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WEST BENGAL

Corporate honchos jittery over proposed union for IT employees in the state

After years of stagnation, the state is slowly emerging as the new investment hub in the country, thanks to Chief Minister Buddhadeb

Bhattacharjee's investor-friendly attitude. In less than six years, more than 25a0 IT companies-both desi and foreign-began their operations in Kolkata engaging about 40,000 young, skilled graduates and postgraduates. As per the latest projections, if the present trend is maintained, by the end of the current fiscal, the strength of employees in Bengal's IT sector would be about one lakh and by 2010, it would cross four lakh.

When all the signs in the IT zodiac appeared to be favourable for the industry, Shyamal Chakraborty, president of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), West Bengal, declared that they would set up a trade union for the IT sector covering engineers to class IV employees. The West Bengal Information Technology Services Association would be launched on November 14, a month before CITU's all India bandh to protest the wrong economic policies of the UPA government.

The announcement by Chakra-borty unnerved the industrial sector. No one has forgotten the period between 1967 and 1970, when gherao became a normal tool for bargaining in the hands of the trade union leaders, particularly those of the CITU. The reaction of the IT industry against the proposal ranged from shock to consternation. A spokesman of the IT major TCS observed candidly: "There is no need to set up a union in this sector." Almost similar sentiments have been expressed by D.K. Chowdhury, MD, Skytech Solutions, when he said: "Here there is hardly any difference between the employer and employees. We all work together."

"It is not the time for indulging in unionisation. West Bengal is about to appear as a major IT power and any wrong step at this juncture would carry a harmful message to those companies who are planning to come to the state," said the spokesperson of a major IT company.

Bhattacharjee is yet to react. He had opposed tooth and nail the hawks within his party for granting special status to the IT industry. Hence his silence has raised a few eyebrows in knowledgeable circles. The question is whether Bhattacharjee is behind the unionisation move. The question has become more pertinent because Chakraborty happens to be one of the closest confidants of the chief minister. The duo began their political career in the early 60s along with CPI(M) state secretary Biman Bose, the late state party secretary Anil Biswas and Subhash Chakraborty, the maverick state transport minister.

On the issue of Singur, where Tata's small car factory is likely to come up, it was

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Chakraborty who openly defended Bhattacharjee. Hence, political analysts in Kolkata believe that it is the latest ploy of the chief minister to set up a friendly union in the IT sector with the help of Chakraborty to save it from CITU interference. But Chakraborty strongly denied all rumours about Bhattacharjee's backhanded support for the union. "Who else will form the union here but I," he said. Then he explained the background of the formation of the union: "Some professionals and employees of the sector recently approached us to form a union. But we opted for an association."

Who are those professionals and employees? Chakraborty refuses to divulge their names on the ground that "time is not ripe yet for such an exposure". About reactions of the IT bosses, his reply is simple: "If everything is so hunky dory then they needn't fear an association." Chakraborty doesn't believe that a union would adversely affect the IT sector. "It would strengthen the bargaining power of the employees, and it would also help the industry to grow," he said. Then he added with a flourish: "Just like Buddhadeb, I, too, want industrialisation of the state. Without industry there cannot be any working class, and without a working class there can't be any class struggle. We can't wage a class struggle in a desert."

MADHYA PRADESH

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