

Chapter IV

Workers' Resistance in the Indian Railways: The All India General Strike of May 1974

In the previous chapters we have seen that the industrial working class of India were and exploited class. They suffered from the very beginning of the process of establishment of the industries in the colonial period. And the sufferings had continued even after independence due to the economic exploitation of the working class. The grievances of the workers had reached its peak during 1960-73 due to several reasons. The political and economic situation of India from the early 1960s up to 1974/75 was marked by crisis. The industrial workers especially the railway workers were aggrieved due to the emerging situation such as the inflation or the price rise of daily commodities, decline in real earnings, and absence of wage link with Dearness Allowance, non- payment of Bonus, absence of leave with pay etc. Workers disappointments grew up from late 1972 and touched the sky in early 1974. Therefore, the years 1973-74 were hit by several incidents of resistances by the workers in the Indian industries. But the railway workers' struggle in May 1974 became an unprecedented event in the history of labour movement in India.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section has focused on the grievances of the railwaymen which forced them and their organisations to take the decision of launching an indefinite strike in May 1974. The section also looks at the strike situation preparations by the railway workers and their trade unions. In the second section of the study we have observed the nature and situation of the strike in different railway zones throughout the country during the period of the twenty days of the struggle.

I

The Grievances of the Workers and the Preparations for the Strike

We have seen earlier that the Indian railwaymen were well known for their spontaneous actions and innumerable struggles since the establishment of the industry. The railway workers' militancy was very common and they had the tradition to challenge the authority for the betterment of their working and living conditions. Hence it can be said as Dange had referred to the railway strike as it was not anyone's conspiracy or clever trick but it was the result of the parasitic capitalist landlord system and its viciousness which has grown in this country (Dange, 1974; p. 4). In this section we are going to assess the reasons behind the grievances of the Indian railwaymen. It also plans to describe how aggrieved the railway workers became that their resentments had compelled them to take the decision of launching the all India general indefinite strike in May 1974. This section has also attempted to discuss the process of the strike preparations by the railwaymen and their trade unions during the periods of mid 1973 to May 1974.

End of the Second World War and the end of colonial rule in India required a speedy growth of industries for the purpose of all round socio-economic development of the country. The Railways played a vital role in this sphere by ensuring a rapid growth in the transportation industry. But the employees of the public utility department remained lowly paid thus their resentment revolved around the pay structure. The political and economic background of India since independence till 1970 had been ushered by waves of crisis. Numerous strikes, bandhs, go slow, mass sick leave, lock outs etc. had been taking place during the period of the late 1960s up to 1973 which indicated the unharmonious relationship in the industrial front. In the railway industry the employee-employer relationship came almost to an end and showing a breakdown of socio-economic equilibrium.

The rise in prices of basic commodities made the situation worse for the industrial workers. In this situation the ineffectiveness of the trade unions aggrieved the railwaymen. It was true that the workers in all the industries especially in the railways had been suffering from relative decline in real wage since the past two decades. But in the year of 1960-61 the

gross traffic receipts increased from 1950-51 by 73.68% which indicated an improvement of Railway revenues. The central government employees including the railway workforce had abided by the recommendation of the Central Pay Commissions. Therefore they were not in a position to bargain with their authorities on the matter of payment. During the years 1970-73 when the Commission planned to publish its report and the government hesitated, India faced with the worst inflation since independence, under the impact of drought and oil price increases, wholesale prices escalated by 70% between 1968-69 and 1973-74, with a 30 % growth being recorded in 1973-74. (Sherlock, 1989; p.2312). The Times of India analysed that the price of the consumer goods in fact, had climbed steadily in the last few months and the latest budget levies had given the price curve rather a sharp swing (Times of India, 28th March,1974; p.1).

In this situation trade union movement of our country had observed several splits which on the other hand had affected the strength and unity of the working class. During this period India also was involved in the war with the neighbouring country Pakistan which resulted in the birth of Bangladesh. Sukomal Sen analysed the whole economic and political situations of the country. To him the economic crisis and various other conflicting tendencies of the administration had its serious impact on the ruling party itself. The other derogatory measures taken against the working class in the form of wage-freeze or repression through Defence India Rules (DIR), ESMA, etc. was also responsible for implementing to emergency provision, thereby the fundamental rights of the citizens remained suspended (Sen, 1997; p. 401).

The misrule of the Government since independence was reflected in the crisis of country's economic condition which they desired to solve at the cost of the workers' misery. It was true that the workers in the railway industry had been suffering from relative decline in real earning since independence. The railways industry was a public sector industry which was treated as a government department run by a separate ministry. It was also a revenue producing department of the government. In the year 1960-61 the gross traffic receipts increased from 1950-51 by 73.68%, which indicated the improvement of railway revenues. Nrisingha Chakroborty as a trade unionist and a member of AIRF was of the opinion that the entire system of the railways was dependent on the western countries for loans, importing vital spare parts, sophisticated machines and diesel oil etc. But the railwaymen

were denied their legitimate demands of need based minimum wage, linking of D.A. with Consumer Price Index Number etc. It was also seen that job saving devices like Electric Computers had installed to decrease the requirements of the railway workers. Consequently there was widespread stagnation in employment and retrenchment took place (Chakraborty, 1971; p. 2).

In this situation the railway workers started comparing themselves with those in the other Public Sector Undertakings (PSU). Because the workers engaged in PSUs had the right to bargain and negotiations with the management. But the railway workers under a separate ministry were bound by the decision of recommendations of the Central Pay Commission. The Times of India observed that the consumer goods in fact, had been climbing steadily since the end of the 1973 and the latest budget levies had given the price curve rather a sharp swing (Times of India, 28.3.74; p.1). The prices had increased 35% by this time, thus the prices of basic commodities went out of reach of the common men. The situation was extremely grave especially for the working class as there was no other mechanism in the hand of the workers to cope up with the emerging situation and the government was unable to control the inflationary crisis and price rise. The following table would show the trend. A journal on economic condition reported that all India Consumer Price Index for industrial workers (1949=100) had been showing an upward trend since February 1973. It again soared enormously by 27.9 percent in April 1974. This was the highest increase since independence. (Dange, 1974; p. 25).

Whole Sale Index		Consumer Index
1969-70	3.7	1.4
1970-71	5.5	5.1
1971-72	4.0	3.1
1972-73	9.9	7.7
1973-74	22.7	21.1

Source: Dange, General Report made to the General Council, AITUC on 22nd July, 1974; p. 35.

Food shortage and soaring of prices were to some extent artificial, occurred due to black marketing and hoarding. Rising prices, shortages, corruption, parallel black money economy and incompetence had come to reinforce one another in such a manner that it had become extremely difficult to break the vicious circle (Jain, 8th May, 1974; Times of India). These were the reasons of discontentment among the workers. The Government was not in a position of controlling or rather not willing to solve the root cause of the workers' grievances. Not only had it seemed that the government was incapable of administering and disciplining these vested interests. The prices of basic commodities like edible oil, food grains, price of kerosene etc. increased by 23% in 1973 but the Third Pay Commission had increased the wages very meagrely from Rs. 170/- per month to Rs. 196/- per month whereas the workers in steel industry were getting Rs. 297/- per month, in BHEL Rs. 294/- and in Hindustan Machine Tools the wage was Rs. 350/- per month. At this moment the government had decided to disburse the D.A. in instalments. Thus, the workers became furious when they found an absolute decline in their real earnings. The industrial workers had suffered not only by the fall of real earnings but by the injuries caused by the industrial accidents too. Accidents in railways occurred more frequently from the early days of its establishment and construction. And also it took place due to the poor conditions of bridges and mechanical failures such as brake and coupling failures etc.

Real Earnings (Base: 1961=100)

Years	All India CPI Members	Index Numbers of money earnings (Factory Workers)	Index Numbers of Real Earnings (Factory Workers)
1961	100	100	100
1962	103	106	103
1963	106	109	103
1964	121	114	94
1965	132	128	97
1966	146	139	95
1967	166	151	91
1968	171	160	94
1969	169	171	101
1970	178	175	98
1971	183	185	101
1972	194	199	103
1973	228	216	95
1974	304	207	68
1975	321	205	64

Source: 1961-1973 Indian Labour Statistics 1972, 1977; 1974-1975, Primary Source –Pocket Book of Labour Statistics (1977-78), (Roy, Marxist Review; p. 42).

The following official table shows that both the number of industrial injuries and the frequency rate were increasing (Roy, 1985; p. 44).

Industrial Injuries

Year	Total Number of Injuries	Frequency rate of Injuries (per 1000 workers)
1961	1,59,696	45.67
1962	1,69,283	46.40
1963	1,84,509	47.80
1964	1,89,595	47.12
1965	2,02,823	49.25
1966	2,08,844	51.33
1967	1,98,710	48.13
1968	2,27,458	55.93
1969	2,62,616	63.48
1970	2,38,343	70.11
1971	3,85,180	75.67
1972	2,85,912	63.63
1973	2,86,017	62.58
1974	2,49,110	53.77
1975	2,42,352	50.87

Source: Pocket Book of Labour Statistics, 1971-78, (Roy, Marxist Review; p. 44).

