

## **Chapter V**

### **The Railwaymen's Strike of 1974: Impact on Eastern Railways**

In the fifth chapter we look at the strike situation in the Eastern Railways (E.R). It is an analysis of the unmet demands of the railwaymen which triggered their resentments and discontentment against the authority. The discontentment had prompted them to go against the management in all the zonal railways throughout the country. In this chapter we look at the preparations of the rank and file railway workers and their trade unions for launching of an indefinite strike in May 1974 in Eastern Railways (ER). Description of the prevailing situations during the strike days in the E.R. is the central concern of the chapter. Here we also try to address the impact of the struggle in this Zone. All this is discussed in three different sections. The first section evaluates the position of the railwaymen in E.R. in the background of the industrial relation of the country during the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. It explores the reasons of their grievances and demands in the country's economic situation in E.R. It also reviews the steps and measures taken by the railwaymen and their organisations to mount an indefinite strike in this Zone. Section two seeks to assess the circumstances that persisted in various Divisions of Eastern Railways during the twenty days of the struggle in May 1974. In section three we analyse the impact of the struggle in this Zone.

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### **Grievances of the Eastern Railwaymen and their Preparations for the Strike of May 1974**

Eastern Railways was one of the largest and oldest zones of the Indian Railways. We must discuss the history of the Eastern Railway since its inception briefly. On 15<sup>th</sup> August 1854, East Indian Railway's first train had moved from Howrah to Hooghly, which covered a distance of twenty four miles. It was stretched out up to the west bank of Yamuna in 1862.

The Government of India took over the charge of the management of East Indian Railways in 1925 and created six divisions of this zone – such as Howrah, Asansol, Dinajpore, Allahabad, Lucknow and Moradabad. East Indian Railway came to be known as Eastern Railways on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1952 i.e., after independence. It was integrated with entire Bengal Nagpur Railways and consisted of Sealdah, Howrah, Asansol and Dinajpur Divisions with the head office in Farley Place, Calcutta. Later in August 1955, a part of B.N.R. i.e., Howrah to Vishakhapatnam in South and Nagpur in Central area were separated and the South Eastern Railways were formed. Eastern Railways had three major workshops – Liluah, Kanchrapara and Jamalpur. Chittaranjan Locomotive Works was situated in Asansol Division and started manufacturing from the year 1950 (Source: er.indianrailways.gov.in). Approximately Eastern Railways employed two lac workers in 1974.

The main reason behind the workers' grievances was the wage structure, i.e., the mode of payment of salary and the amount too. Suwendu Mukherjee, member of the Broader Committee of NCCRS, employed as a technician in Kanchrapara Workshop<sup>2</sup> was of the opinion that the main reason of workers' resentment was their salary which was so less that they could not avail minimum livelihood. It was really very tough for them to run a family of seven members with this amount of money. Above all heavy price rice of daily commodities especially the prices of food grains and edible oil had become immensely high which ultimately immersed the railwaymen into darkness. Brojesh Prasad Chowdhury,<sup>3</sup> the leader of Eastern Railwaymen's Union posted in Ranaghat under Sealdah Division in Eastern Railway as a Chief Commercial Clerk shared similar views about the workers' anguish. He talked about the economic hardships of Railwaymen due to the inadequate quantum of salary paid by the railways. He informed that the railway workers were the worst sufferers as they did not have any bargaining power like the other Public Sector Units they had to abide by the recommendations of the Pay Commission. Workers also had disappointments on the bonus issues. In this situation the crippling economic policy of the Government as adopted by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had plunged the working class into a deep crisis. Sankar Prasad Chatterjee was of the opinion that since the

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Suwendu Mukherjee on 19.01.2018 at 2:30 p.m. at his Kanchrapara Residence

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Brojesh Prasad Chowdhury on 20.01. 2018 at 8:30 a.m. at his Muchipara Lane Residence, Kolkata

last two decades the price of bare necessities began accelerating with widespread black marketing, no increase in wages and salaries or D.A. decline in purchasing power due to heavy taxation and high inflation, the railwaymen bore the chilliest burnt (Chatterjee, 1983; p. 3).

Eastern Region was very rich in minerals and agriculture and the geographical area under Eastern Railway was very significant in the economic perspective of the country. It was one of the most densely populated area, connecting the entire eastern part of India with the rest of the country and a market in itself which added a good amount to the national purse. Therefore, it was quite obvious that when the Eastern Railways contributed a considerable amount of profit to the gross national income, the workers expected to be treated well at least economically. But the management of E.R had failed to accomplish their minimum necessities of the labourers in the industry. Above all the factors like rising prices, shortages, corruption, parallel black money-economy and incompetence had cemented each other in such a way that it became terribly arduous to break the vicious circle (Jain, 1974) In this background the employees became frustrated with the attitude of the management. They started considering themselves as the most disadvantaged sections of the working class. Sometimes railway workers were unable meet their daily requirements of life. In Eastern Railway in some railway colonies the quarters provided by authority were of poor qualities, in fact the quarters for Group D or Class IV categories had only two rooms without proper system of ventilation and the rooms were also too small to live. These quarters basically could not accommodate a family of six or seven members. Another reason which aggravated the workers was the decision of withdrawal of the rationing system from the grain shops. Poor quality of uniforms provided to the drivers, foremen, cabin men and several other categories of workers by the authority was another cause of their anger. Rabindra Chandra Roy,<sup>4</sup> member of Eastern Railwaymen's Union was the foreman in Sealdah Station in 1974 made the above statement. The long demand of the Loco men i.e., the decrease of the long hours of duty also provided necessary impetus to the railway workers to erupt their anger and let the voice to reach at the highest level. Exploitations and economic deprivations since long had played a significant role in this regard. The role's played by the railway trade unions too disappointed the general railway workers in the country. All the movements prior

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<sup>4</sup> Interview on 19.01. 2018 at the Kanchrapara Residence of Mr. Suvendu Mukherjee at 5:00 p.m

to 1974, mainly the strikes of 1960 and 1968 went futile as it failed to bring any integration among the workers and had no ideological base. Thus they failed to fetch anything for the working class as a whole. In the Eastern Railway Zone, the Chittaranjan Locomotive Workers' Labour Union affiliated under the AIRF was a very strong organisation from its inception. But the authority for its own safety tried to avoid giving recognition. Almost twelve to thirteen thousand workers employed in Chittaranjan Locomotive supported this organisation. But before the 1968 strike, AIRF had cancelled its affiliation on a very filthy issue. S.K Bramha informed that AIRF had cancelled the affiliation due to the non-payment of fees and the Union in Chittaranjan Locomotives was not even provided seven days time to repay the fees (Bramha, 2016; p. 117). Mukherjee had mentioned the conditions of the casual labourers who actually were the main victims of exploitations. The casual workers got rupees three (Rs. 3/-) per day and the payment was on the basis of 'no work no pay'. The casual workers were appointed for hundred and nineteen days then they were terminated for a day. Again they were reappointed for the above said period in another department or sent to different place. The purpose behind this policy was that these non- permanent sections could never demand substantive posts. There was no fixed working hour for them and no fixed type of work because they were shifted from one department to another and one place to other. No facilities like leave, accidental benefits, quarters, allowances were provided to them. They were not entitled to voice their resentment, otherwise faced retrenchment immediately. Malay Ranjan Das<sup>5</sup> who worked in various departments like Signalling Inspector (S.I), Permanent Way Inspector (P.W.I), Bridge Route Inspector (B.R.I) etc. and moved from Sealdah to Asansol divisions under the Eastern Railway. The workers comprising of both the permanent and casual involved in the Indian Railways were the most deprived section of the industrial working class. The Recommendation of Gadkaar Commission did not include these three lacs of casual workers for the payment of Dearness Allowances. It excluded those railway men too who got rupees 449/- per month. All these factors inflamed them.

