

Our Journey to the New Millennium

By Mukunda Neupane

A decade has elapsed.

The journey, started towards the completion of a Century, has crossed many ups and downs and has arrived at the threshold of another Century.

"The great labour movement of 1st May 1886 came to an end after the cruel massacre on 2-3 May 1886 in Chicago City of America. In order to immortalise the memories of the martyrs of the movement, May 1 was decided to be celebrated worldwide as the holy occasion of the global unity of workers. This decision had taken place on 20 July 1889. Today is the same day - the 20th of July of another century." It is the expression extracted from the press release issued on 20th of July 1989 on the occasion of the establishment of General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT). The press release further says, 'We are dedicated to the goal of liberation of working community from all forms of injustices, inequalities and suppressions. We greet with these words the great legends of the 20th of July.'

Today is the 20th day of July; we have completed glorious 10 years of our journey. We remember the rainy day 10 years ago. We, the activists with an objective to give a new dimension to the trade union movement of Nepal, gathered silently in a secret den of the capital city of Kathmandu beneath the nose of the dictatorial reactionary system. And we declared: 'Now the co-ordination mechanism for trade unions in Nepal is launched. We have established GEFONT' to fulfil the long waited need.

Once people's leader Madan Bhandari had said, 'No one will provide rights and facilities to the working class with a feeling of kindness or love until the workers snatch it through their own unity, organisation and struggles. The workers who do not care about a class unity, independent

organisation and organised efforts will be made musclemen and slaves. Because of the low level of consciousness, workers are facing the conditions synonymous to slavery even today.'

GEFONT was established with an aim to make people aware and conscious about their rights and engage them to achieve a new era of full liberation of working class.

Ten years have elapsed since. Just after a short period of establishment, GEFONT, in its third meeting of mid January 1990, decided to involve itself with full determination in the proposed popular movement designed for the attainment of democracy in order to strengthen the interests of workers.

Looking back at the footsteps of our history, we feel satisfied that our sacrifice have not gone in vain. The struggles produced achievements, pleasant and inspiring.

A number of events have taken place after the establishment of multiparty democracy. GEFONT was an active partner in each of the activities. With high expectations and ambitions, workers took to the streets as the new political system came into being. The state of affairs was really complicated. On the one hand, it was a relief to the workers heavily oppressed under feudal exploitation, on the other, their flying expectations had to be addressed on the ground of given reality. GEFONT accepted the challenge to bring the nation-wide labour unrest to safe-landing and to determine milestones for the movement under the legal framework.

We promulgated a new constitution and the first general election was held. With the formation of a new government, the process of framing new laws started as per the constitution. We, trade union activists, also expected progressive labour laws compatible with the new situation in order to ensure professional as well as class rights of the workers.

In 1917, Com. Lenin, addressing the All-Russian Trade Union Conference, had called on workers "...not to rely on the 'State' but to rely on the strength of one's own class" as the state was "an organisation of the ruling class." This statement proved to be true in our case, too. 'Cross the river and forget the stick' is one of the Nepali proverbs. Ironically, within a short span of ascending to power, our democracy fighters started to forget their comrades of difficult days, particularly

those in the working class and trade union movements. So, GEFONT had to choose the other option. It did so by registering an alternate Labour Bill through its Chairperson who was in Parliament at that time.

During the days all efforts were made from our side to move forward while facing difficulty. But we did waste our time on a wild-goose-chase. We are proud of the glorious 10 years of our movement. Because of these efforts, the trade union movement became successful to dig out its track and achieve layers of successes. Although fluctuating, our struggles have charted a positive pathway.

In course of time, the Labour Act came into existence in spite of a number of weaknesses, so did the 'Trade Union Act. GEFONT', as an umbrella organisation of its 16 national federations with 300,000 members, registered itself as the first confederation of the country.

What inspires the workers even in the midst of adversaries is the call that they have 'nothing to lose but the chain', and 'a world to win', if united. This goal stimulated the workers to build the nation through the protection of their professional and class rights and interests.