From the very beginning of independence the railway workers were always in the forefront of the country's trade union movement, e.g., in the three central government employees' strike in 1949, 1960 and in 1968, railway workers played a significant role. After 1947 Indianisation had provided opportunity to many workers to be promoted to higher grades especially to the loco staff. But when the semi illiterate workers were appointed in the higher posts, it was observed that the status of the loco staff had declined. When they

attempted to impart English education to their children, their pocket had not permitted. Repeatedly the workers approached the leadership of the recognised unions to take action in this regard, they never paid any attention. Introduction of diesel engines also had reduced the number of staff requirements in the railway industry. Thus, frustration had emerged and escalated day by day. The railway workers accused the leadership of the recognised unions in the railway industry – both the AIRF and NFIR as they started trading with the workers and not acting like trade unions. They developed an alliance with the railway bureaucrats which brought a halt to the trade union movement in the railway industry. This nexus between the management and union leadership was reflected in the ineffectiveness in ventilating the grievances of the workers which resulted into the formation of category wise or craft associations in the industry. By the end of the 1960s a new trend emerged in the railway industry i.e., almost in every department of the railways the workers formed their own association to raise their demands. The formations of a number of craft unions had led to the foundation of AILRSA in August 1970.

However the life for the loco men became unbearable because a large number of loco staff still had to work for fourteen hours. In the month of May 1973 AILRSA had agitated against the long hour of work; harsh working condition, poor living condition, poor quality of uniform provided by the authority etc. Out of 70,000 thousand drivers 42,000 struck against the management. The intensity of the strike and the number of workers – firemen, drivers, shunters involved in the strike had compelled the management and Railway Minister L.N. Mishra to talk with the AILRSA members. But several issues remained unresolved and Mishra assured the workers that no victimisation would take place. In spite of his assurance large scale arrests, use of DIR took place; even after the withdrawal of mass sick leave, authority accused the railway workers and also victimised the loco leaders. Therefore, again in August, they went on strike. The Railway Minister unconditionally accepted their demands and asked the Railway Board to negotiate.

Indian Railways was the largest employees of casual labourers in the country. More than two lacs of casual works in the railways were being deprived by the authority since long. A casual worker after completing a continuous service of 120 days, became a temporary worker some normal benefits of wages, leave etc. but in the railways most of the time these casual workers were terminated in the 119th day of work and again engaged in

another job. As a result a large number of casual workers became aggrieved and demanded for decasualisation. There had always been resentment amongst the workers regarding the system of promotion in the railway department. Skilled workers with long years of experience were promoted only to the post of supervisors or foreman and indeed their service upto the local levels only, never reached to the heights of divisional or zonal management. Of the fourteen lac permanent staff employed by the railways in 1972, 7,543 were classified into the managerial class I and II divisions, the vast majority being in the skilled class III or unskilled class IV division (Sherlock, 2001; p. 249). Another cause of their resentment was related with the question of bonus. In 1972 the government announced that all the enterprises should pay bonus to its employees irrespective of the question of profit. Therefore the government laid down a statutory bonus of one month's wage (8.33%) and asked the respective employers to disburse the amount to employees of the public sector undertakings and the industries (Sherlock, 2001; p. 297). But in the railway industry the authority denied to pay bonus to its own employees. All these factors prepared the ground in favour of the eruption of railway workers' agitation. The crux of the above discussion was that the workers grievances had increased day by day due to various reasons e.g.

- a) there was a huge gap between the lowest and highest wages in the railways specially the wages of the Group-D workers;
- b) the wages of Indian railways compared to the railways of the other nations were extra ordinarily low;
- c) even compared with the other Public Sector Undertakings the railway workers got less payments;
- d) the railways were paying less than their capabilities;
- e) real wages of the railway workers did not increase proportionately to the money wages;
- f) Indian railway did not give need based minimum wages to its employees;
- g) non-payment of D.A. accordingly;
- h) there was no system of bonus in the railways.

The pay was quite low for the class IV workers who actually took risks and responsibilities more than any of the class I employees who were well paid. Not only that if one compares these types of work with any class IV employees in other industries, the work types in the railways were much more crucial and risky and required more attention and benefits for the workers. Railwaymen had long term grievances over working conditions in the workshops and also the conditions of the trains, engines etc. were equally poor. The grass roots local unions were aware of the working conditions of the railway tracks, rakes etc. in the industry, consequently, the protests naturally would come from the independent unions that wanted to safeguard the interests of the local workers (Samaddar, 2015; p. 45).

Economic hardships and vested interest of the ruling class accelerated the discontentment among the workers. The overall crisis in the economy marked by shortage of grains and domestic fuel, charges of corruption against members of the ruling establishment and the rising tide of militancy in the trade union movement laid the basis for a strike (Ananth, 2016; p. 17). AIRF leadership in this situation was forced to launch any movement to regain its lost legacy of militant unionism and also to retain its power. However, the basis of this battle was economic. The potentialities of the workers as an instrument of revolutionary social change remained untapped. What was accomplished by the moderate leadership was promotion of trade union consciousness but not revolutionary class consciousness (Krishna, 1980; p. 22).

Preparation of the Railwaymen's for the Strike

This section of the study attempts to describe different measures that were taken by the railway workers and their organisations to launch an indefinite and general strike throughout the country in the railway industry. The situation and the industrial relation in the railways became so poor and workers' grievances had touched the sky and their life became intolerable due to the economic hardship of the entire nation. The success of AILRSA movement had revitalised the general workers in the industry and compelled the recognised unions to rethink over the demand of a bigger trade union movement in the country. NFIR though always remained loyal to the ruling government, announced to go on direct actions against the authority as it realised that the workers had lost their faiths on the recognised

unions. They conceived them as impotent and had no strength and ability to accomplish any desires or requirements of the workers. AIRF on the other hand, had a tradition of militant activities and ability to mobilise the workers, hence it started preparing for large scale organised agitation of the railway men. But during the whole of the 1960s it had suffered from indecision and self -contradiction which ultimately weakened its position among the workers. Thus it faced tremendous erosion in its support and membership base. It seemed that the AIRF leadership became incapable of leading a general mass movement of its own. But to retain in power, it had to do something to influence the workers, therefore, it initiated to change its leadership. George Fernandes, a stormy patrol trade unionist in and around Bombay and Chairman of the Socialist Party was brought into AIRF by sections that were desperate to reinvent the Federation as a fighting organisation (Ananth, 2016; p. 17). In October 1973 at Secunderabad in the annual convention of AIRF George Fernandes was elected as the president of AIRF. There was an extreme opposition towards this election. But the contest had replaced Peter Alveras and put Mr. Fernandes in the leadership of the AIRF. In this conference the delegates took the decision of organising a nation-wide strike without considering the strength of the union and the consequences of the movement. “Taking the platform at the conference I pleaded with the delegates not to take decision without first possessing the requisite organisational strength to go into action, but my appeal was in vain” (Fernandes, 1984; p. 29). Then Fernandes started mobilising the workers and creating a broad based forum for united action. Another issue which became very vital was that the financial conditions of the union must be sound to launch and continue any larger and bigger movement of railway workers.

According to Fernandes, he needed two to three years to prepare and organise AIRF before launching any all India general strike. But the other front line members did not allow him to take much time because in their opinion within two years, the entire hold over the railway workers would be taken away by the craft unions. On November 24th and 25th 1973, Fernandes convened special loco running staff conference under the aspects of the AIRF to focus attention on the special problems of the loco men and mobilise them in view of the possibility of the current agitation culminating in a strike of railwaymen on February 27 (Sherlock, 1989; p. 2318). But for him it was quite a difficult task to convince the loco running staff association. They became suspicious about the betrayal of the AIRF. In the

month of December the communication system of the country was almost standstill due to the lockouts of Indian Airlines and the strike of loco running staff of the Indian Railways. Their job is no doubt tedious only who know the intensity of heat in a boiler can guess it (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 19.12. 74). The working hours and conditions were so miserable that they had to fight for their cause. AIRF under the leadership of Fernandes stood in support of the loco men.

Surprisingly enough in all other industries like Textile, LIC, Electric Supply and Transport, Undertaking in Bombay even in Delhi the junior doctors confronted with their authorities but the spotlight was always on the Railways. A lot of debate took place because “the government invested Rs. 400 crores in the Railways in the Third Plan and Rs. 900 crores in the Fourth Plan and yet the system is unable to move even 20 crores tonnes of goods” (Mainstream, 25.5.74). The reason behind this was the corruption at every layer of the organisation. Railway Ministry was not perhaps keen to eradicate the problems. Mainstream reported that it was equally important for the railway trade union leadership to take up the campaign against corruption since they knew that many categories of the employees more than in any other department of the government engaged regularly in different malpractices, like bribery etc. In many cases they earned a larger share than their pay packets (Mainstream, 25.5.74). Ananda Bazar Patrika published that International Development Association, the self-lending World Bank affiliate, had announced a credit of 80 million dollars (over 60 crores) to assist the Indian Railways’ Programme of modernisation (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 20.12. 73). Thus a debate arose regarding this issue, when the railway department was already charged with several cases of malfeasants. However, the strike ended on 25th December 1973 when L.N. Mishra, the Railway Minister called the loco staff for a fresh talk on the assurance of no victimisation. Sabhapathy, the President of AILRSA negotiated the settlement. In the month of December Fernandes declared in a press release that Railway administration had thrown the workers in a crisis by not setting the demands of the railwaymen and also not keeping the assurances and promises made to the railway’s association. He also proclaimed that the railwaymen unitedly settle the following issues and various sectional grievances:

1. Settle the wider issue of job evaluation and classification;

2. wage revision to rise the wage level at par with public sector undertakings;
3. bonus;
4. eight hour duty for all categories including running staff without loss of emoluments;
5. decentralisation of casual workers
6. Subsidised food grains etc. (Indian Railway men, 1974; p. 4).