However, the workers of all the railway zones including the Eastern region had participated in the five days strike of 1960 and one day token strike of 1968 in protest of

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Malay Ranjan Das on 21.01. 2018 at the Office of the Pensioners' Association, Eastern Railways at 6:00 p.m., Barasat

their economic exploitation. Railway workers had therefore, solid reasons to go for larger action against the authority, if one compared the salary or emoluments of the other Public Sector Undertakings like BHEL by using their bargaining power, compelled the authority to review and increased the salary in every four years. But the railway workforce comprising of hundred categories of staff had failed to influence their authority. It created a great deal of disappointments and frustration among them. This failure disillusioned them about the role of the recognised trade unions as well. In early seventies, it seemed that there were a number of powerful agitations by different categories of staff like Loco maintenance, Station Masters, Signal and Tele-communications, Guards and Yard and Cabin etc. in the Indian Railways for their sectional demands under the banner of their unrecognised organisations (Bhangoo, 1999; p. 15). However, all these activities of the workers were perceived by the Government as an attack on liberal democratic system. The authority argued that rules of conciliation machinery were not followed properly by the leaders of the railway trade unions. According to them in 1951 the Railway Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri had set up Permanent Negotiating Machinery (PNM) at the three levels – divisional management, Railway Board and an Ad-hoc Tribunal levels. At the third level it was headed by any of the retired Supreme Court or High Court Judge to examine the grievances and demands of the workers and the capabilities of the departments to meet the demands of the workers. The main purpose was to minimise the resentments of the workers and maintain a healthy industrial relationship between the two. To Ranabir Samaddar in 1972 the first step was taken by the Railway Ministry which constituted a Corporate Enterprise Group (C.E.G.) of Management in order to give opportunities to the organised labour to express their views on the working of the Indian Railways and also suggest measures needed to be taken for improving the efficiency of the railways (Samaddar, 2015; p. 40). It was to be worked at three levels, e.g., Railway Board level, Zonal level and at the Divisional level so that the grievances and demands of the railway men could be voiced and reached upto the highest level. No such disruption of industrial growth was desirable and at the same time not even tolerable. But peculiarly all the machineries and instruments of conciliation and reconciliation had failed. Samaddar argued that some instances were there, as in 1965 that the railway authority had approached to the Parliament for the payment of bonus to the railwaymen as a matter of principle. Because the same rule for Payment of Bonus was

applied to the toy factory and other establishments employing twenty or more unskilled manual labourers, or an establishment which followed the same mode of payment as per the Factories Act (1948), salary, wage and dearness allowance including all cash and other allowances which the employees received as incentive and same procedure of retrenchment compensation and gratuity (Samaddar, 2015; p. 40).

On the other hand the Railway Minister L.N. Mishra was of the opinion that the Indian Railways had been facing financial crisis since the last two years. According to him, the situation had become graver in the recent past due to the attitude of the workers who frequently went on agitation like strikes, work to rule or go slow etc. These acts seriously impeded the movements of essential commodities in different parts of the country and eventually obstructed the earnings and growth of the industry. If the Indian Railways as public sector industry could not achieve its estimated rate of profitability as set by the Fifth Plan then the purpose of Planning would not be fulfilled and the economy will never flourish and reach its desired goal.

In this situation, the trade unions in the railways had found it extremely difficult to appease the authority on the one hand and to subvert the labour movement on the other. It also became exasperating for them to reassert their authority especially for AIRF. The level of corruption and reluctance to lead any movement for the workers' cause had become a practice which ultimately strained the relationship between the union and workers and weakened their positions. The railwaymen had been increasingly losing faith on the leadership of the recognised unions especially the AIRF. Several local based struggles took place in the railway industry during this period. The success of AILRSA blew a massive threat to the unions and workers of all levels to fight against the authority. It helped the workers to strengthen their power and regain faith on struggle. The most important essence and feature of this struggle was its attempt towards unity. It approached and encouraged pro-unity thrust among the workers on the sectional basis but ultimately from the broader perspective it instigated the factors leading to the anti unity forces among the railway labourers.

The broad based unity achieved by the workers was a step to the successful launching and continuation of struggle which ultimately extended upto twenty days. In the

Eastern Railways (E.R.), it continued for twenty one days and in some places especially in the remote areas twenty two days as they did not get the news of withdrawal of the strike. In West Bengal there was a strike “Bangla Bandh” on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1974 in support of the railwaymen’s’ struggle which indicated the solidarity and the strength of the working class. The most significant and primary tasks of the recognised trade unions were to eliminate the category sentiments among the railway workers and to strive for pro-unity dynamism in the railway industry. The existence of category-wise associations created a serious threat to the industrial harmony and also a menace to the compatible relationship between the employer and the employees and also amongst the workers and their organisations. It was a crucial hindrance in the way of achieving solidarity in the working class movement. In many places it was observed that local leadership went against the decision of united struggle led by AIRF. In the local levels, the workers had lost faith from AIRF in many cases thus; the streamlining of unity process was viewed as another treacherous move of the recognised unions. Anti AIRF stands of the local leadership and grass root activists had opposed the preparation for the indefinite strike of all the sections of the workers. However, the task of pro-unity leadership was more arduous and inconvenient because the workers had seen the attitude of the recognised unions and their affiliated Federations during the AILRSA strike in December 1973. But there was a constant and continuous effort to persuade all the sections of the railway workers to join in the united struggle though there was a huge controversy and contrary of opinions prevailed. The decision of the organisation did not only symbolise the defect of the anti-unity forces in the railway trade union movement but also, delivered a great blow to the disruptive activities of the Railway Ministry in their effort to isolate AILRSA from the united movement of railwaymen (Dhar, 1999; p. 20). At this juncture one should refer to the unity which was achieved and observed upto 1972 when AIRF and NFIR jointly demonstrated against the authority in front of the Rail Bhawan in New Delhi.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately this unity did not remain for a long time and they opposed each other on every attempt of joint venture. No efforts were initiated to bridge the gap between the two recognised unions, resultantly the difference of opinions turned into the relation of

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<sup>6</sup> A.P. Sharma, Secretary of NFIR raised the slogan “agar bonus nehi milega toh kiya hoga ...aur kiya rail ka chakka jaam hoga” Interview with Mr. Suvendu Mukherjee (who had witnessed the incident and was present in New Delhi on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1972) on 19.01.18 at 2.30 pm at Kanchrapara Residence.

enmity and between the two. It eventually affected the broader unity and the solidarity of the trade union movement in the country.

In the Eastern Railway and in case of Northeast Frontier Railways, the role of the trade union leaders in harmonising and uniting the railway workers was remarkable. Jyoti Basu was one of them. He started working in the railway front before independence. He always tried to consolidate the working class and attempted to reach solidarity of the industrial workers. He became the General Secretary of Rail Road Worker Union. In his early phase of political career he was assigned to work only for the unification of the railway workers' associations. As railways were divided into hundred of categories of works, the workers were also divided into different categories. He understood that this fragmentation could never lead any broader movement and fetch any positive result. He organised several meetings, addressed the grass root workers. He travelled from Allahabad, Tundla, Jamalpur to Asansol, Liluah, Naihati, Kanchrapara and Kolkata and expressed his opinion in favour of united struggle. Basu, as a member of the Parliament, had a stronghold over the entire north east region and as a trade union leader and founder of leftist trade union's strong base in the railway industry he had motivated a large number of workers and encouraged them. Therefore, the workers from Tinsukia to Mughalsarai including the areas of North Bengal and also Darjeeling hills were swept by the communist ideology (Bramha, 2016; p.100).

All India Railway Employees Confederation conducted a convention in Madras on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1974 to discuss the common demands and future actions of the railway workers. This convention was attended by all types of railwaymen's organisations and central trade unions too. There was an overwhelming response from every nook and corner of the trade unions. The convention resolved the following programme of actions:

- a) From 2<sup>nd</sup> April to 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1974 'Demand Week' by wearing badges, holding mass rallies and demonstrations at different railway headquarters.
- b) From zero hours of 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1974 'Work to Rule' movement by all railwaymen till the demands are settled (Bhangoo, 1999; p. 16).