The memory is still fresh that GEFONT had to work very hard to inculcate a feeling that workers were a 'creative motive force', not a 'destructive mighty source'. As the outcome of the tiresome efforts, the previous sentiment to see management and workers as the tiger and goat was gradually replaced by the consciousness that 'workers, management and government' were 'the three social partners'. As our movement accelerated, our efforts succeeded to sketch the landscape of the national trade union movement.

The days afterwards saw more challenges. Workers were seen as a mass of people who know nothing; we were neglected. We fought this delirium with slogans 'Down with...' 'Long live...' while shouldering the challenging responsibility of nation-building. We, the representatives of world builders, were not easy to subdue, nor forget. Hence the concerned bodies finally realised the compulsion to recognise us.

Within the 10-year journey, the representation and involvement of GEFONT in Central Labour Advisory Committee, Minimum Wage Determination Committee, various committees and task force for formulation and revision of labour laws, International Labour Organisation, IPEC-National Steering Committee, National Productivity

Council, National Pension Scheme, Steering Committee of Expansion of Employment Opportunities for Women, Mechanisms related to Federations and numerous trade union's internationals and trade union forums is indicative of this recognition.

Our presence in these forums was not only challenging but also full of risks. In a society dominated by a feudal culture, every decision taken with our involvement could face severe criticism and debates. The decisions could go adverse to hard working brothers and sisters of our working community. Fortunately, our movement and its leadership did not have to face such accidents. The confidence of our members, united under a sound discipline of GEFONT, always remained with us. It is their trust that enabled GEFONT to continue its journey with enthusiasm even in the face of challenges, complications and risks.

The history of our movement is the history full of blood and sacrifice of pro-liberation working masses. In every success of our movement is sweet and hard endeavour of the working people unified under our umbrella. Based on this sacrifice, we can declare with our heads high up: 'Among the achievements of the glorious ten years, are the frequent review and increase of minimum wages, formulation of labour laws, revision and amendment, successful settlements of labour disputes and inspiring size of international solidarity.'

We feel our achievements are not sufficient. Nor are they that frustrating.

During these glorious 10 years, not only did GEFONT become nationally well recognised, but also ascended to policy intervention. Today, on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary, we proudly declare that the First Historical Labour Conference, the presentation of the concept of Labour Policy, formulation of Transport Policy, Labour Rules, Trade Union Rules and Transport Regulation are the outcomes of our policy interventions.

Simultaneously, we developed some good traditions, too. The model examples of our activity are the beginning of trade union education and the successful operation of the Mobile Trade Union School. We think that the GEFONT publications on various themes and the Labour Resource Centre that it has maintained are valuable assets of the entire labour field. We moved from an almost non-existent labour information

system to a fairly sophisticated information storage and supply system in a matter of decade.

The action researches conducted on different topics, the issue of migrant workers and organisation of agriculture and urban informal sectors are also our gains. We also successfully hosted the International Trade Union Conference with an active participation of 38 labour organisations of 15 countries in the capital of Nepal.

We did not limit our decade-long activities to mere monotonous political practices and confronting labour disputes. We brought ourselves to outlying rural villages and doors of working masses in every difficulty, whether natural or human-made. We extended whatever relief supports we could to the victims of flood, landslide and other forms of calamities.

Even within our own family, we initiated our effort to establish a social security network, such as the GEFONT Emergency Fund Scheme, Accident Relief Programme for the Transportation Sector and the OSH Campaign.

We spent some of our important time to clean up social vice scars. We launched an appeal movement for the liberation of bonded Kamaiya workers, a nation-wide campaign for child labour elimination, and a programme against gender discrimination and unfair labour practices still existing within civil, police and arm services.

Whatever we did, we did with full commitments and full dedication. In order to protect their rights and interests, we organised workers from rural working population to urban wage workers.

On the occasion of the 10th Anniversary, we declare without hesitation that we could achieve this much. We have a long way to go, for which we are fully prepared.

Glorious ten years have elapsed.

This Century is going to rest forever. But our journey has just begun. We are fully prepared to face up to the new challenge of the new Century!

Thank you!

*(A speech delivered by Chairperson **Mukunda Neupane** on the occasion of 10th Anniversary Celebration of GEFONT, 20th July 1999)*