Again in December 1973 thousands of thirteen category unions from all over India met and discussed the demands and problems created by the recommendations of the Third Central Pay Commission and submitted a Charter of Demands to the Chairman of the Railway Board. In January, 1974 AIRSA President Sabhapathy had warned the railway authority of another country wide agitation if the agreement of December 28, 1973 meeting with Mishra was not implemented. He said that the working committee had condemned the 'delaying tactics' of the Railway Ministry and Railway Board in implementing the three points, agreed by the Railway Minister on December 28th, 1973 at the meeting of the Loco Running Staff Grievance Committee – withdrawal of all DIR and other cases; treating of the strike period in December on leave and payment of salary for the same and recognition of AIRSA as the Channel of Communication (Assam Tribune, 23.1. 74). Hence on 24th and 25th January 1974 a meeting of AIRF was held which was attended by twenty two unrecognised unions. This meeting had a significant impact on the united struggle of the railwaymen in near future. In February 4th 1974, in the South Eastern Railway the movement of trains were heavily hampered when the carriage and wagon staff went on work to rule and Assistant Station Masters on mass absenteeism in Adra Division. In January South Central Railway's all the class III and II staff of Head quarter, Divisional and Accounts Department assembled in front of General Manager's office at Secunderabad for almost three hours protesting against the discriminating attitude of the Railway Ministry in up gradation of the posts. Sporadic agitations like these continued to take place in different zones with full of unity and enthusiasm. In this situation neither the category-wise unions nor the AIRF were capable to mount any movement, therefore on 27th February 1974 in New Delhi a National Convention was held. The representatives of one hundred and the recognised and unrecognised unions attended the meeting except the members of NFIR. Almost two thousand delegates were present in the meeting. The convention became more important

when it was attended by the representatives of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) also. An atmosphere of enthusiasm and expectation had emanated from this convention because it was perhaps till date, the most widely participated, distinctive and noteworthy gathering of railway trade unions that had ever taken place. It was able to provide a sense of solidarity and determination among the railwaymen. It adopted a larger of demands which included wage, payment of dearness allowances, bonus, decasualisation, eight hour working day and finally withdrawal of all the cases of victimisation. The convention had concluded that if the Railway Ministry did not negotiate with them by 10th April 1974, the union would go for an indefinite general strike. A coordinating committee of all unions supporting the charter was established with Fernandes, President of AIRF, as convenor, the committee became known as the National Co-ordinating Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle (NCCRS) (Sherlock, 2001; p. 313). On 28th February 1974, the first meeting of NCCRS was held and it constituted a thirteen member Action Committee consisting of the following members:

1.	George Fernandes	-	Convenor
2.	J.P. Choubey	-	AIRF
3.	Priya Gupta	-	AIRF
4.	Parvathi Krishnan	-	AITUC
5.	Sri Krishna	-	AITUC
6.	N.S. Bangor	-	All India Railway Employees' Confederation
7.	K.P. Ramaswamy	-	All India Railway Employees' Confederation
8.	H.S. Chowdhury	-	All India Loco Running Staff Association
9.	S.K. Dhar	-	All India Loco Running Staff Association
10.	Samar Mukherjee	-	CITU
11.	N.N. Chakravorty	-	CITU
12.	G.S. Gokhale	-	BMS
13.	N.M. Pathak	-	BMS

(Siddhanta, 1974; p. 30).

Meanwhile in March the Railway Budget proposal came in the Parliament with hike of freight fares and third class passenger fares too. The Opposition criticised the proposal as anti people because freight rate hike surely would push up the price level once again.

However, the NCCRS sent the memorandum with the charter of demands to the Railway Board which as usual ignored the memorandum and refused to negotiate with them. The convention appealed the railway ministry to accept the following urgent and common demands of railwaymen:

1. (a) All railwaymen should be treated as industrial workers with full trade union rights including the right to negotiate.
 - (b) The working hours of the railwaymen shall not exceed eight hours per day.
 - (c) There shall be job evaluation of all the railwaymen through a scientific system to be followed by their reclassification and re-gradation with the need based minimum wage as the wage for the lowest paid worker.
 - (d) Pending the completion of job evaluation and reclassification, immediate parity in wages with those of workers in the Central Undertakings, viz., H.M.T., BHEL, HSL, HAL etc.
2. Dearness Allowance linked to the cost of living index with full neutralisation for every rise of four points in six months period.
 3. Bonus at the rate of one month wages for the year 1971-72 and 1972-73.
 4. Decasualisation of all casual railwaymen and their confirmation in service with all benefits given to them with retrospective effect.
 5. Adequate and subsidised food grains and other essential commodities through departmentally run shops.
 6. All victimisation cases should be withdrawn.

(Indian Railwaymen, 1974; p.14-15).

Fernandes emphasised on the issue of fund raising at each and every level – local, divisional, zonal and head quarter level because for pursuing an indefinite strike enough money is needed and collection of which must be geared up. The main weakness of any struggle was associated with the question of funds. An organisation in order to continue the struggle for an indefinite period needs funds. If the organisation was not equipped with proper funds and

is not financially sound, it was quite impossible to persuade any working class movement. The Railway Board would not suppose to settle the matter and negotiate with the striking unions immediately because delayed discussion would break the confidence of the workers. If the management felt the intensity of the struggle, power, strength and capacity of the strikers that they could continue the agitation then probably the authority might have talked with the trade unions. Apart from the fund, it gave thrust on the building of unity among all levels. But in practice the picture became very gloomy when the question of unity came at the branch level. When Fernandes started visiting the branch offices of different railway zones for motivating the railwaymen in favour of the indefinite nationwide struggle, many local leaders complained to him about the inter union rivalry, lobbying and hierarchical system of the organisations which interrupted heavily the pledge of pro-unity and process of solidarity at the base level. Another aspect which was emphasised by Fernandes was the structural reorganisation of the unions at all levels and also directed to change their attitude and focus. Specially, the General Council directed its affiliates to immediately set up:

- a) Action Committee of the Union at all level
- b) Joint Action Committees with all those organisations those are willing to make common cause with our struggle.
- c) Women's Committees to bring about total involvement of the women from railwaymen's families in the struggle.
- d) Volunteer corps to meet situations that may create by the enemies of the struggle.
- e) Peoples' Committees consisting of prominent citizens, representatives of other working class organisations, lawyers, journalists and other public personalities to support the action of railwaymen.

The Council also directs the affiliates:

- 1) To complete the collection of the struggle fund targeted at Secunderabad by the fifteenth of March.
- 2) To appoint a cell at the zonal Head Quarters to keep liaison with the AIRF Head Quarters on the progress made in the preparations for the strike.

(Siddhanta, 1974; p.25).

In the meantime the Guards' Council decided to go for 'work to rule' agitation in March 1974 and they approached Fernandes to support their cause. But Fernandes requested them to postpone the movement because an indefinite general strike of the railwaymen would be likely in the month of May. In spite of that he had to support their agitation to win their reliance on AIRF. The Hindu reported on 11th March 1974 that Railway Guards all over the country today launched the "work to rule" agitation, causing delay in the movement of a large number of passenger and goods trains, the General Secretary of the All India Guards' Council Mr. C.L. Upadhyay, said (The Hindu, 11.3. 74). In almost all the zones of Indian railways were affected by this agitation- movement of coal, food grains were seriously hampered. Almost 17,000 guards denied to join their work in demand of revision of pay scale and improvement of working conditions. In this connection we must refer to the Acts which rendered different provisions for settling down the industrial disputes, e.g., the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947, the Code of Disciplines (1958) and the Industrial True Resolution (1962). These were the instruments that were applied in the industrial fronts to resolve the conflicts between the employer and employees. These were accepted voluntarily by the Central trade organisations of employees and the workers. They assisted in promotion and maintenance of healthy relations in the Indian industries (Annual Report of Ministry of Labour, 1974-75; p. 24). Interestingly, during the last five years man days were lost exorbitantly due to the strikes and lockouts in Indian industries. The following table would indicate the scenario. The figure of man days lost during the last five years was as follows:

1970	20.56 million
1971	16.55 million
1972	20.54 million
1973	20.63 million
1974 (Provisional)	31.27 million

Source: Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour, 1974-75; p. 24.