The weak condition of the organisation, i.e., the organisational inefficiency and weakness, existence of number of unions – recognised, unrecognised, craft, category wise unions, feeble and unconvincing leadership etc. were tough hurdles in the way of united action which must be overcome by the railwaymen in order to initiate a long term fight in the face of an all India general strike for an indefinite period. CITU played a significant role in this regard. At the national level CITU took the initiative to unite the trade union centres and railway unions and thus UCTU was formed followed by NCCRS at the national level of the railways (Ramdas, 1999; p. 28). This job was not at all easy because the position of the AIRF was tormented and railwaymen had a negative attitude towards the real intentions of the AIRF as the workers started suspecting the union because of its different previous actions and decisions. At the same time the workers especially the grass root workers had lost all faith on the recognised unions. While the Loco running staffs were getting involved in such strike actions, the AIRF generally remained a passive spectator (Fernandes, 1984; p. 28)<sup>7</sup>. And

In the meantime, the broader NCCRS was formed and it was proposed that in all the railway zones Zonal NCCRS must be constituted to peruse the decisions of the National Committee. The primary task of these Zonal NCCRS was supposed to bring the divergent political trends under one umbrella at the local levels. As a result in Eastern Railways an Action Committee was formed. Bimal Dey, the general secretary of Eastern Railwaymen's Union was elected as the Convenor of this Action Committee. Kanailal Bandopadhyay, another prominent leader of Eastern Railway, Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury, Suvendu Mukherjee became the members of this Committee. Suvendu Mukherjee was assigned to integrate the workers of different workshops, marshalling yards in Sealdah and Asansol Divisions and to build pro strike attitude among the railwaymen. Brajesh Prasad Chowdhuri was sent to the small and remote places where the workers were ignorant and he remembered that he went to every house of the railway worker and campaigned in favour of the united struggle. Some of the workers affirmed to support them and some accused them of non-action and betrayal. Fitting to the local conditions, the joint demonstrations, mass meetings, processions, democratic convention including the youths, students, women and

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<sup>7</sup> It was turned into a “rudderless ship”, Interview with Sri. Suvendu Mukherjee on 19.1.18 who corroborated the statement by quoting Mr. George Fernandes.

the rural masses were held and more and more participation of the workers in the public meetings were observed (Dhar, 1999; p. 21). In all the divisions of Eastern Railway thousand of leaflets and pamphlets in vernacular and in many other languages were printed and distributed the trade unions like CITU supported wholeheartedly and boosted up the railway workers in strengthening their morale. Other organisations and confederations too agreed spontaneously to support the activities of the railwaymen's Action Committee. In the big cities and towns under the Eastern Railway zone several meetings were held by the leaders of the zonal NCCRS which were attended by thousands of railwaymen. In the areas like Bandel, Naihati, Ranaghat, Kanchrapara meetings continued upto midnight and the attendance of the workers was overwhelmingly large. In all over the country in all divisional headquarters including Eastern Railways, the local Action Committees had served the strike notice to the Divisional Railway Managers on 23.04.74 together except in the South Eastern Railways where it was served on 22nd of April 1974 (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 9).

Unity of the Railwaymen under the leadership of NCCRS generated magnificent co-operation and coordinated actions. Therefore, railwaymen had exerted fullest strength in almost all the zonal railways in the form of indefinite nationwide strike to fulfil their charter of demands. The financial arrangements were the most important part for launching an indefinite strike successfully. Rabindra Chandra Roy, Sealdah Division was consigned to collect and raise funds in favour of the strike. Roy expressed his gratitude to those people who supported immensely to the railwaymen's cause without any hesitation. In fact people who were not associated with the railways stood beside them. He informed that some of the management staff were also sympathetic and provided financial assistance to them<sup>8</sup>. At that point of time in the Eastern Railway the construction of Metro Railways has just started. Metro Railways with its handful of employees was combined with the zonal NCCRS and jointly served the strike notice. Interestingly, they had participated in all the deputations. Most of the labourers of Metro Railways were casual and purely daily wage- earners. This section was also involved in all kinds of activities relating to the indefinite general strike of 1974. Permanent and casual workers of Metro Railways formed MTP Railwaymen's Union to the strike. Observing their zeal and enthusiasm the Eastern Railwaymen's Union had incorporated them into the coordination and Action Committee of the Railwaymen's

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr. Rabindra Chandra Roy on 19.01.18 at 5.00 pm

struggle. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1974, a big rally was held at New K.G. Building jointly by Eastern, South Eastern and Metro Railways where Baswan Singh, the trade union leader addressed the gathering (Mukherjee, 1999; p. 25). A meeting was held at Santragachi railway colony which was attended not only by the workers but also their family members. This meeting was addressed by Jyoti Basu to build consensus among them.

The Local Action Committees were instructed by the National Action Committee of NCCRS to follow their line of actions. The leaders were directed to remain semi-underground i.e., the local leaders should not stay in their quarters but keep a good liaison with the general workers at the same time. Following the directives, the leaders took shelter in nearby villages and started travelling from one place to another to avoid arrest. After the strike notice was served the authority had begun to show its power against the workers. Management had conceived it as a long term battle against the most important component of democracy. Several secret circulations revealed the real intention of the authority. Sri. Samar Mukherjee mentioned in his speech in the Lok Sabha debate referring to those circulations. He stated that the General Manager, Eastern Railways assured in writing to the Chairman of the Railway Board that enough police and army had been arranged to encounter the striking railwaymen, even few days before the strike action began. Then Sri Mukherjee referred to a secret circular which was placed before the House by Sri Jyotirmoy Basu, dated the 7<sup>th</sup> April issued by the Joint Secretary of the Home Ministry wherein categorical instructions had been given to the Chief Secretaries of various states that the leaders should be arrested before the strike materialised and not too early and not too late basis (Mukherjee, 1999; p. 9). Samar Mukherjee stated that from the very beginning all the Divisions of Eastern Railway, not only Eastern Railway but all the Zonal Railways were ready to confront and encounter the entire activities and the struggle of the working force. Following the orders of the circular, police started arresting the leaders and Nrisingha Chakraborty's house was searched and as he was not found in his quarter, police was not able to arrest him. Samar Mukherjee's house was also searched and seized by the Police and Intelligence Department on 2<sup>nd</sup> May. According to T.N Siddhanta the railway workers became highly annoyed with the authority and expressed their savage anger which stormed the masses. Not only that in the operation of the Railway Board, the Home Ministry or for the whole governments, it had

been prevalent which forced the railwaymen to go into the general strike action and face all the might of the state (Siddhanta, 1974; p. 69).

At the same time, Railway authority began its arrangements to manage the strike situation. Calcutta Corporation suspected that it would not be able to continue the water supply if the proposed rail strike materialised because the coal stock for the two pumping stations – Tallah and Palta were highly inadequate. If any of the two electrically operated pumping stations went out of order then the situation would become more terrible. FCI had prepared its own mechanism to increase its stock in order to meet the exigencies of the situation during the strike days. A large quantity of food grains was stored for fulfilling the demands of the three states – West Bengal, Bihar and Assam. In Eastern Zone the stock of rice and wheat was about 2.17,000 and 45,000 tonnes respectively in addition to 5,000 tonnes of milo; full arrangements had been made for road transport (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 33). The P & T (Post and Telegraph) had requested the public to use postage system only if emergency occurred. Eastern Railway had ordered to reduce the number of suburban trains in each and every division especially in Howrah and Sealdah. Throughout the country including E.R and South Eastern Railways (S.E.R) mobilisation of Indian Army personnel and Territorial Army was observed to maintain normal train services (Hindustan Standard, 5.5.74; p.1).

The Railway Authority had guessed the intensity of the agitation from the attitude of the railway workers and assumed that it might be very difficult for them to resist the upheaval, hence they started preparing themselves so that the situation does not go beyond control. On the other hand, the railway working class also had developed a very well knit coordination in the entire region and Calcutta became the main centre of the struggle; communication and coordination were maintained from here. Bimal Dey performed his responsibilities quite effectively and efficiently and created an appropriate network to link all the local leaders and workers to launch an indefinite strike. He tried to motivate the workers in general towards the struggle. Another member of the Action Committee, Kanailal Banerjee also played an optimistic role in this regard. He was actually a believer of leftist ideology and also a Steering Committee member. He was considered as the grass roots leader and a great support base in the remote areas. Thus he was utilised to inspire and influence mainly the mass of the workers. He used to issue a bulletin everyday on the

preparation of the strike since the strike notice was served. The purpose of this was to gather information about the day to day preparation and circumstances of the pre-strike situation. Banerjee was supposed to apprise the workers regarding the developments of the railway head quarters and different offices under Eastern Railway so that they could be able to formulate their own plan of actions.

