

The All India Cement Employees Federation (AICEF) and Unions United both affiliated to IndustriALL Global Union in November 2018. While defending the rights of precarious workers and women, both industrial federations have led struggles, built union structures and overcome challenges posed by employers.

profile

Unions: **All India Cement Employees Federation (AICEF)** and **Unions United**

Country: **India**

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1

INDIAN UNIONS FIGHT PRECARIOUS WORK



ORGANIZING IN THE CEMENT INDUSTRY

The AICEF was founded in 2008 when cement unions affiliated to trade union centre HMS came together to better defend workers in their sector.

The AICEF has a total membership of about 25,000 workers, the majority of whom are precarious workers. The members are found across cement plants in the states of Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu.

The AICEF organizes in an environment where the majority of the workforce are precarious workers; the cement industry

counts between 75 to 80 per cent contract workers. **Almost all precarious workers are employed through third party contractors and face a lack of job security, poor wages and bad working conditions.**

Defending the rights of precarious workers, trying to regularize their work and increase wages have been the principal goals of the AICEF.

Mukesh Galav, general secretary of AICEF, says:

“Through our struggles in the cement industry we have managed to reverse terminations and regularize precarious workers. Our unions have played an active role in ensuring that companies implement wage decisions not only

for permanent workers, but also for precarious workers. This has meant significant wage increases and social security benefits for our members.”

A 98-day struggle by the AICEF’s Mangalam Cement Karamchhari Union resulted in the reinstatement and regularization of terminated precarious workers. The agreement also ensures that when permanent workers retire those vacancies are filled through the regularization of precarious workers. This has led to precarious workers achieving similar benefits, including free uniforms and shoes, to permanent workers. In 2016, about 150 workers were made permanent, and there is a process under way for an additional 150 workers.

The cement industry in Rajasthan is notorious for poor working conditions.

After the AICEF managed to end 12-hour working days for security staff employed by third-party contractors at the ACC Lakheri cement factory, the union plans to do the same for the factory workers on short-term contracts, also working up to 12 hours per day.

“Working conditions are deplorable in many of the cement units,” says Mukesh Galav. “Unfortunately, we often have to fight with yellow unions, recognized by the company as counterparts for collective bargaining, to win workers’ rights.”

The AICEF has a unique method for uniting permanent and precarious workers in union activities. The constitutions of many of its unions are designed to include precarious workers as members, with voting rights and the possibility to run for leadership positions like president or general secretary.

The AICEF has launched a campaign to win equal wages for precarious work and is engaged in a legal process to implement a recent judgment of the Supreme Court of India calling for equal wages for equal work.



2

“Being affiliated to IndustriALL Global Union is an important step to ensure AICEF’s efforts are complemented with international solidarity support,” says Mukesh Galav.

“And at the same time, the national and international trade union network led by IndustriALL in the cement sector helps to reinforce AICEF’s work at a national level. IndustriALL provides much needed platforms for training on occupational health and safety, learning from others’ experiences, as well as developing a union response to rapid technological developments in the face of increasing automation in the Indian cement industry.”

UNIONS UNITED FOCUS ON WOMEN AND PRECARIOUS WORKERS



3

Unions United is an industrial federation formed in April 2018 with 55,000 members in base metals, textile, mining, mechanical engineering, electronics and energy sectors. 12,000 of the members are women.

Precarious workers make up over 90 per cent of Unions United’s total membership.

Union United’s membership of precarious workers include more or less all women workers, as well as a large number of male workers, in sectors like garment, base metals, and public sector steel plants and uranium and gold mining units.

Reaching out to women precarious workers in their homes and neighbourhoods and addressing women’s rights and social wages, including the demand to access housing and public transport, have been central to the organizing strategies of its members.

Powerful campaigning on women workers’ rights by the garment workers’ unions in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, including equal wages, access to crèches, appropriate toilet facilities and an uncompromising struggle against sexual harassment to ensure a safe and fair work environment, are some of the core issues undertaken by its members.

Job security has always been a major challenge when organizing precarious workers. Members of Unions United built effective solidarity to resist large-scale victimization and employers’ violent attacks of union activists and precarious workers.

Gautam Mody, convener of Unions United says that **“firm political will is the fundamental feature of organizing precarious workers.”**

Winning regularization of precarious workers and equal wages in the public

sector at employers such as the Uranium Corporation of India and the Steel Authority of India are some of the major milestones achieved by the members of Unions United.

While all members of Unions United are unions affiliated to the national centre New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), the federation is open to all registered trade unions in the manufacturing industry and associated services across the India.

Currently, its membership is spread over several states, and in each of these states the member unions participate in joint calls to action from the central trade union organizations, including the recent historic countrywide general strike held on 8-9 January 2019.

Members of Unions United come from sectors closely tied to global supply chains and are conscious of the need to build unity and solidarity within and across the sectors nationally and globally to defend workers’ rights.

In multinational companies like Siemens and KEC International, in addition to signing collective bargaining agreements, unions have taken initiatives to build countrywide company councils together with affiliates of other national trade union centres. Such initiatives strengthen their capacities to engage in global works councils and to take advantage of global framework agreements signed with IndustriALL.

Unions United’s membership in the garment industry works in factories that supply to leading global garment and retail brands. Its members at US company Avery Dennison are currently engaged in a major struggle to regularize 600 contract workers and win recognition of the union.

Gautam Mody, says:

“It is important for our members to come together to strengthen union power and to build workers’ solidarity nationally and across the global supply chain. Our affiliation to IndustriALL is crucial to connect our members’ struggles internationally and to take advantage of the global union force.”

1 Public union meeting, AICEF. *IndustriALL*

2-3 Unions United taking action. *IndustriALL*