However, after the withdrawal of the agitation, the Guards' Council appreciated Fernandes for his support but still they were suspicious regarding AIRF's call for united struggle. In March 15th to 18th at Varanasi, the AILRSA's Working Committee's Annual Conference took place and interestingly the decision of united action by AIRF brought a split among the loco leaders. Differences of opinion and an atmosphere of disunity were created. Sabhapathy, President and Mewa Lal, the Vice President of the Association did not agree with the decision of united action and they were quite confused whether to join the strike in coming months or to refrain from it. From the Loco Running staff Association S.K. Dhar and H.S. Choudhury were sent to join the meeting of NCCRS in the month of February 1974. A clear contradiction among the leaders and lack of unity became evident which hindered the reaching of solidarity among the workers. It ultimately affected the activities of the unions when the indefinite strike of May 8 started. The loco running leaders at branch and divisional levels became puzzled when they heard about the all India united struggle under the leadership of AIRF. Hence they requested Sabhapathy, the president of AILRSA to clarify the peculiar situation emerged due to the decision of launching an all India general strikes for indefinite period by the NCCRS. The proposal for united struggle was mainly supported by the General Secretary P.K. Barua and Joint Secretary S.K. Dhar and they opposed the categorical feeling. Sabhapathy justified his reason to stand with the strike was to avoid a cleavage among the members of the Association. But the majority members of the Working Committee of AILRSA agreed to support NCCRS's call for all India strike; the top leaders had no other option but to give their consent in this regard. On 29th March the AILRSA leaders of Southern and South Central Railways did not meet Fernandes when he was travelling throughout the country bailing on united platform for the strike. Thus, it became very tough to organise a broad based unity among those who had the tendency to believe in craft consciousness. As a result a whole hearted unity amongst the AILRSA leaders had never been achieved.

In this situation on 5th April, AITUC members e.g., S.A. Dange, Parvathi Krishnan, P.K. Kumara etc. met Labour Minister Raghunatha Reddy to explain the grievances and workers' demands to the minister and Reddy agreed that there was an urgent need to negotiate with the concerned organisations to avoid the strike.

Unfortunately the NCCRS was compelled to take the decision to go on an all India general strike from May 8, 1974. On April 15 a meeting was held and it was attended by K.V. Raghunatha Reddy, Labour Minister; Md. Shafi Qureshi, Deputy Railway Minister; M.N. Berry, Chairman of Railway Board and other members of the Board. The Times of India on 16.4.74 reported that railway trade unions had to take a drastic step following the deadlock which arose after the negotiation with the Railway Board on the railwaymen's demands and resentments (Times of India, 16.4.74). Fernandes was of the opinion that the ultimate "dead end" was reached because government's attitude on all of the issues was negative and there was no willingness on the part of the Railway Board to arrive at any fruitful conclusion. The Deputy Railway Minister Mohammad Shafi Qureshi initiated negotiations with the trade union leaders and Fernandes declared that AIRF could do everything to avert the strike but the ministers always tried to create an atmosphere of humiliation and showed an attitude of confrontation. V.V. Giri, the then President of India also asked the railwaymen to avoid the indefinite strike.

Surprisingly, the union government had decided to take a tough line to deal with any possible strike irrespective of industries. The Railway Minister took firm stand on the demand of the NCCRS and attempted to restrict any kind of agitation. The Hindu reported on 17th April 1974 that the Political Affairs Committee of the Union Cabinet had discussed the issue of the Indian railwaymen's grievances on 16th April, 1974 in the light of the deadlock reached in the talks with the Railway Board. The Committee made it clear to the Railway Minister that there should be no pressure to accept the unjust demands of railwaymen though early efforts to settle the affair should be made. And the Ministry should initiate discussions to bring about an early negotiated settlement (The Hindu, 17.4. 74). At the same time the Railway Board attempted to dismantle the pledge for unity among the railway workers. The Congress supported unions like INTUC, NFIR etc. had played the role of professional strike breakers and NFIR was branded as 'official strike breaking unit'. Trade union leaders and workers in many areas betrayed the striking workers but co-operated with the authority and acted as an agent of the railway management.

Hence the NCCRS on April 15th directed its constituents to serve a 14 days' notice to the railways and on April 23 for an indefinite strike notice from May 8 were served (Peoples Democracy, 21.4.74). By this time as the government's attitude had become more firm

against the discussions on workers' demand, the railwaymen's strike had become more inevitable. The striking trade unions and their affiliates representing different categories of employees, had served the strike notices to their respective railway authorities. The railwaymen gave a call to everyone in the industry to join the all India general strike commencing at 6 a.m. on May 8 and asked everyone in the country to support the railwaymen's cause. The 'Times of India' reported that in Bombay city on 23rd April 1974 that after submitting the strike notice, the railwaymen had been rallying against the railway management for fulfilling the long pending demands of 2,00,000 railwaymen, they waved flags, demonstrated and marched to the Museum from Church gate and then dispersed (Times of India, 24.4. 74). On the other hand, the authority and the government were busy to handle situations, how to run the trains and keep normalcy in every railway zone if the strike occurred. Railway authority even appealed to the people that they should travel by train if it was too urgent and almost all the zonal head quarters started cancelling the passenger trains. Meantime, the Deputy Railway Minister had invited the NCCRS leaders on 30th April for settling the matter and urged them to reach a fruitful negotiation so that the unwanted situation could be avoided. The Statesman published a report on 1.5.74 that a deadlock situation was arrived between the railway authorities and railwaymen's representatives on the evening of 30th April 1974 when they sat to discuss the discontentment and demands of the workers to avert indefinite strike of the rank and file workers of the railways from May 8, 1974. The reporters said that deadlock emerged when the Railway Minister Lalit Narain Mishra intervened into the matter to regain the peace in the industrial front and recover situation (The Statesman, 1.5. 74; p.1).

None of the demands got fulfilled except the demand of eight hour working per day and they could not reach any decision. According to some labour leaders for successful negotiation and also reaching to any concrete decision working class unity was most important and this unity should not be based on party affiliation. Here the dilemma lies elsewhere, both the parties – government and trade unions were trying to examine and measure their power in their own fields. In the Western Railways especially in Bombay majority of the motorman were the members of the AIRF, thus before the strike started almost all the suburban trains were cancelled. Surprisingly, on 2nd May in the midst of negotiation meeting suddenly George Fernandes, P.K. Barua along with others were

arrested. The arrest of Fernandes indicated that there was no positive willingness on the part of the authority and all these meetings, discussions and negotiations were nothing but farce. Almost all the issues were being on the verge of settling down except the bonus questions during the end of last day's talks with the Ministry on 1.5. 74, but the government showed authoritarian and dictatorial attitude towards the workers. In Bombay and Delhi on 3rd May a 'bandh' was observed in protest of Fernandes's arrest and life became standstill in these two cities. The Statesman reported on 4th May 1974 that the work in the offices of the Central and Western Railways and in their two major workshops and in other establishments in banks and insurance companies in Central and State Government offices including Post and Telegraph, in Port and Docks, in factories and textile mills etc. were paralysed as there were no suburban trains, buses and taxis to take people to their places of work in Greater Bombay (The Statesman, 4.5. 74; p. 1). Situation was almost similar in Delhi.

Therefore, the indefinite strike by the railwaymen became obvious and in some zones the workers began their agitation on the news of Fernandes's arrest. From the custody Fernandes earnestly requested the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi to intervene over the issue. Not only that Parvathi Krishnan stated that on the release of all the arrested NCCRS leaders they would again take part in the talk and some negotiable settlement might arrive. But the authority was firm in its stand. The Action Committee of National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's struggle has in a statement declared that as all attempts for a negotiated settlement of their demands having been frustrated by the 'adamant attitude' of the government, the strike shall begin at 6 a.m. on May 8 (The Hindu, 7.5. 74; p. 1). The NCCRS announced that all works on the Indian railways would stop, no wheels would move and the trains would terminate at the next main stations at 6 a.m. on 8th May. At the last moment S.A. Dange and other Communist leaders including Fernandes from jail tried to convince the authority to resume talks and trade union leaders defer the strike. But all their attempts went in vain. Thus all the important leaders of AIRF went to underground in order to avoid arrest. Surprisingly the Guards' Council declared that they were not willing to take part in the proposed indefinite strike launched by the NCCRS. According to them it was politically motivated without any genuine interest of labour welfare.

Meanwhile the Confederation of Central Government Employees decided to go on strike from 10th May. The situation became so unfavourable and disagreeable that the trade

unions had no other option but to go on strike though Mishra had warned that the striking workers might lose their jobs if they joined the strike. Despite being threatened by Railway Minister, in many places like in Southern, South Eastern, Eastern, Western Railways train services of both the passenger and goods trains were heavily disrupted. But the authority claimed that movement of goods trains was maintained properly. The reporters of the Hindustan Standards reported that the Government once again made it clear that there could be no further deliberations unless the strike notice was withdrawn, hence ordered a country wide mobilisation of the Territorial Army and other security forces to guard and man vital railway installations, equipments or machineries and patrol the unsafe sections of the 12 lakh k.m. of railway tracks crisscrossing the country (Hindustan Standards, 8.5. 74; p.1).

In spite of all, the railwaymen were determined on strike issue and it began on its scheduled date i.e., on 8th May at 6 o'clock in the morning and lasted for twenty long days. Maniben Kara, President of Western Railway Employees' Union appealed through a press release in Times of India on 7th may 1974, to the employees to carry on their struggle with discipline and without violence. She also requested the countrymen not travel by the trains if they were manned by the army personnel and promote the railwaymen's causes in order to keep the morale of the railway working class (Times of India, 8.5. 74). More than two thousands Central Government Employees exhibited their solidarity with the railwaymen's strike outside the Rail Bhawan. Following Stephen Sherlock's opinion, it can be said that the unity and solidarity achieved by the railway working class and their organisations during this period i.e. in the early months of 1974 were unparalleled and unmatched in the history of trade union movements of the country (Sherlock, 2001; p. 345).

II

The Situations in Different Railway Zones During the Strike of May 1974

In this section we seek to uncover every little incident that took place during the general strike launched by the Indian railway men in May 1974. This twenty day long struggle started from 8th May and ended on 28th May 1974. We shade light on the overall situation that prevailed during the strike throughout the country. This is the main concern of this section.