In Kharagpur, the division under the South Eastern Railways, the workers expressed their solidarity from the time when the decision of all India general strike was taken, not only that they showed their courage, strength and stamina against various types of provocations for non-participation and non-cooperation towards the struggle. Tarun Kumar Chatterjee<sup>9</sup> was a young employee in the year 1974, briefed the activities during the pre-strike days. Several meetings, rallies, processions were arranged in Kharagpur and Adra Divisions and in other divisions too. The newly appointed workers of South Eastern Railway immensely participated in all of them without fearing the threat of retrenchment, removal or termination. He himself distributed leaflets and gave slogans in favour of the Strike). Interestingly, a vast number of workers of Kharagpur workshop who did not join in the 1968 struggle had promised to succeed the railway workers' movement in 1974. They declared that this was their last opportunity to make the strike successful for realisation of their demands (Bagchi, 1999 p, 35). On 2<sup>nd</sup> May, following the arrests of the national leaders like Fernandes, P.K. Barua etc. in the Eastern Railway police started arresting the local leaders. On the same day workers were demonstrating at Gaya Station in favour of the strike which was triggered off when the news of the arrest of M.R. Khan, a notable leader of the railway workers' of this region came, demonstrators stormed into the office, ransacked the railway cabin, Yardmaster's office and damaged the telephone exchange (Hindustan Standard, 3.05.74).

In West Bengal more than two hundred railwaymen were put behind the bar on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1974. The picture was similar in almost all the zonal railways. Most of the arrested workers were the activists who were advocating the launching of indefinite strike from 8<sup>th</sup> May. The Railway Minister declared that if the strike notice was not withdrawn, the railway authority would not negotiate any settlement and resume any talk with the unions. The

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<sup>9</sup> Interview Tarun Km Chatterjee on 20.01.18 at 6:30 p.m. at the Eastern Railway Pensioner' Association, Barasat

opposition accused the Government as it lacked sincere and earnest effort to resolute the matter, if and so the incident could lead even further bitter consequences. The Chief Minister, West Bengal appealed to the Railwaymen “not to go on strike as that would affect a large number of people particularly poorer section of the population (Hindustan Standard, 3.05. 74). He met all the high officials and secretaries of the State and asked them to compose their own devices for preserving the essential services throughout the State. However, the three persons who tried their best to avert the strike were the Union Rehabilitation Minister R.K. Khadikar, CPI leader Bhupesh Gupta and INTUC leader Kali Mukherjee. But all attempts went in vein as the two parties of the battle become stubborn and headstrong that nothing could be done to avoid the deadlock. Meanwhile, the Eastern Railwaymen’s Congress declared that their members, approximately six thousand five hundred workers had not been joining the strike. The General Secretary of this Union, N.P. Roy assured the newsmen in Calcutta on 3rd May that the ERMC members would not participate on the proposed strike from 8th May rather they will make every effort to keep the wheels of the railways moving. For that if they had to devote more time to the industry, they agreed to work even in ‘double shifts’ (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 4.05. 74).

On the other hand several rallies, gatherings, demonstrations continued. A number of meetings were held in Sealdah Division. Jyoti Basu addressed some of these meetings asking for solidarity of the workers against the undemocratic, fascist rule of the country. To hit back this attitude united action was required. Rabin Chandra Roy<sup>10</sup> affirmed that they sat for ‘Dharna’ through peaceful means in protest of the attitude of the Government on 4.05.74 in front of the Divisional Head Quarter in Sealdah. The contribution of Jyoti Basu in strengthening the confidence of the railwaymen in eastern region and preparing them to fight with the authority was remarkable. Not only that he himself debated several times in the Union Parliament and opposed the policies of the administration on railwaymen’s struggle. He also referred to the government’s notices which openly discarded the strike move and threatened the press for publicity in favour of the strike (Parliament Lok Sabha Proceedings No confidence Motion May 9, 1974, page 284. Source: Mukherjee, 1999; p. 9).

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Rabindra Chandra Roy on 19.01. 18 at 5.00 p.m

Moreover three days prior to the strike the news of the arrests of Nrisingha Chakraborty and Bimal Dey ignited the general workers in E. R who went on “tool down” action spontaneously. Near about five to six thousand workers including some members of E.R.M.C. had joined this action. Further, the Zonal Action Committees were directed to meet and convince the unions of Bank, LIC, and CGE for creating public support. In the meantime, the Railway Board had been campaigning against the railway workers’ struggle as irrelevant and illegal. They had engaged expensive and professional advertising agencies to alienate the railwaymen from the mass of the country. General Secretary of Confederation Bhangoo challenged the statement of the government and emphatically denied that the strike was at all “politically motivated” (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 17).

In the adverse situation resistances should be avoided if they harmed the greater good of the people or the nation. They must be reviewed in the backdrop of the benefits of the workers and their fellow men. Despite of all this when the workers felt that no option remained for the satisfaction of their minimum needs, they agitated and struck against the authority. The railwaymen’s strike had taken place due to the determination of the authority to refuse any negotiated settlement; to some extent, the government intended to confront the railwaymen in order to show its power and strength to the entire industrial working force. Therefore, the battle of the railway workers became the battle of the entire nation.

## II

### **The Situation in the Eastern Railway Zone during the Strike**

In this section we give a picture of the situation that prevailed in the Eastern Railway Zone during the days from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1974. Here we look at the circumstances and the incidents that took place in the days of the strike in the important centres of E.R. This section seeks to evaluate the developments of the workers’ agitation on regular basis which influenced heavily the day to day life of the railwaymen in particular and the mass of the eastern region in general.

Sankar Prosad Chatterjee mentioned that the railway workers belonged to various types of races, communities, caste and creed and spoke almost all the languages of India. These classes were threatened at that point of time. All sorts of trades, crafts and skills of electrical, mechanical, architectural, medical and managerial departments were available in the Railways, in short a mini India (Chatterjee, 1988; p.2). But this mini India was divided amongst themselves in several places of the country, different localities, offices, workshops etc. They did not even understand the language of each other while working in the same Zonal Railways. In spite of these differences, they had common pain, sufferings and feeling of solidarity which compelled them to get united and share common problems and troubles and raise their voice to reach at the highest authority. All their cries remained unheard and unsettled their requirements and desires. But all democratic means of actions were treated in a highly undemocratic way. Indian Railways comprised highest number of workers among the industrial sectors but failed all along its journey to impress the authority and accomplish their needs and demands.

The strike of railwaymen started on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 at 6:00 o'clock in the morning. In the previous section we had discussed the grievances of the workers and the different steps and measures taken to organise a general strike throughout the Eastern Zone. The preparations of the trade unions and workers at all levels and categories under the banner of NCCRS on zonal basis, were wonderfully coordinated which till date was not attained. The situation in the year 1974 was immense discontents and resentments but the innumerable disjointed unrests could not produce any fruit for the railwaymen except that they realised the importance of united countrywide struggle possible through the formation of an all India united platform (Bagchi, 1999; p.34). Samar Mukherjee analysed some factors which contributed to the successful launching of strike. These were:

- i) The emergence of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in 1970 as a revolutionary trade union with the object of uniting the entire working class for developing militant struggles not only to achieve immediate demands but also to bring about radical changes in the society to remove poverty, unemployment and social justice by ending exploitation leading to socialism;

- ii) The emergence of a joint platform named United Council of Trade Unions (UCTU) consisting of CITU, a section of HMS, HMP and some other central trade unions of employees, George Fernandes became its convenor. The joint platform encouraged joint struggles in various sectors including railways;
- iii) The struggle of the Loco Running Staff under their organisation AILRSA in August, 1973 created a big impact on the railwaymen because the strength of the struggle was so powerful and well organised, the government was forced to negotiate with the leaders when the struggle was going on and had to accept some of their major demands such as reduction hours of duty from 14 hours to 10 hours and the channel of negotiation;
- iv) The change in the AIRF leadership played a big role in changing the atmosphere of division between AIRF and LRSA, AIREC and other category-wise unions in favour of all out unity under the banner of NCCRS (Mukherjee, 1999; p.8).

