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The Founding of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha

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In December 1948, more than 600 union leaders packed into a hall in Calcutta. They spoke for 427 unions and claimed over 600,000 members. They were not there to grow one of India's existing labour bodies. They were there to build a new one, free of party control.



Asoka Mehta, elected the Hind Mazdoor Sabha's first general secretary in 1948. Government of India, GODL-India, via Wikimedia Commons.

Founded24-26 December 1948, Calcutta
First presidentR. S. Ruikar
First general secretary Ashoka Mehta
Stated aimA worker federation free of party control

Trade union federation: A large body that joins many separate worker unions together, so they can bargain and speak with one voice.

Central trade union: The government's term for a recognised national-level federation, such as AITUC, INTUC, or HMS.



1. Why did HMS break away from India's existing unions in 1948?

1.1 Who started organising Indian workers first?

- A single worker could not ask a mill owner for safer machines or better pay and expect much to change. A union let workers speak as one group.
- The **All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)** began in Bombay on 31 October 1920. It was India's first national trade union federation.
- Lala Lajpat Rai was its first president. Dewan Chaman Lal was its general secretary. N. M. Joshi was a key organiser at that first meeting.

1.2 What happened at the Calcutta founding conference?

- By independence, India already had two rival federations. AITUC leaned communist. The **Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)** had formed in 1947 with Congress ties.
- Socialists and independent union leaders wanted a third path. HMS says its founding conference met in Calcutta from 24 to 26 December 1948. More than 600 leaders spoke for 427 unions, claiming over 600,000 members. These are the federation's own founding figures.

- The Indian Federation of Labour, the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat, Forward Bloc unions, and independent groups all joined the new body.
- Some accounts also name 29 December, at Howrah, as a formal founding step. Both dates point to the same launch.

1.3 Who led HMS at the start?

- **R. S. Ruikar** became HMS's first president. **Ashoka Mehta** became its first general secretary.
- Other early leaders included T. S. Ramanujam and Maniben Kara.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: The Hind Mazdoor Sabha's founding conference met in Calcutta from 24 to 26 December 1948, with R.S. Ruikar as its first president. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Now you try: In one sentence, explain why socialist and independent union leaders felt they needed a third federation in 1948, when AITUC and INTUC already existed.

2. Why did AITUC split apart before HMS ever came along?

2.1 What was the Meerut Conspiracy Case?

- The British government's **Meerut Conspiracy Case** began in 1929. It targeted communist and trade union activists.
- The trial did not cause every later split on its own. Leaders inside AITUC already disagreed about nationalism, class politics, and who should control the unions.

- By 1931, communist leaders had seceded from AITUC. They formed a separate body, the Red Trade Union Congress.
- The **Trade Unions Act, 1926** already let unions register and gave them some legal protection. It did not force an employer to accept every registered union as its official bargaining partner.

2.2 How was INTUC different from AITUC?

- INTUC was founded on 3 May 1947. Its leaders favoured talks over strikes, and stayed close to the Indian National Congress.
- Suresh Chandra Banerjee was its first president. Harihar Nath Shastri took that post later, in October 1947. Exam questions often swap this order by mistake.
- INTUC's Congress ties shaped its outlook. But its members were still ordinary workers, with their own real demands.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: By 1948, India had only one national trade union federation before the HMS was founded. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: AITUC (1920) came first and leaned communist after its 1929-31 split. INTUC (1947) came next, tied to Congress. HMS (1948) came last, built to stay free of any one party.

3. What changed for India's unions after 1948?

3.1 Did the splits stop with HMS?

- No. A group left HMS itself and formed the United Trade Union Congress (UTUC) in 1949, just a year after HMS began.
- Later federations, including UTUC, BMS, and CITU, followed. Each one still ended up tied to some political current. Staying free of party ties proved hard to hold onto for long.
- HMS joined international labour networks in 1949, including the western, non-communist ICFTU. This gave it a voice abroad, and marked a clear contrast with AITUC's links to communist international bodies. It did not end the debate over political independence back home.

3.2 What rights protect Indian unions today?

- The Indian Constitution protects the right to form associations, including unions, under Article 19(1)(c).
- Article 43 asks the state to work toward a living wage for workers. This is a goal for policy, not a direct promise of one fixed wage to every worker.