A united struggle of more than two million workers of the most significant industrial sector of the government or rather the life line of Indian economy was such as outstanding event that no one could dare to disregard. The determination and unity that was achieved by the railway workers was unprecedented in the history of labour movement in India. The strike began from 6 a.m. morning on 8th May. But the decision and measures taken by the government had ignited the flame of agitation amongst the railway workers. The provocative arrests in the midst of the negotiations throwing to the winds all norms of democratic behaviour incensed the workers (Siddhanta, 1974; p. 63). In Southern Railway Zone the strike started on 2nd May in protest of the arrests of the NCCRSs Action Committee members including the convenor George Fernandes. In N.F. Railway it began on 7th May and continued even after the two days of withdrawal of the strike i.e., upto 30th May. Although the strike began on 8th May and lasted for twenty long days the leaders had failed miserably to convince the authority and government to intervene into the matter. Even during the strike they appealed to the Railway Minister L.N. Mishra to step in and resolve the matter. But from the government's end no such measures were taken for negotiated settlement of the issue. T. N Siddhanta by referring to the reports of Times of India said that the arrests of the central trade union leaders showed that the government had intended to have a show down with the railway unions. But the timing of the arrests had been definitely unfortunate for the entire workers' movement (Siddhanta, 1974; p. 64). Thus, the strike became inevitable due to the attitude and the uncooperative behaviour of the authority. It

had taken every step to show how the demands of the workers were undue and unreasonable. Nevertheless, the strike began on 8th May at 6 o'clock morning, 1974.

The strikes began with all its strength and weaknesses, with all intra and inter union rivalries that existed. The only strength of the workers was their number and this strength which was broken only by the process of separating the workers from one another. Sri Biren Roy was of the opinion that trade unions originally appeared from the spontaneous attempts of workers to remove or to restrict the unexpected competition between the employer and the employees. They were also determined to conquer the terms of contract which might raise them above the condition of the slaves and at least tried to raise the voices to get heard (Roy, 1983; p. 219). According to George Fernandes the railwaymen had to overcome some weaknesses to launch successful movements. Most importantly they had to be more united and brought under one platform and fight for common issues. Second, financially they should be more strong and sound. Third, he was of the opinion that the railway workers' associations were to be more strengthened. The leaderships of the trade unions should be more committed towards the broader perspectives of the workers' interests rather than their personal gains. The manner of workers-management relationship and method of resolving the industrial disputes must be restructured and reframed. Fourthly, Fernandes stated that a massive change in educational background of the workers must be brought forward and powerful workers' movements also be launched for collective development. Finally, he asserted that the trade union leadership must be aware of the potentialities and power of the railway working class in India (Fernandes, 1987; pp.31-32). The most important challenge before the trade unions was how to mobilise the workers and combat the repressions of the government. However in this situation, the trade unions in the railway front had no option to retreat but to motivate and mobilise the workers towards the achievement of unity and solidarity and face the odds in achieving this end. The workers throughout the country were firm on their decision to continue the strike.

Before the strike started, the government deployed force to handle the entire situation. Day by day the police and para military forces made it difficult for the railway workers to stick to their decision. Nevertheless, the largest railway system in Asia, over sixty thousand kilometres of railway track spreading almost every corner of the country particular came to a closure. According to Dange 'by the united action of four million

“hands”, created immobility in the most crucial sector of Indian transport industry, known as the life line of the capitalist system of the country. The strike began at the appointed hour ignoring all the constraints of geography, state, language, caste, religion and their own internal job competition. The struggle had shown to the capitalist land lord exploiters that the real power was possessed by the working class not by the few who ruled the country when it was united and fought for its own class benefits’ (Dange, 1974; p.1).

In almost all the railway zones the strike was intense and complete. Few places showed some exceptions. In the main railway centres of the country, e.g., Delhi Main and New Delhi, Bombay Central, Madras, in Calcutta both the Howrah and Sealdah, Gorakhpur, Guwahati, Mughalsarai etc. not a single train had moved and services were completely paralysed during the first few days of the strike. In the entire Southern region the strike was complete. In the railway workshops like Kharagpur, Kanchrapara, Jamalpur, Perumbur, Golden Rock near Tiruchirapally, Chittaranjan Locomotives etc. were remained deserted. Though the Board Chairman M. N. Berry claimed that normalcy had been prevailed in all the zonal railways except minor disruptions which were noticed in few areas. He released a press notice that only 8% of the total train services were affected by this agitation. He also stated that almost 70% of already cancelled passenger trains and 65% of goods trains were running. According to Berry, absenteeism was concentrated only in certain centres (The Statesman, 9.5. 74). But the facts were something different. News paper reported that Workers in Delhi Main station and other offices including the Northern Railway Head quarters, the Divisional Superintendent’s office and the office of the Commercial Superintendent joined the strike (The Statesman, 9.5. 74). In Tughlakabad Marshalling Yard the works were maintained by the Territorial Army. Hindustan Times reported that at Tughlakabad Yard “A loco inspector told that not a single diesel engine had gone to the shed for check or servicing” (New Age, 1974; p. 4).

Howrah and Bandel were run by the Territorial Army. Correspondents of People’s Democracy noted one interesting incident that took place in Howrah - Bandel section. When the correspondents went to visit this area, found that one passenger train was being run by the army personnel but it was in a wrong track. The driver was asked by the people to take the train in a right track, but he surrendered that he had not learnt reverse driving (People’s Democracy, 12.5.1974; p. 12). This was the situation in most of the stations whereas the

authority claimed normalcy. In Mughalsarai which was considered to be the nerve centre of the railways in north India, during the first week of the strike the entire place had been almost deserted and east-west and north-south movements became very limited. The area covered by the railways here was near about 15 k.m. spread, seized by police and CRPF. The whole colony became a Police Camp. As a result of which the railwaymen were bound to leave their quarters in order to avoid arrest and torture. Railway workers said that they had to leave not only the quarter but sometimes they were forced to leave the area even before the strike began.¹ The women members of the striking workers' family were threatened and sometime beaten up badly by the police if they failed force them to join their duties. Some loyal workers continued their work and became the volunteers of the police and authority. It was also reported that the railways had spent more than thirty thousand rupees to feed these slanders and were utilised against their fellowmen. The Ananda Bazar Patrika on 27.5.74 calculated that an estimation of rupees of 75 crores was spent on the "running of train by T.A and Patrolling by State Government Police" and the total "expenses to break the strike" was approximately "187 crores"; The Statesman reported on 25.7.74 that the used "20 lakhs" as an "advertisement cost on Radio and T.V" and "79 lakhs" as an "advance increment to the Loyal Staff" and 12 crores as a "cash rewards to the Loyal Staff" (Chatterjee, 1988; p.112). Therefore it can be said that the government preferred to exhaust hundreds of crores to crush the railway workers' struggle instead of paying the amount of only "9 crores" to the railway men as the "staff wages".

However, the train services both the passengers and goods trains were heavily affected in this region despite the claims of normalcy by the railway board and management on the basis of false and baseless information. At the same time the leaders of the NFIR affirmed that all its members had joined their duties uninterruptedly. In Bombay on the first day of the strike, the workers of both Central and Western Railways had immobilised the normal activities of the regions. The Southern Railways was completely shut down upto the second week of the strike. Even one day before the strike started, due to the fear of disruption of train services, hundreds of people travelled even on the roof of the trains to

¹Interview with Sri. Tushar Chattopadhyay, member of United Committee for Railwaymen - a craft union active in this region, was an Assistant Station Master, posted at Rangia under N.F Railways, on 24.1.2016 at his Court Complex Residence Alipurduar at 7.00 p.m.

reach their destination. The 'Times of India' reported on 8th May that several hundred of employees of the Western Railways walked out of their workshops at different places in the city hours before the scheduled strike. It was also accounted that the loco shed staff and the yard staff at Bandra Marshalling Yard commenced their strike at noon while the car shed staff at Mahalaxmi began their strike at last mid night (Times of India, 8.5. 74; p. 1). In the South the strike was more intense and the workers' participation was massive. Wagon workshops, loco yards, coach factories etc. were almost deserted and only essential maintenance staffs were present on duty. The Hindu said that The booking counters both at Madras Central and Egmore were open but only a handful of persons were seen standing there mostly seeking refund on their tickets (The Hindu, 9.5. 74; p.1). The union leaders stated that the railway authority tried to run the train and attempted to demoralise the railway workers. In different parts of the country, a turmoil situation persisted. More than one third of the scheduled arrivals or departures of the trains was almost disrupted. In the agricultural states like Punjab or Haryana the problem of disordering of train services did not affect much because the chief ministers of these States resorted to their own tactics to handle the strikers (according to them, a separate police 'bandobast'). And these 'sheri tamasha' (city's theatre) had not been encouraged and tolerated in the agricultural villages (The Statesman, 20.5.74; p. 4). But in the industrial areas especially in South railway services was hampered a lot.