In West Bengal on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 all the leftist parties gave a call for ‘Bangla Bandh’ which was condemned by the rightist wings. Government officials requested the people to keep normalcy, asked the shop keepers to open their shops and urged the vehicle owners to run the buses and other means of communication. The State Government following the path of the Central Government, had band the strikes – both the ‘Bangla Bandh’ and the railwaymen’s strike as ‘illegal’, politically motivated and would adversely affect the life of the general public of state. Two days before the strike a huge number of employees of the E.R and SER were taken into custody. The Eastern Railway authority had declared that they had cancelled a few trains but presumed that they could maintain the movement of the goods trains so that essential commodities like food grains, coal and oil could be mobilised. The railwaymen ignored the threats and warning of the Government and participated in the strike. It was a total strike and the unity of the workers were unprecedented. To keep alive of the striking workers well-knit coordination work was done in Calcutta. Bimal Dey, Convenor of the Eastern Zone sent daily message to the striking railwaymen assembled at Curzon Park, Eden Garden (Mukherjee, 1999; pp. 25-26). The General Secretary of Eastern Railwaymen’s Union and also the Convenor of Zonal Action Committee complained that even four days were left to begin the railway strike, the authority with the help of the police

unleashed tremendous torture on the railway workers, basically a reign of terror persisted between the stations of Howrah to Mughalsarai (Jugantar, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Interestingly, Biswakarma, the Assistant Secretary of Eastern Railwaymen's Union had resigned from his post in protest of the proposed railway strike. Nageshwar Prasad, Secretary of Ministerial Staff Association, also resigned from his post against the decision of the general strike by the trade unions in the railway industry. The Divisional Superintendent of Danapur Division had told that all the Guards and Assistant Station Masters of this division had submitted written appeal in favour of resuming their duties and didn't participate in the indefinite strike. It was reported that in order to sustain regularity in railway signalling system and also perpetuate consistency and steady functioning of the railway workshops, a giant body of the CRP and BSF along with the State Police force were arranged by the Eastern and South Eastern Railways. The General Manager of the S.E Railways, G.S.A. Saldanha on 29th April, revealed to the newsmen that the Army would be called out in aid of the State Police, if the situation so demanded any time for the protection of railway properties and prevention of disruption in train services (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 30.4.74; p.1). Tarun Kumar Chatterjee<sup>11</sup>, a member of Local Action Committee of NCCRS in South Eastern Railways, affirmed that the divisional head quarter in Adra and the station too went under the control of Police and G.R.P.F too before the strike started. A control room was opened to get information from different areas of the division. The purpose was to command and instruct the railway administrative officials in each and every small and remote station of all the concerned divisions, order to take necessary measures if required. In spite of all these the state apparatus was ready to deal with every situation, the movement of trains in Sealdah South and Howrah division was heavily disrupted and delayed.

On 8<sup>th</sup> May it was exactly 6'0 clock in the morning, in Howrah Control Room several calls had started coming from different stations in this division such as Ultarpara, Haripal, Rishra, Konnagar, Bhadreswar, Belanagar and so on asking for help. Most of the station areas were deserted because majority of the employees and railway workers went on sick leave or remained absent from their duty. Those who were in the office could not perform their duties properly because it was impossible for them to continue the duty for seventeen to twenty hours long at a stretch. Not only that those who were on duty, were paid

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Sri. Tarun Kumar Chatterjee on 20.01.18 at 6:30 p.m.

overtime and extra money was declared to be given as a bribe to them. There were four sections in Howrah division consisting of four control rooms such as Howrah to Bandel, Howrah to Burdwan Cord, Bandel to Ajimganj and Naihati to Shaktigarh – all the control rooms became very busy as the sounds of several microphones were creating a cacophony and officers became perplexed. All the sections demanded that they were in dire need of railway staff to run the trains and to maintain minimum services. They also needed police protection and troops for the security of the workers who were in service because the strikers started threatening them for joining the duty. Ananda Bazar Patrika reported on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1974 that extremely busy Howrah station remained abandoned, all the fourteen platforms were emptied, not a single train was observed, booking counters were under lock and key, no passenger, no hawker were seen, only the porters were lying down over the platforms. Howrah station was seemed to be paralysed. Similar type of situation existed in Sealdah division too. Especially in Sealdah station only handful of passengers were seen running here and there in search of the trains. Samastipur passenger was the last train which left the station at 5.55 a.m, from Sealdah but it too got halted at Titagarh station. Same scenario was also visible in the southern section of the Sealdah station. The station had almost a deserted look. Hindustan Standard reported that the control room of Sealdah division of the Eastern Railway looked like a base camp for army operations, the make-believe given a touch of reality by the massive presence of khaki-clad armed personnel, policemen all in and around (Hindustan Standard, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1974; p.8). The authority said that the number or percentage of workers willing to work were seventy to eighty percent but physical obstruction and threats had resisted them to join their duties. But the striking workers found that the entire Sealdah Division was surrounded by armed forces and it seemed like an emergency situation or a circumstance of acute crisis was prevailing. Thus anomaly between claims and reality was found here. Rabin Chandra Roy<sup>12</sup> explained that the authority from the very beginning of the strike started propagating and tried to mislead the striking workers, but it does not tell the whole truth. There were some non-striking workers willing to work but they were prevented by some other factors like fellow feeling, moral support etc. restricted them. At the same time fear factor also prevented them to join their duties. However, no scheduled long distance trains had left or reached at Howrah or Sealdah stations in the first three to

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr. Rabin Ch. Roy on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 at 5.00 p.m

four days of strike. Not even the goods traffic was satisfactory. Several trains were held up in different stations in Eastern Railway because of the scarcity of loco men in almost all the Divisions and there was no indication that they will be joining their duties in the near future. The situation in Eastern Railway and South Eastern Railway remained unchanged and no relief had been provided to the travelling general people and to the traders or businessmen who were heavily depended on the passenger and the goods trains.

On the other hand opposition leaders were trying their best to find out any solution to settle the dispute and also trying to convince the Government and the trade union leaders to avert the deadlock. But the trade unions maintained that unless and until their charter of demands were accepted and the arrested leaders were released unconditionally and immediately, they would not be able to initiate any step. On the other hand the Government demanded for immediate withdrawal of the strike. Thus, in this situation amicable settlement was not something which was to happen (Hindustan Standard, 6.5.74; pp. 1 & 5). The Government was determined to confront the railwaymen and trade unions were determined to carry on their struggle as they were highly satisfied with the strike progress. The picture in Sealdah divisional office was equally awful. Divisional Manager and Divisional Superintendent with few officers were only found there. And according to them the main problem lied with the massive absence of Cabin men, Signalling men and Points men. On the first day of the strike Lalgola Passenger left Sealdah station at 4:40 a.m. and reached Ranaghat at 6:00 a.m. and then the Driver abandoned the train in the station. Since then in Ranaghat no train arrived or left the station. The incident was narrated by Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury<sup>13</sup>, the Chief Commercial Clerk at Ranaghat. Consequently, from Calcutta Head Quarter, news was sent to the small and remote stations and stations like Krishnanagar, Naihati and Ranaghat too to stop the train services totally because it only increased the trouble and harassment of the general people. Eatable and perishable commodities like fish and vegetables usually were brought from Canning and Diamond Harbour areas to Calcutta. These commodities were distributed from South Sealdah section to the various markets of the city, but due to strike nothing had reached here. The usual crowd in this station had suddenly disappeared and the entire section remained emptied, no buyer, no porter, no vehicle outside the station was visible.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr. Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury on 20.1.18 at 8.00 a.m

On the second day of the strike two significant incidents had taken place – in Howrah Station a railway compartment caught fire mysteriously and in Chitpur Yard two round of police firing took place. As a result of which even the workers who were hesitating to work denied to join. Thus circumstances became worse as the improvement in services in the railway industry went beyond control. However, some hostile mobs in varying strength and degree intruded in many stations of Howrah and Sealdah Divisions of the E.R. Amrita Bazar Patrika corresponded on 9.5.74 that these mob pressurised the on duty staff to vacate their offices, while others obstructed the running of trains on the track and forced the Cabin men to go out of their duties in the Howrah-Kharagpur section of S.E.R. This incident had caused a serious dislocation in the passenger train services in the two most crucial railway centres of the eastern region on the day one of the indefinite strike by the railway workers on 8th May on Wednesday (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9.5.74; p. 1). The Howrah signal workshop was practically non-functioning. A large number of booking counters in almost all the stations were opened under the supervision of CRFP and in some places army personnel operated the counters. All the workshops in Eastern Railway and Signal Workshop at Howrah were practically closed as the majority of the workers were absent from work. Moreover, majority of the railway offices of the suburban stations were closed. The local and long distance trains running through the stations between Liluah and Bandel were on high risk because the level crossings and gates were unattended and peculiarly police and army started substituting them.

