance of all-India strikes signals not merely institutional decline but a crossroads. As a rising Bharat seeks to convert global opportunity into durable prosperity — consistent with the constitutional promise of enabling citizens to pursue their livelihoods — trade unions face a strategic choice. They can recalibrate, adopt a forward-looking posture, and become partners in national growth while safeguarding worker dignity. Or they can persist with symbolic shutdowns that mobilise shrinking constituencies. The former path alone aligns worker welfare with India's economic resurgence. And at this juncture in India's economic journey, that alignment is not optional — it is essential.

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