On the other hand in the Union Parliament the opposition leaders walked out from the Lok Sabha in persist of the strike issue. Times of India reported that when the opposition leaders in the Union Parliament, wanted to talk on the railwaymen's strike, the Speaker G. S. Dhilon refused to allow any debate on this issue because the matter had been discussed in detail in the House. The leaders protested this decision, hence had walked out of the Lok Sabha on 8th May (Times of India, 9.5.74; p.1). Opposition members sought for some clarification from the government regarding the turmoil circumstances throughout the country created due to strike of the railway workers. They should provide some facts in support of this statement whether their claims were correct or complete lie. When they started claiming that normalcy remained in majority of the zonal offices, stations, marshalling yards or workshops, opposition leaders rejected the claims of the authority. Chandrasekharan (SOC) said it was "really strange" that All India Radio had come out with

an absolutely “false” statement and he felt that Gujral, the Information Minister had become ‘a super Goebbels’ (The Statesman, 9.5. 74). Above all there was a huge gap and conflict between the demands of the trade unions and the government regarding the movements of the trains and railway services. The Statesman had mentioned that Berry was very careful in the choice of his words: At Mughalsarai the ‘recovery’ he stated, at Tughlakabad, the yard was getting back to its feet; in Delhi the situation was ‘getting fluid’; at Tondipet on the Southern Railway, the situation was ‘back entrains’, and at Jolarpet the situation was ‘getting into swing’ (The Statesman, 10.5. 74; p. 1). Whereas the Action Committee of NCCRS demanded that the strike was nearly complete and ninety to ninety eight percent of railwaymen participated in the strike all over the country. The suburban trains in Kharagpur area came to a halt. Coal movement had been affected heavily. Meanwhile the NCCRS convenor George Fernandes has proposed the resumption of talks on the railwaymen’s demands with the railway minister L.N. Mishra, if necessary in the prison itself (Times of India, 9.5. 74).

On the third day of the struggle the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi met the opposition leaders. She believed that a revision of present wage structure was needed without disturbing any balance. And she was of the opinion that although the negotiations had started in the end of April, the railway trade union leaders for their popularity and small interest went on strike. She regretted the entire attitude of the leaders of the railwaymen’s unions and said that they had participated in the negotiations only to gain time and made constructive suggestions to avert strike (Hindustan Standard, 12.5. 74). Hence the meeting concluded by resolving a three point formula which included:

- 1) release of arrested leaders of NCCRS,
- 2) resumption of negotiations,
- 3) withdrawal of the strike.

For the government it was not possible to meet all the demands of the railway workers in the perspective of national economic conditions. The government held that since the last few years’ the government’s Labour Policy had benefitted the workers but did not increase the productivity in the industrial front. The government did not express any desire to meet the economic demand like wage parity, bonus or dearness allowance, therefore, the Action

Committee rejected the proposal of withdrawal of the strike. According to NCCRS, the government did not have any willingness to avert the deadlock by considering the overall position of the strike. The union leaders were of the opinion that these 3-point formulas were highly unsatisfactory and unacceptable as well. The Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that the hope of an early end of the three days old nationwide rail strike had been dismissed today on 10th May. The convenor of the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's struggle Sri. George Fernandes virtually rejected the three-point formula of the Government and urged the workers to continue their historic struggle in a peaceful manner (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 11.5. 74; p. 1). Fernandes stated from the jail that without considering the railwaymen's demands of wage parity with other public sector undertakings and bonus by the government, no settlement could be reached. In this crisis instead of attempting any agreement, all the political parties especially the ruling Congress party was more keen to compel the railway men to go on strike so that they could take the advantage of the situation in favour of their own interest. In the perspective of growing rural unemployment, social discontent and economic disorder the Government did not afford to alter or modify the three point formula. Thus in this background the Government could not change their plan of action and must be defensive and suppress any conscious effort towards any agitation (Fernandes, 1987; p. 48).

Interestingly on the other hand actions like dismissal or removal from service, arrests, suspension etc. had been taking place against the railwaymen by the authority. These actions had become a regular practice during the entire strike period. Apart from this Central Government resorted to brute force to break the unity of the railway workers. The rejection of government's three point formula was interpreted as crippling of the national economy and spreading chaos throughout the country by the leaders of NCCRS. The government was determined to crush this organised attempt to throw a challenge to the authority who considered it as an attack on democratic government and an effort to create anarchy over the country by the trade unions. But the leaders expressed their willingness through a press notice that NCCRS was still ready to hold fresh talks with the railway management yet again. According to The Hindu correspondent the tangential moves still (upto 11th May) 1974 had not initiated from any political corner for ending the railway strike because there was no proper understanding between the government and the opposition parties on the

purpose of the proposed three point formula so that the striking leaders could be influenced to resume the negotiations (The Hindu, 12.5. 74).

In the meantime opposition leaders requested V.V. Giri, the then President of India to intervene in the dispute and resolve the matter as soon as possible because already one week had passed and the deadlock had been continuing. As a result Mr. Giri met the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and discussed on this issue. According to informed sources Mr. Giri felt that there should be a fair settlement of the disputes so that the workers remained satisfied and put in their contributions to the national productivity design, there should be no bitterness between the government and the workers; he was believed to have opined asking the government to see that the labourer should not feel humiliated (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 16.5. 74; p. 1). On the other hand the leaders of the Action Committee had hoped that the government must have the courage and foresightedness to accept the suggestions of the President so that none of the sides lose their respect and sense of prestige. Thus it must try to reach a solution to step the crisis.

Nevertheless, the situations in various railway zones were marked by little improvements e.g., coal movement at the end of the second week had stepped up and food grains etc. also started moving. In Rajasthan the picture was quite reverse, in the early days of the strike there were few workers who had participated but with every passing day the number of striking workers were increasing in the entire division of Northern and Western Railway Zones. Times of India reported that while the total number of strikers all over the state was not available, the number of strikers increased in Jaipur division from 3,590 on Saturday to 4,057, eight core striking workers in Jaipur division were dismissed, hence it brought the total number of the dismissed workers to twenty one (Times of India, 14.5. 74).

Interestingly the loyal workers were staying in the stations taking lunch and dinner at free kitchen run by the railways at the cost of rupees 5/- only. Several areas showed stand stillness in the functioning of railway offices or yards and workshops as well e.g., Gorakhpur, two areas of N.F. Railways, Eastern Railways and South Eastern Railways, the majority of the workers struck hence the movement of goods and passenger trains were very much restricted and continued to be dislocated. A family of a Central Railway employee complained that police continuously coming and threatening them for the employee's

participation in the agitation. Interestingly Central Railway authority announced that fresh recruitment would be taking place in the posts of the dismissed class III and class IV categories of railway workers. The wives of four motormen were arrested because their husband's non-participation in duties created great inconvenience to the general public. Most of the striking employees left their quarters to avoid arrest. Many hundreds of unionists and striking workers were arrested or removed from job started inevitably weakening the strike process. The number of dismissals has risen to over eight hundreds and arrests to well over ten thousands according to informed sources (Times of India, 13.5. 74).

Central Government Employees general strike on 15th May 1974 to support the struggle of the railwaymen throughout the country received an industrial solidarity and undeniable affirmative response. Apart from this the Central Government Employees throughout the country participated in hunger strike. They also conducted meetings, assembles and demonstrations too. T. N. Siddhanta, observing the solidarity pledge of the all central government employees towards the railwaymen's cause, mentioned here that the All India Defence Employees' Federation called for solidarity tools down strike of civilian defence employees in Ordnance Factories and the banks including State Banks, Life Insurance Corporations and General Insurance employees too participated in the solidarity strike action (Siddhanta, 1974; pp. 76-77). All these activities of the different trade unions actually tried to exert a considerable pressure on the Central Government. On the seventeenth day of the strike NCCRS blamed the authority for its confrontational attitude and still not to avert the deadlock. Smt. Parvathi Krishnan and Sri Krishna, members of the Action Committee were arrested in New Delhi on 14th May 1974 in the morning and the arrests were made when they were going to Sari Rohilla in North Delhi to address a meeting of the railwaymen (Assam Tribune, 15.5. 74). This incident indicated the heavy headedness of the government and its pining for continuous confrontation with trade unions. Hence, out of total thirteen members of the Action Committee seven members got arrested and were kept behind the bars. Not only the leaders but the police arrested nearly twenty thousand railwaymen. Instead of negotiation government utilised armed forces to break the strength of the workers. Police invaded the railway colonies as enemy territories. Times of India reported that the entire opposition members including the members of Congress (O) which had opposed to the rail strike, walked out of the Rajya Sabha on 13th of May (Times of

India, 14.5. 74; p. 1). The President of National Mazdoor Union, P. R. Menon in a statement strongly condemned the ‘terror tactics of the government’ to break the morale of the striking railwaymen (Times of India, 20.5. 74). He referred in this connection to the incident of Kurla where ten railway workers were arrested, handcuffed and compelled to walk through the station areas on 18.5. 74. From above it can be said that a reign of terror persisted in the railway zones during the strike days. The government was charged as inflexible, rigid, repressive and brutal. The members of Rajya Sabha like R.K. Mishra, H.D. Malaviya accounted the strike as harmful to the interest of the workers. Dange was of the opinion that an early settlement was necessary for ending the dispute.