On the contrary however the railway authority claimed improvement in the strike situation. For the first time since the strike commenced the Railway supplied coal to jute mills, paper mills and other Calcutta bell besides pig iron to foundries in Howrah area on Tuesday (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1974). The NCCRS of Eastern Railway and South Eastern Railway said that all the trains were run by the untrained persons which might lead to serious consequences. They outright discarded the demands of the Railway Authority and stated that only five percent of the railway employees had joined their duties. The Statesman reported on 15.5.1974 that Dey alleged that the railway administration was employing anti-social elements to terrorise members of the railwaymen's families, but the intimidation had failed to break the morale of the railwaymen's relatives and women residents in every railway colony were putting up resistance against the 'anti- social elements and stooges of

the Congress' (The Statesman, 15.5.74; p. 1). Although the Eastern Railways authority claimed that improvement was taking place in the strike situation but the harassment of the passengers persisted and dislocation of traffic also continued. In all the divisions of Eastern Railway except Dhanbad including the Yards, Loco sheds Workshops remained completely immobilised upto the end of the first week of the strike commenced. On the fifth day it was reported that few 'anti-social' people attacked the Majherhat and Bose Bridge areas as a result electric supply was interrupted in this region for more than two hours. On this day another twenty employees of Eastern Railway were suspended from office, the total number of suspended workers were one hundred and fifty four (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Ramnagina Pande, Secretary of Eastern Railwaymen's Union complained that some misanthropic elements along with the police tortured the striking workers enormously in the areas of Bajbaj, Baliganj, Sonarpur, Baruipur, Belehata areas railway offices and colonies too. Despite of immense abuses and miseries, the suburban stations of Sealdah division even after ten days were closed. The long distance trains were crossing these stations were at high risk because the level crossings were totally unmanned and unfortunately the army operated the highly delicate and sophisticated signalling system. The busiest stations like Serampore, Bandel, Liluah etc. still had no sign of life. The Statesman reported on 18.5.1974 that a spokesman of the E.R agreed on 17th May on Friday that even basic and minimum services were not possible in the suburban sections of the E.R in both Sealdah and Howrah Divisions a total of 49 stations were completely closed down because of large scale absence of cabin staff (The Statesman, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Most of the stations and their tasks were performed by Territorial Army. What they were actually doing, was receiving and transmitting the information regarding the arrival and departure of the trains by using microphones only. In Bali station, the Station Master's room was locked and the booking counters did not have any Clerks to sell tickets or even to fetch ticket none was seen. Malay Ranjan Das<sup>14</sup>, Joint Secretary, All India Railway Telegraph Staff Council, Eastern Railway was a Signaller and a local level leader at that point of time confirmed the above statement. Sealdah station authority declared that before this all India strike, they used to sell tickets worth Rs. 70,000/- which came down to only Rs. 6,000/- per day. Since the strike began, only two Cabin men

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mr. Malay Ranjan Das on 20.01.18 at 6.00 p.m in the evening at Eastern Railway Pensioners' Office, Barasat

had joined duty at Naihati station and few Loco workers who had not joined the strike, could not work anymore as they were so much exhausted due to the continuous and vigorous labour. From the day one of the strike incidents of conflicts and clashes had been occurring in different places among the strikers and non-strikers. The Times of India reported on 11.5.1974 that railway services had faced a serious difficulty and threat in operating the rakes at Ondal which was perceived as a vital point in the railway network for coal movement. In this area a clash in the railway yard was reported which restricted the supply of coal to steel plants from the 10th May evening (Times of India, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Majority of the railway workers in the Eastern Railway remained away from their jobs after completing ten days of the struggle and the offices in Sealdah to be left isolated. As most of the Drivers had participated in the strike, it caused immeasurable sufferings to the people especially to the regular commuters. The buses had crossed every limit of its carriage and carrying people standing, hanging outside the vehicle and even sitting on the roofs (Hindustan Standard, 9.5.1974; p.8). At the same time, trucks, taxis, motorcyclists and cyclists were also sharing the burden of the road transport. Moreover, within a week it was found that Calcutta became almost alienated from the rest of the country. The railway workshop in Jamalpur in Bihar employed fifteen thousand workers and was a very important installation for the Eastern Railways, but was located in an isolated area; in Jamalpur no more than ten to fifteen workers reported for work during the entire three weeks of the strike, the workshops remaining deserted until 28<sup>th</sup> May (Sherlock, 2001; p. 368). The strike was very much intense in Jamalpur, Chittaranjan and Mugjalsarai too because of the social character of the areas. The inhabitants of these places were predominantly the working class who were closely linked with the trade union activity and related with the trade union culture also and most interestingly they belonged to more or less socially and economically homogeneous class.

In Eastern Railway the suburban train services were crippled even after the two weeks of the struggle. Only few goods trains carrying food grains, coal and raw materials to steel plants had begun resuming. Five “Bazar Special” trains were introduced to transport the perishable products from Diamond Harbour, Canning and Laxmikantapur to Sealdah South. Some miscreants were reported to sabotage in different areas e.g., removal of fishplates, cutting the overhead wires etc. Eastern Railway authority claimed that the strike

situation had been improving day by day and marked development was noticed in the attendance of the divisional offices. Few suburban trains and stations were gradually reopening. The Eastern Railway's four bottlenecks have been the Mughalsarai, Andal, Naihati and Chitpore Yards. One Eastern Railway spokesman said it had been possible since yesterday to work the down hump at Mughalsarai when 1,500 empties could be formed into coal rakes at Andal against about 1,800 normally (Times of India, 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Thus the Eastern Railway authority had been planning to run more suburban trains within two days. Similarly, in Howrah and Asansol division's freight services, to some extent increased. It was reported that police kept arresting striking railway workers. The Zonal Committee of Garden Reach, South Eastern Railway accused the police which had not only arrested the railwaymen but also attacked the union offices and demolished all the furnitures, tools, apparatus, books, files everything of their office. However, in Dhanbad division nearly sixty percent of the workers returned to their work on the twelfth day of the strike. Naihati was the one of the major and crucial junction of the Sealdah division from the operational perspective. This place was also greatly affected because most of the railway employees had left their quarters. Only few stayed to run the regular works of the junction. The township in Naihati was comprised of primarily the railway workers and their families. The Hindu reported that in scorching noon the windows and doors of the houses of the entire township were closed, the roads were deserted, the shops were closed. Only armed forces were seen to cordon off the whole area. Police vans were patrolling and searching the quarters to arrest the employees. A young man identifying himself as the brother of a railway employee showed a big swelling in the leg allegedly caused by the police blows and complained that he could not even carry food to his brother for the past two days (Times of India, 22.5.74). New Age reported that the township in the railway colony at Naihati, 38 k.m. from here on the Sealdah division of E.R, looked like a blocked township, doors and windows remained mostly closed even at noon, the streets were deserted, armed pickets were observed almost at every turn of the road (New Age, 26.5.74; p. 10). One question arose here that whether the demands of the workers of railway industry were so absurd and undemocratic that they would have been crushed and suppressed by utilising force and by means of every unethical way. Gorey, Socialist leader asked how the railwaymen had become suddenly enemies and

unpatriotic when earlier this railwaymen braved bullets and artillery fire during Indo-Pak war (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 74).