Quick check 3. True or false: HMS became a founding member of the ICFTU, the western, non-communist labour international, in 1949. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Explain it back: In one or two sentences, explain why “party-free” labour federations in India kept splitting again, even after HMS itself broke away to escape party control.

4. Exam Angle: How do UPSC and CDS test the Hind Mazdoor Sabha?

CDS papers also test the AITUC side of this story. One question asks which leader belongs to AITUC’s 1920 founding generation, and the answer is N. M. Joshi, not B. P. Wadia, and not the later communist leaders Dange or Ranadive. Wadia instead founded the separate Madras Labour Union in 1918, called India’s first trade union “in the proper sense.” A related CDS question tested Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, a Bengal writer and educationist, against real 1920s women labour organisers such as Anasuya Behn, Ushabai Dange, and Prabhabati Devi. Only the second group actually organised strikes. For any named leader, check the question’s exact wording, and do not turn one exam option into a broader claim about that person’s whole career.

5. Why does this old split still matter for gig workers today?

- App drivers and delivery workers now face the same basic question 1948’s union leaders faced: who speaks for them. Their work looks very different from a 1948 mill job, but the question is not new.

- India brought four new labour codes into effect on 21 November 2025. Together they combine 29 older central labour laws into one framework. States still need to write their own rules and welfare schemes, so this effective date does not mean every benefit started at once.
- In February 2025, the Supreme Court asked the government for a clear timeline on rules and welfare schemes for gig workers. It did not issue a final order granting every gig worker a fixed benefit, and the case was still listed as pending in April 2026.

Practice MCQs

1. N.M. Lokhande, regarded as a pioneer of the Indian labour movement, is particularly credited with founding the?

A. Hind Mazdoor Sabha

B. Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association

C. Bombay Mill Hands Association

D. All India Trade Union Congress

See answer ↓

2. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), founded in 1920 as India's first national trade union federation, elected which leader as its first President?

A. N.M. Lokhande

B. B.P. Wadia

C. Subhash Chandra Bose

D. Lala Lajpat Rai

See answer ↓

3. The Trade Disputes Act of 1929, an important piece of colonial labour legislation, primarily provided for?

A. Unrestricted rights to strike without any legal limitations

B. Abolition of all private industrial ownership

C. Full worker participation in industrial management

D. A system of conciliation tribunals alongside restrictions on the right to strike in certain circumstances

See answer ↓

4. The 1929 Meerut Conspiracy Case trial, though initiated to suppress India's Communist and trade union movement, ultimately generated significant international attention and criticism, including notable support from which prominent contemporary figure?

A. Playwright George Bernard Shaw

B. Lord Curzon

C. Winston Churchill

D. Rudyard Kipling

See answer ↓

5. The 1929-33 Meerut Conspiracy Case trial against Communist and trade union organisers holds the distinction of being one of the longest criminal trials in the history of British India, lasting approximately how long?

A. One year

B. Ten years

C. Over four years

D. Six months

See answer ↓

6. The Girni Kamgar Union, a significant textile workers' trade union active in Bombay during the interwar period and closely linked to Communist organising efforts, played a leading role in which major 1928 industrial action?

A. The Kakori train robbery

B. The Meerut Conspiracy Case's original triggering incident

C. The Chittagong Armoury Raid

D. A prolonged general strike by Bombay's textile mill workers

See answer ↓

7. The All India Trade Union Congress, India's oldest trade union federation, experienced a significant organisational split in 1929 reflecting broader ideological tensions between which two currents within the Indian labour movement?