By the end of the first week (from 15th May 1974 onwards) the Northern Railways authority claimed an improvement in the passenger traffic and enough staff was there in the booking counters or in the offices and slowly loco men started joining their duties. This improvement had helped them to withdraw the Territorial Army from several places like Delhi, Kanpur etc. More long distance trains were resorted, e.g., in South East section, Madras-Dadar, Kandla-Ghandhidham, Baroda-Ahmedabad sections, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh section more trains started running and some long distance mail and express trains also showed some mobility. Trains started to move from Howrah station. Different divisions of the Eastern zone had reported that gradually workers were joining their duties and movement of suburban trains were revamped. Coal rakes also proceeded towards steel plants; wagon mobility in Dhanbad division had increased. Hindustan Standard reported that the Eastern and South-Eastern railways official sources revealed on 12th May in Calcutta that all the six hundred and sixty five employees of the Eastern and South-Eastern railways who had been dismissed from the service till 12th of May 1974, were on the charge of indulging in violence and dereliction of duty (Hindustan Standard, 13.5. 74; p.1). In the three metropolitan cities i.e., in Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi suburban train services began and gradually a large number of staff were returning to their offices. At the end of the two weeks the scenario of the struggle had changed a lot. As per Times of India news correspondent though some long distance trains were running far behind the schedule, the railway strike had become “almost ineffective” in Madhya Pradesh according to official circles. It also said that so far, one thousand four hundreds and four people including one thousand three hundred and twenty four railway employees had been arrested (Times of

India, 20.5. 74; p. 5). In the Eastern and South Eastern Railways slowly trains had regained the mobility towards various directions of the country. While Eastern Railways claimed that about sixteen thousand striking employees had returned to their works, the South Eastern Railways put the figure at eleven thousand eight hundred and eight till last night (Times of India, 20.5. 74). Kanpur, Barauni, Lucknow etc. exhibited improvements not only in terms of train services but also in the marshalling yards, wagon workshops etc. were attended by many workers. According to the Times of India reports on the twelfth day of the railwaymen's strike one hundred and thirty nine motor men in Bombay on 19th May Sunday, gave an undertaking before a metropolitan magistrate to resume duty and this was the first time that a large number of striking motor men had decided to go back to work that indicated a dent in the worker's revolt (Times of India, 20.5. 74, p.1). Mobility of local trains had increased in Western and Central Railways from 20th May 1974, i.e., from the end of second week. Bombay-Ahmedabad passenger trains too, by the end of second week, were able to bring the milk tankers too.

The Hindustan Standard reported that M. Kalyansundaram, member of NCCRS in Madras claimed the strike was continuing as "strong as ever" in the Southern Railways and alleged twelve hundred railway workers who were detained and convicted had been served with orders of suspension and dismissal (Hindustan Standard, 17.5.74; p.1). Notwithstanding, the declaration of the authority the hardships and sufferings of the general public had been continuing due to the irregular movements of the passenger trains. Many stations in Sealdah division and Kharagpur section were closed till the twelfth day. The toiling mass of India had shown tremendous solidarity in this struggle. The strike is complete in Bombay and whatever traffic is maintained is being handled by the Territorial Army (New Age, 1974; p.4). On May 14 Hindustan Times reported: "Strike position in Bombay division of Western and Central Railways has stabilised". However, there had been several accidents taking place since the strike had started. The Railway authority proclaimed all of them as the cases of sabotage and intimidation. But investigation revealed that all these were aggressive demonstrations by the authority.

The Action Committee of NCCRS intended to continue the strike with its "full vigour". It decided after assessing the strike situation throughout the country in the mid of the second week, to carry on their struggle. And they believed that they would be successful

in achieving an honourable settlement. The members of National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's struggle said to the reporters of The Statesman on 17th May in a statement that because of "its unreasonable adamant stand" the government was prolonging the strike "with a view to crushing it". They guessed that if this attitude continued, "it would cause invaluable harm to the national economy which would be felt for many months to come (The Statesman, 18.5. 74). Goray, a socialist M.P. stated that with every passing day a new problem got added with the old one especially the problem of victimisation which was in an alarming condition and the government should not take it as an issue of prestige otherwise, it would cause more damage in every field of national economy and polity. Surprisingly both the sides were not in a mood of compromise and showed no evidence of relaxing their earlier positions. The trade union leaders like S. M. Joshi, Socialist leader Madhu Dandavate, Madhu Limaye expressed their desires to end the strike without causing any mark of bitterness among the workers. Fernandes appealed to Jayaprakash Narayan to meet all the members of the Action Committee for the future policy decision and measures about the strike struggle. Fernandes maintained that as he was not able to meet anyone in the prison but it seemed that there would not be any other option opened to the railway workers but to continue their heroic battle. The Times of India reported that the Opposition leaders in Parliament had decided to associate themselves with all effort to reach an honourable settlement of the strike. The leaders including S. N. Mishra (Congress O), Jagannath Rao Joshi (J.S.), Bhupesh Gupta (CPI), Tridib Choudhury (RSP), Samar Mukherjee (CPM), Madhu Dandavate (SP) and J.B. Dhate (FB) attended a meeting on 19th May 1974 for this purpose (Times of India, 20.5. 74; p.1).

At the end of the second week, the railway authority agreed that there were serious inconveniences that still existed in running the trains – both the passenger and goods. In the North East region it had been difficult to maintain uninterrupted goods traffic which actually obstructed the tea trading in this region especially in Assam. Hindustan Standard reported that two goods sheds of Eastern Railways – Ultadanga and Chitpur were facing serious congestions and a large number of wagons containing rapeseed and other oil-seeds, grains, pulses and miscellaneous goods were standing unloaded (Hindustan Standard, 21.5. 74; p.8). In Calcutta and Bombay the suburban electrical multiple rakes were kept abandoned and inoperative due to the absence of the maintenance staff whose duty was to check and repair

the coaches in the Car shed. In some divisions like Kharagpur, the railwaymen's strike at the end of third week had successfully paralysed the normal activities of the area. Police had completely taken care of the area; the schools were given summer vacation and now had become police barrack. The running staffs of this division were compelled to join work by the police and para-military force especially the drivers, motor items, guards etc.

In Howrah station the queue before the booking counters tailed far away the station area, because only a few booking counters were opened. This strike had affected the social life also e.g., people could not attend the marriage ceremonies in far away places, students who stayed away from home could not meet their parents for long. Therefore, when the fewer counters started operating and trains also started running. People began rushing to their destinations.

In the Southern Railways, there was a scarcity of the essential commodities in the market. Huge price rise was observed here. Prices of edible oil, vegetables, building materials and electrical goods have gone up by thirty to forty percent; cement and sugar have vanished from the market, although the sale of cement is regulated by the government (Link 1974; p.15). The Chief Minister Karunanidhi referred to the railway strike as responsible for these current conditions. In this critical background the senior trade union leaders discussed with the Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament to revise the three point formula and advised to include the modification of wage structure of the railwaymen. They also talked with the Bonus Review Committee to consider the question of bonus. Dange who had tried to start a fresh talk for settlement, made it clear that unless the Government created a 'proper atmosphere for resuming dialogues with the Action Committee' the struggle would continue. Therefore all those thousands workers who were in prison, were assured to be released. Not only that the members of the NCCRS had to meet immediately otherwise the reinstatement formula for the settlement had been failed to have any effect (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 25.5. 74; p. 1). NCCRS reaffirmed the determination to continue the struggle on the fifteenth day of the strike as the government had not shown any willingness to negotiate on the issues of wage parity and bonus. NCCRS stated that men from Ambala, Jodhpur, Bhilai etc. had rejoined in the agitation at the end of the second week. In this moment all felt an amicable settlement was necessary and very important because the paucity of funds created another trouble for the striking workers and their

families. Thus the trade unions started collecting money to help them and decided to contribute their one day's salary to the striking railway workers. They got massive support from most of the trade unions in the country. Opposition parties especially the Socialists and the Left directed their different units to organise peaceful agitations like gheraos, dharnas etc. all over the country for three days from 26th May. Day by day it was becoming more troublesome for the striking workers to resist the heavy repressions and to maintain the same morale and strength to pursue the struggle. As a result NCCRS announced 21st May as Anti Repression Day.

The strike entered into the third week and from all over India, reports of improvement in movement of trains and other operational works were becoming more and more normal. Many workers started resuming their duties. Six thousand wagons were loaded with coal in Bengal-Bihar coalfields during the last twenty four hours; another one thousand and one hundred wagons were loaded in the Central Indian Coalfields (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 26.5. 74). Despite all these the Action Committee favoured to continue the strike. At the end of today's meeting of the Central Executives of the CPI here, Indrajit Gupta, CPI leader and President of South Eastern Railway Workers' Union, told newsman while releasing a resolution in favour of the strike that the government had "declared a war on railway workers, but the workers had not" (Hindustan Standard, 24.5. 74). But all the members of the NCCRS, trade union leaders, and leaders of the opposition parties hoped for a positive development to break the deadlock created by this dispute. On 25th May Assam Tribune noted that the prospect of a settlement to end the eighteen day old rail strike appeared to be dim because the government and the union leaders decided to stay on their respective positions. As the Government remained adamant on its position to oppose the workers' agitation, the trade union leaders expressed their desire to carry on their struggle with full power and strength (Assam Tribune, 26.5. 74). In the meantime, AITUC declared that time had come to decide upon the strike issue and group wise and zone wise views and opinions of railway workers should also be taken into consideration. These views and opinions should be judged and then take further decisions regarding the continuation of the strike. This declaration by AITUC made the NCCRS surprised and hence they maintained that this would destroy nothing but the hard earned unity of the workers based on great sacrifices and sufferings. The Committee pledged whole hearted support to the railway

workers “in the fight against detention, dismissals, suspensions, removal, break-in-service and eviction from railway quarters and appealed to them to continue the strike” with more determination and firmness as the government had not changed its attitude (Assam Tribune, 26.5. 74). This demonstrated a serious cleavage and disagreement on the strike issue among leaders of the trade unions. This movement was a reflection of strained relationship between the industrial working class and the government on the one hand, and a hostile attitude amongst the trade union leaders. On the assurance of non-victimisation by the government the leaders like Dange and others were of the opinion that all the members of the Action Committee should meet and collectively resolve to withdraw the strike. The current political context revealed the real feeling of the democratic government towards the working class of the country. It exhibited a battle between the working class and the ruling government. It also highlighted the strength and weakness of the authority, strength of the government to suppress the working class movement and the weakness to deal with any kind of opposition. This tendency of the government had manifested its explicit reliance on force as a conflict resolving machinery which had a far reaching political implication, ultimately led to the imposition of Internal Emergency in June 1975. Interestingly, all the parties involved in this struggle had used this strike issue in their favour but ironically the innocent railway worker’s became the agents of the political battle.