Till the end of the fifteenth day of the strike large-scale absence of the Cabin staff was seen and the pictures of the vital junctions were more or less similar as it was earlier. The Convenor of NCCRS, Eastern India Bimal Dey asserted that only few striking workers had joined their duties due to the departmental pressure and heavy repression by the armed forces and terror strike by the state. There was a huge gap between the claims of the authority and the trade unions. Eastern Railway demanded that only handful of workers still remained absent and almost pre-strike situation persisted. Goods trains too started moving and railways now were ready to provide services to the industries by transporting raw materials based on the Calcutta and its surrounding areas. But the unions confirmed that the strike was continuing successfully. The railways tried to run a large number of 'Petroleum Specials' as the Union Government had decided to move essential petroleum products by road to ensure that industrial activity must not suffer. This extra ordinary step had evidently been taken to anticipate the problem of shortage, if the railway strike had continued for some more days (Peoples' Democracy, 26.5.74; p.10). Meanwhile Bimal Dey was arrested under DIR in Calcutta, thus, condemning the arrest of Dey, the spokesman of the NCCRS (E.R) said that this in no way discourage the striking workers and shatter the struggling employees (The Statesman, 24.5.74; p.1). This incident of arrest had accelerated the agitations among the workers in this region. The left trade unions including H.M.S and H.M.P organised a rally to support the railwaymen's struggle and to exhibit solidarity with them. Addressing the rally, Jyoti Basu, the CPI (M) leader said that the current railway strike was not an isolated phenomenon, it presented the struggle of the starving millions against the feudalistic and capitalist exploitation and therefore, it was the duty of every Indian to support the strike (Hindustan Standard, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1974; p.1). Not only the Government but the NCCRS refused to relent to any negotiated settlement even after the twenty days of the strike. In Howrah Coalfield Express caught fire and a huge damage was caused due to this fire. The tracks adjacent to the train which caught fire were also ablaze. According to the authority it was a case of sabotage and intimidation. Eastern Railways declared that sixty five percent of the train services had resumed. Passenger and freight traffic had improved a lot. A notice was published in Hindustan Standard dated 25<sup>th</sup> May,

1974 by the Eastern Railways Authority : “A Friendly Advice to the Eastern Railwaymen who have Resumed Duty : Even now it is not too late for you to come back to work. Your colleagues have already joined in large number and are doing magnificent job. Why not join them: Be quick; join before it is too late. We need you”.

By Eastern Railways. (Hindustan Standard, 25.5.74; p. 5)

On 27<sup>th</sup> May as the situation had been returning to normal days, more and more workers were resuming to work, B.S.F. and C.R.P.F. were withdrawn from the three Yards of the Eastern Railways such as Andal, Patratu and Mughalsarai Yards and Dehuri-on-Shore station. It was on 27<sup>th</sup> May evening at 6 p.m., the Ananda Bazar Patrika reported that when they got the news of the unilateral decision of withdrawal of the railwaymen’s strike from 28<sup>th</sup> May at 6’0 clock in the morning, a big rally of the railway workers had been approaching towards the Dalhousie Office area, swearing that this glorious strike of the railwaymen would be continued until and unless the Government had vowed down (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 28.5.1974; p.1). Therefore, this news of unconditional withdrawal of the strike had have broken the morale and strength of the workers, not only the striking workers of the railway industry but also the entire working class of the country and the trade union leaders as well. It raised the question that whether the unilateral decision of the strike withdrawal would certainly influence adversely the activities of the grass root trade union leaders and members too. The local leaders were of the opinion that it would determine the future course of trade union movement in the country and at the same time the unity of the industrial workers. The trade union leaders opined that if it continued for two days more, the Government would have been compelled to negotiate with the workers. However, the decision made the Railway Management happy. M. Ganguli, the Station Superintendent, Sealdah Division screamed with joy when he heard the news of withdrawal of the strike and he embraced the reporter who gave him the news. He told that it had become exhaustive day by day and unbearable inconvenience to run the department due to the absence of majority of the workers (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Eastern Railways announced that it would take another 48 hours to normalise the situation. The long distance trains would commence running within a short-while. The congestions in Sealdah and Howrah Yards

would be cleared and nearly all the workers resumed to duty except those who were removed from services. These worker who were removed, demonstrated in their concerned offices for reengagement into their jobs. Attendance at all offices and workshops of the Eastern Railways has returned to normal following the calling off of the railway strike except at the Patratu Diesel Maintenance Plant in South Bihar (The Statesman 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). The reason behind the Patratu case was that the workers went to their villages for pursuing the agricultural affairs e.g., sowing and harvesting operations. More important trains like Rajdhani and Toofan Expresses were reintroduced and the other functions and services of the railways were regularised. E.R Authority said that the number of their dismissed workers was 4,406 and the investigation would start soon against the workers who did not have any specific charges. It was quite obvious that any struggle of this capacity and magnitude must have entangled with despondency and distress specially when the repository of the democratic power let loose every kind of brute force to suppress the movement of the working class. All India Radio was used to circulate the false information regarding the struggle. The press of the country, contrary to its usual hostility to the cause of the downtrodden, by and large gave factual accounts exposing and unmasking official claims (Chakraborty, 1975; p. 10). However, the weak nature of organisation and the best effort to crush the struggle, both the factors played a significant role towards the withdrawal of the strike unconditionally. But the twenty days long railwaymen's strike had left long lasting scar and a serious damage to the country's economy. At the same time dependence on armed and reserve police force had revealed the incapacity of the government to deal with the democratic opposition by the most vulnerable section of the country. It also proved the trend of authoritarianism that persisted in the Indian democratic structure.

### III

## **The impact of the strike in Eastern Railways**

In this section we analyse the impact of the railwaymen's indefinite general strike in May 1974 in the Eastern Railway Zone. Railway workers' strike in May 1974 was an unparalleled event. It shook the socio-political and economic root of the country. It erupted and took the shape of a major labour unrest in the country and unfolded the actual nature of the industrial relations in India. It also raised some questions and initiated debate regarding the grievances of the workers: whether the workers' movement really represented the legitimate demands of the railwaymen, whether this industrial dispute became a political issue or truly a conscious action by the industrial worker to accomplish their needs and years long demands.

The impact of the strike of 1974 by the railwaymen was deep and manifold at the same time it was terrible and dreadful. The unity and solidarity achieved during this strike was historic. The fellow sentiments were expressed by the people in sphere of economic activities and every individual industry had rendered their support to the railway workers. The immediate impact of the strike was the declaration of innumerable penal measures to be taken by the government against those railway workers who participated in the proposed strike of May 1974. Peculiarly, even before the strike commenced, workers were arrested, victimised and pressurised in various ways. These included automatic break-in-service, postponement of the date of increment and forfeiture of accrued leave, pass and PTOs invoking of DIR, MISA and convicted staff for sabotage, violence, intimidation and act of treason to be removed or dismissed from service, while the Ministry of Labour had exempted the Railways from the provision of Payment of Wages Act, 1936 enabling the Rail Authority not to pay the salaries of the staff within the stipulated time (Chatterjee, 1988; pp. 32-33). The railway trade unions especially the Congress led right wing trade unions from the very beginning, exhibited their opposition towards the decision of the indefinite strike by the rank and file workers in the railway industry. They conceived this struggle as a political confrontation and politically motivated action to defame the Government. Antagonistic

attitude of the Government towards the workers was apprehended in its decisions and steps taken before and during the struggle. The Congress-led unions attempted to protect the image of patron of the 'institution'. They cried to rebuild the relation with the Government and grow a nexus with the management for their own interests and benefits. It became soon clear the way in which the whole matter was handled right from the inception that the demands of the workers played a lesser role in the whole movement (Keshav, H. Kulkarni, 1988; p.13 in Brahma, 2016; p. 95).

The National economy had suffered grossly a loss of one thousand crores due to the railway strike (Gopalakrishnan, 1974). As a result of this stagnation in the industry arose due to the workers' struggle in May 1974, the Indian Railways itself faced five hundred crores of estimated loss from only the passenger and goods freight fares (The Hindu, 4.6.1974). Railways were considered as the life line of the country but the workers who had worked to keep the heart beating and the blood flowing through the arteries, were extremely ill-treated and exploited inhumanly. Indian Railways treated its employees according to the policies framed by the British. Therefore, railwaymen were considered as the public sector industrial workers and at the same time central government employees under a separate Ministry with no right for collective bargaining. During the strike period, desired amount of export and import cargo had not moved, thus a huge backlog had to be overcome after the withdrawal of the strike (The Hindu, 4.6.1974). The movement of food grains, coal, fertilisers, petroleum products etc. had been restricted heavily which indirectly affected the loading and black marketing and increased the prices of the daily commodities. The Union Ministries of Agriculture, steel, irrigation, power and petroleum etc. too had suffered a lot. North-east India was amongst the worst affected areas because mobility of wagons of food grains was totally paralysed in this region and goods traffic faced a complete halt. The intensity of the strike was immense and it was participated by innumerable railway workers in the N.F Railways. The position of the locomotives was very much unsatisfactory as the engines which did not run even for a single mile since long two weeks, could not perform well. The immobility of the engines caused the decline in potentialities and lack of maintenance automatically led to the failure in production. The repair and restoration works required huge expenditure of money and time as well. The daily goods of traffic movement on the Railways during 1973-74 (which was a bad year owing to wildest strikes in August

and December) amounted to 20,900 wagons corresponding to 0.5 million tonnes but the bulk of the goods movements during the strike period excepting that of petroleum products was low rated traffic (The Hindu, 4.6.1974).