A. Hindu versus Muslim labour organisations

B. Moderate, Congress-aligned trade unionism versus more radical, Communist-influenced labour organising

C. Textile versus agricultural worker unions

D. Urban versus rural labour movements

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Lokhande's Bombay Mill Hands Association, established in the 1880s, is generally regarded as India's first organised labour association, focused on improving working conditions for textile mill workers in Bombay. His advocacy contributed to the passage of early factory legislation, including provisions restricting child labour and mandating a weekly holiday for workers. Lokhande's pioneering efforts predate the more well-known 20th-century trade union movement by several decades. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** Lala Lajpat Rai's election as AITUC's first president reflected the growing convergence between mainstream Indian nationalist leadership and the emerging organised labour movement in the years following the First World War. AITUC sought to unite India's fragmented regional and industry-specific labour unions into a single national platform, though internal ideological divisions (between moderate and more radical/Communist-aligned factions) would later cause significant splits within the organisation. Its founding marked a significant institutional milestone in the history of Indian trade unionism. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The 1929 Act established formal tribunal mechanisms for resolving industrial disputes while simultaneously imposing significant restrictions on strikes in public utility services and other designated 'essential' industries. The legislation reflected colonial authorities' growing concern over the rising militancy of the Indian labour movement, particularly following major strikes like the 1928 Bombay textile strike. Labour leaders were sharply critical of the Act's restrictive provisions, viewing it as favouring management and state interests over genuine worker rights. ↑ Q3

4. **A.** Shaw's public criticism of the Meerut prosecution's severity and its apparent targeting of legitimate trade union organising reflected broader international left-wing and liberal opinion's growing discomfort with the case, significantly undermining British colonial authorities' original intention of using the trial to decisively suppress and discredit India's nascent Communist and labour movement. This international attention, generated in part by the case's unusually lengthy duration (the trial extended across several years before its 1933 conclusion), inadvertently provided the prosecuted labour organisers with a prominent public platform to articulate their political views to a global audience. The Meerut case's ultimately counterproductive propaganda effect for British authorities parallels the somewhat similar dynamic seen in the later, more famous 1945 INA Red Fort trials, where high-profile prosecution efforts again backfired into generating substantial sympathetic public attention for the accused. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The Meerut trial's extraordinary duration, stretching over four years from the initial 1929 arrests through to the case's 1933 conclusion, reflected both the case's genuine legal and evidentiary complexity involving numerous defendants and extensive documentary evidence, as well as the considerable procedural delays that generated mounting international criticism of the prosecution's apparent heavy-handedness. This unusually protracted legal process, rather than achieving its original goal of swiftly suppressing India's Communist and labour movement, instead provided the defendants with an extended public platform and generated substantial sympathetic international attention over its multi-year duration. The case's remarkable length stands in notable contrast to the comparatively much swifter legal proceedings in other major political trials of the period, such as the Lahore Conspiracy Case against Bhagat Singh and his co-accused, which moved to conviction and execution within a considerably more compressed timeframe. ↑ Q5

6. **D.** The Girni Kamgar Union's leadership of Bombay's major 1928 textile strike -- involving well over a hundred thousand workers over several months -- represented one of the largest and most significant organised labour actions of the entire interwar period, demonstrating the growing scale and organisational sophistication of India's Communist-influenced trade union movement well beyond its more commonly documented earlier, smaller-scale activities. This strike's scale and duration directly alarmed colonial authorities, contributing significantly to the government's subsequent decision to pursue the large-scale Meerut Conspiracy Case prosecution against Communist and labour organisers the following year, intended to suppress this rapidly growing organised labour movement. The Girni Kamgar Union's substantial organisational capacity illustrates how, alongside the more centrally documented Congress-led nationalist movement, an increasingly significant parallel labour movement was simultaneously developing its own independent organisational strength and political assertiveness during this same broader period. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** AITUC's 1929 split reflected the broader, significant ideological tension developing within India's organised labour movement between more moderate trade unionists preferring alignment with mainstream Congress nationalist politics and increasingly assertive Communist-influenced organisers favouring more explicitly class-conflict-oriented labour strategies, a division that would continue to shape and periodically fragment India's trade union movement for decades afterward. This organisational split occurred against the backdrop of the same broader Communist and labour movement growth that had produced the large-scale 1928 Bombay textile strike and would soon prompt the government's Meerut Conspiracy Case prosecution, illustrating the closely interconnected nature of these various contemporaneous developments within India's rapidly evolving labour political landscape. The moderate-versus-radical tension this 1929 split first significantly exposed would remain a persistent, recurring feature of India's organised labour movement's institutional history well into the post-independence period. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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