

SINGLE FILE

A leader of the workers

George Fernandes' passionate trade union work helped mute violent conflict in democratic India

DEVAKI JAIN



George Fernandes was one of the most vivid characters in the Indian political landscape from the 1960s onwards. He was a passionate believer in worker unions and in the socialist order. Among the cohort of laid-back political activists those days, Fernandes was a fireball — articulate, courageous and outspoken. While some of that passion got diluted with increasing engagement in formal politics, his commitment to old-fashioned democracy and socialism could never be dampened. He was a workers' man, who, along with unionised hotel waiters, hawkers, and workers from the transport sector, could bring Bombay to a halt. In 1974, Fernandes famously led the largest railway strike that India has ever seen, which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi responded to by arresting or detaining thousands of trade unionists.

Fernandes was also a fearless dissenter. He was an anti-Emergency crusader. He spent the Emergency years in prison and even contested the 1977 elections from there. He won by a huge margin. The Janata Party was then elected to power and he was made Industries Minister in the government led by Morarji Desai.

But power corrupts. His induction into formal politics did not sit well with his personality or his actions. As Defence Minister, Fernandes was embroiled in the Kargil coffin scam. The *Tehelka* expose on the murky defence deals of the National Democratic Alliance forced him to resign.

But his downfall is not how we should remember Fernandes. We should remember him because he belonged to an era where leaders represented economic groups rather than castes or families. We should remember him because while at present there are many political and social leaders who may term themselves as being of the people, Fernandes was truly a man of the people.

And we should remember him because the worker in India today, whether in the formal or informal sector, is under threat. Unions face challenges right from getting themselves registered. The recent proposal to amend the Trade Unions Act of 1926 was met with protests — unions said that the government was trying to interfere in their functioning. In this era, we should remember stalwarts like Fernandes who understood that unless workers, like other professionals, are able to assert and organise power and negotiate the terms of their employment, there will be feudalism.

Worker unions were not only a vital institution for democratic India to thrive, but it was due to their propagation, aided by people such as Fernandes, that violent conflict was muted. His passing should be a reminder to support existing unions and build more unions.

The writer is an economist