Meantime, in different railway zones like Western, Central, Northern, Southern, some divisions of Eastern and North-East Frontier Railways almost a pre-strike environment appeared to exist. Goods and passenger traffic became operative and moreover, the loco workshops started functioning. A Railway Ministry spokesman claimed on 24th May that about seven thousand strikers on the Central and Western Railways resumed duty in the last twenty four hours “making the collapse of the last pocket of strikers (Hindustan Standard, 25.5. 74). In various areas of N.F. Railways e.g., Rangia, Guwahati etc. a bulk of railway employees had joined their duties. Many long distant trains – goods and passenger services had improved a lot. In this environment it was really disheartening for the striking railway workers not to have any option for an honourable settlement. J. M. Biswas was of the opinion that it was natural that the railway workers had to loose heart and spirit at a time when the avenues for negotiations at the government level seemed to have disappeared. The situation became more difficult when the majority of the Action Committee members were

locked up in jail marking thereby the possibility of correct and joint decision for the railway workers practically was impossible. And the strike situation itself had been gradually deteriorating since the 15th of May, it was almost non-existent. It could not however, be resisted (Biswas, 1977, p. 19).

In this background the rail strike was called off from 28th May at 6.00 a.m. The twenty day long strike was declared to be withdrawn by the Action Committee of NCCRS unilaterally. George Fernandes and other members of Action Committee who were in jail custody like J.P. Chaubey, Parvathi Krishnan, Krishna etc. had decided to call off the strike, while the other members like Priya Gupta or Samar Mukherjee had managed to go along with their decision. However, the NCCRS leaders had decided to call off the strike for various reasons. Following were some of them: The workers were threatened and repressed heavily and these long four weeks of terror attacks and suppression had demoralised the workers immensely. The strike scenario also had been gradually disappearing from most of the railway divisions and it remained only “on papers”. Therefore, it would be more dishonourable and disgraceful for the leadership of the railway trade unions to continue the strike ignoring the graveness of the situation. The railwaymen who were still on the strike, were literally starving and those who had already joined their jobs were bitten bitterly and tortured heavily by the police and CRPF. The Defence India Rules was designed for different purpose but it was applied with vengeance on the railway workers who were conceived as the great enemies of the state. Army and all other kinds of armed forces were utilised against the striking workers. Mrs. Gandhi’s government did not even desire to undergo any change in its attitude towards the working class movement of the country till the end of the withdrawal. Since the mid of the second week i.e., from 18th May 1974 the news papers constantly published that despite the exaggerations made by the authority regarding the prevailing normalcy in the railway stations and offices, slowly the circumstances were going out of control of the union leaders. The strike was virtually ineffective at this phase from the end of the second week. Hindustan Standard analysed that the government had succeeded not merely in beating down the strikers, but more importantly it successful in creating a division in the ranks of the opposition parties (Hindustan Standard, 28.5.74, p. 1). At the same time Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi expressed that there should not be any bitterness amongst the trade unions and the workers because the

government was not against the demands of the workers but all should focus on the larger interests of the country.

So far as the circumstances were concerned, the Action Committee had to consider all these perspectives and thus, withdrew the strike. The Action Committee published a resolution in support of the withdrawal of the strike. The resolution said “The Action Committee having given deep consideration to the strike situations on all the zonal railways and in other railway establishments and being aware of the economic consequences of further prolonging the actions and conscious of the responsibility thrust on it in the circumstances, hereby resolves to unilaterally call off the strike” (Hindustan Standard, 28.5.74). “The Committee calls upon all railway men to return to work and do everything within their power to bring normalcy in the movement of trains” (Times of India, 28.5. 74). According to the Action Committee the strike was called off due to current economic status of the workers and the country as well. They proclaimed that being aware of the recent economic facts; the strike should not be continued any longer. This unilateral decision of withdrawal was not supported by many members of the Committee, e.g., Priya Gupta, Secretary of AIRF, and member of the Action Committee of NCCRS, said that there was no assurance of non-victimisation by the government and release of those hundreds of thousands of railwaymen who were arrested during the course of the strike. Thus the decision of unconditional withdrawal of the strike brought severe splits amongst the trade union leaders. The most unsatisfied leaders who were completely disagreed with this decision were Tridib Choudhury M.P. (UTUC) and Jatin Chakraborty, the General Secretary of UTUC. But S.A. Dange opined that NCCRS had shown maturity and generosity by withdrawing the strike. Chakraborty held that the “AITUC was a Trojan horse into the ranks of the NCCRS. It created the first disruption and demoralisation in the NCCRS and today’s decision is the inevitable result. We have serious disagreement with the wisdom of this decision because it will adversely affect not only railwaymen’s struggle but also trade union movement in general (Hindustan Standard, 28.5.74). On the other hand, the Railway Management announced that it would take a few days to become everything normal in the railway industry and get back in track. After the withdrawal of the strike the railway authority kept some long distance trains like Rajdhani Express cancelled. Assam Tribune corresponded that the train services remained disrupted for few more days. According to

railway official sources the twenty days long nation-wide strike by the railwaymen had disturbed the railway services heavily thus setting back into its original shape would take time (Assam Tribune, 29.5. 74; p. 1). In the Southern Railways the official sources revealed that it would take twenty four hours to reach the prescribe position. Attendances were becoming more or less regular in most of the railway offices in the country. In N.F. Railway headquarter at Maligaon, Guwahati some demonstration took place against the unconditional withdrawal of the strike. The news of the termination of the strike had relieved all the sections of the people of the Indian society. The daily wage earners, hawkers, vendors, peasants, small traders, office goers, daily passengers etc. became very happy and relaxed. A huge section of people especially belonging to the lower economic strata heavily depended on railway transportation. But the participant of the strike who had been suffering since long twenty days, were left speechless and totally disheartened and puzzled too. Many of the workers could not understand their future steps because without any affirmative commitment from the government about the workers, the strike struggle was withdrawn unconditionally. Mishra had welcomed the employees returning to their duties and assured that no case of victimisation would be charged and his department would not be vindictive. He also communicated his willingness to discuss with the union leaders about the rail men's problems especially with the recognised unions such as AIRF and NFIR. The railway authority had declared break-in-service would be implemented against the striking workers who were charged with the cases of sabotage, violence, intimidation and destruction of railway property. In this connection Mrs. Gandhi thanked those workers who helped the authority to keep the wheels of the railways running during these twenty long days. Railway Ministry announced advance increment to these loyal workers. For having worked for forty eight hours at a stretch, over five hundred Eastern Railway employees had already been sanctioned advance increment (Hindustan Standard, 28.5. 74). This news agitated the dismissed workers and they assaulted near about sixty loyal workers in Kharagpur. In different divisions of the railways had reported the news of fresh agitations against the decision of advance increments to the loyal workers by the authority.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi mentioned that the State Governments were already instructed to start the process of screening and releasing the impersonal workers and leaders of the different trade union and members of NCCRS. Fernandes and other leaders of NCCRS who

were arrested under MISA or DIR were released after withdrawal of the strike. According to Fernandes the strike was a means and the circumstances and greater cause of the nation had compelled them to take this decision. He opined that it was most crucial time to stand united and praised the workers for their heroic battle and glorious struggle.

In the course of assessing the intensity of the strike and the participation of the workers, Fernandes mentioned that out of fourteen lac permanent employees almost twelve lac faced break-in-service and fifty thousands were dismissed from jobs. Therefore, this figure symbolised the paternity and strength of the movement. Fernandes clarified this decision of unconditional withdrawal of the strike not as a weakness of trade union movement but for launching larger movement more preparedness was required to continue indefinite period of strike against such an undemocratic and authoritarian government. He believed that the railwaymen never got demoralised and never lost unity, but it would provide them more strength, solidarity, tolerance and experience for future action. He commented that if the government remained such an unsympathetic and despotic the working class would have been pursuing their struggle too. He criticised the role of the All India Radio during the strike days, which was solely propagated against the working class struggle and favoured the policy of terror tactics and repression as practiced by the government. The success of force mobilisation strengthened the hand of the Indira Congress in managing adverse situations during her tenure. The breaking of the railway strike was a step in the long term trend towards authoritarianism which marked Congress rule under Indira Gandhi (Sherlock, 2002; p. 413).