After the withdrawal of the strike, the railway faced various problems and losses due to the considerable deterioration in the utilisation and maintenance of the railway wagons yards and other railway properties. The working in the marshalling yards was seriously affected during the mid of the strike, only twenty five percent of the total wagons moved. Even after the calling off the struggle, the number of wagon and engine movements had not improved much rather significantly restricted. The power stations in the states like Delhi, Punjab, Haryana etc. could not generate the required amount of power due to the scanty supply of coal which were transported by the rails from distant places like Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, Bihar collieries etc. Thus irregular train services disrupted not only the smooth sailing of the industries but also the daily life of the general countrymen. Just before the strike the demand for the movement of 'rabi' crop from Punjab and Haryana had not yet come up and concentration was on the movement of imported food grains from Bombay, Kandla, Madras and Visakhapatnam to distant areas in Bihar and Assam; during the strike 18.255 wagons of food grains were loaded on a priority basis to the North Eastern sector which had been badly affected (The Hindu, 4.6.1974). The following table gave an idea regarding the goods traffic maintained by the railways in a year.

**Tonnes originating in 1973-74 (in millions)**

<b>Coal</b>		
a)	For Steel Plants	8.79
b)	For Washeries	3.93
c)	For Public Uses	22.83
	Total	35.55
	Raw materials for Steel Plants	11.56

Pig Iron and finished Steel from Steel Plants	4.52
Iron Ore for Export	6.44
Cement	7.67
Food Grains	11.18
Fertilizers	4.09
Mineral Oils	7.46
Other Goods	31.72
Total Revenue Earning Traffic	125.55

The table itself indicated the implications of the railway strike. Production as well as distribution was bound to be severely affected as the railways carries 0.55 million tonnes goods per day (Hindustan Standard, 9.5.74). Ironically, the year 1974 was envisioned as the year of new outlook and belief. The Fourth Five Year Plan ended and Fifth Five Year Plan was inaugurated in 1974 therefore, marked changes in the attitude and policy of the government were witnessed in the upcoming Five Year Plan. The Government had emphasised on the policy of development of the industries and resultantly on the industrial relations which would ultimately affect the growth of industrial production. A favourable relation between employees and the employer would determine the national economic progress and at the same time effect the overall development of the country. The Central Government was keen to provide an encouraging and supportive environment to the industrial working class of the country and the policies and objectives of Five Year Plan reflected its earnest desires to improve the dimensions of conflicting and strained industrial relations in India. But one must analyse the reasons behind the government's reaction and intentions behind the opposition towards the railwaymen's struggle. It could be argued that the responses of the Government towards the railway workers' strike was contemptuous. Because the policies and the objectives that were framed from the broader perspective of welfarism, had entirely been deterred by the way it reciprocated to the working class movement in the country. The attitude of the Government reflected its inclinations towards

the authoritarian rule. The railway men's strike had caused the loss of highest number of man days since independence till date. The Union Ministry became so helpless that they could go upto using brutal force to break the struggle of the harmless and peaceful railwaymen who only fought for fulfilling some of their daily requirement of livelihood. In the largest democracy of the world, the demands of the downtrodden were pressed and crushed buy its own protection and thus, it revealed the true nature of the peoples' representatives. The solidarity that was reached in the industrial sectors of India was overwhelming and historic, never before and after this struggle, such unity was achieved. This unity in fact could challenge the might of the State. The Government had shown a total disregard to resolve the matter through discussions or negotiations. It used every means and ways to prove its power and isolate the railwaymen. Interestingly different international workers' organisations expressed their solidarity with the railway workers' struggle. Messages of unity had come from various international associations like Australian Locomen's Federation, Communist Party of Great Britain. World Federation of Trade Unions had conveyed their integration with the railwaymen of India. President of Industries Gewerkschafts Transport of German Democratic Republic Iffalender Cabled, "685000 members of I.G. Transport express complete solidarity, support your demands and complete success in your struggle" (New Age, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1974; p.7). Sankar Prosad Chatterjee intimated that International Amnesty today (on 21.5. 74) appealed to the Government of India to release the estimated 20000 trade unionists and railwaymen detained for strike, not only that 100 progressive writers of Delhi condemned the attitude of the Government on the rail strike and appealed to the Government to resume negotiation without any pre-condition. Democratic Women Organisation had condemned the barbarous attack by the Paramilitary and Armed forces on women in railway colonies, breaking of teeth, charged by bayonet etc. were reported, hence they sent a petition to the Prime Minister on this issue (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 83).

The railway workers' strike of May 1974 had different pictures in different railway zones and the impact of the strike also differed. Eastern Railways comprised of almost two lakh of employees. The strike was very intense in this region. In almost all the divisions, the workers had participated spontaneously and continued the strike till May 28<sup>th</sup> and in some

places it ended on 29<sup>th</sup> May i.e., one day after the withdrawal of the strike<sup>15</sup>. The workers of the workshops in Liluah, Kanchrapara and Jamalpur workshops had continued the strike remarkably. The Jamalpur Workshop was deserted till the end of the strike, the workers were keen to continue the strike to pressurise the Government to attain their demands and sought an honourable settlement. At the Head Office in Calcutta almost ninety five percent of the workers remained absent from work. In Asansol division the strike was only covert and was obscure in most of the stations except the areas like Ondal, Sitarampur and few other places. Similarly at Dhanbad division the workers did not join the strike actively, thus could not achieve much success but at Patratu and Paherdih it was massively attended by the railwaymen (Biswas, 1977; p. 10). Rabindra Chandra Roy corroborated the statement. He communicated that he was sent from Sealdah division to Dhanbad for motivating and inspiring the workers to join the strike. The workers' strength and its support base at Dhanbad was very frail and fragile, at the same time the repressive measures and the brute force that was unleashed by the authority were hard to resist and a valid reason for non-participation in the strike<sup>16</sup>. At Danapore Division forty percent of the workers had joined their work four to five days the strike was called off. The strike at Mughalsarai braved the most severe repression and attained heroic success, but even at Mughalsarai, according to the report of Fernandez, a bare 1500 workers out of 13,500 were striking out during the final phase of the strike. The report on the whole of the Eastern Railways however, reveals that 40% of the workers were with the strike when it was called off (Biswas, 1977; p.10).

When the strike started, worst affected areas in Eastern Railways were the Calcutta itself – different offices, stations, head office and the surrounding areas. The suburban train services were halted and the entire communication system became paralysed. Territorial Army was deployed to maintain the essential services and to supply commodities for daily use. Serampore correspondents of *The Statesman* added that station staff of Serampore, Baidyabati, Bhadreswar, Mankundu and Chinsurah abandoned the stations and the station offices had been locked, according to the Superintendent of Police (*The Statesman*, 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The railway workers in Ranaghat and its surrounding small village areas were bewildered when they got the news of unconditional withdrawal of the strike, hence reluctant to join their duties and interested to continue the struggle locally (interview with Sri. Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury on 20.1.18 at 8.00 a.m)

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Sri. R.C. Roy on 21.01.18 at 2:30 p.m. at his Barrackpore residence

May, 1974). At Ondal a 'bandh' on local basis was called on 12<sup>th</sup> May protesting against the atrocities and torture on women in the railway colony. Thus Ondal which was a crucial centre in the railway network for coal mobility to the steel plants, faced a considerable set back in operating and administering the work. The coal movement in this region was greatly hampered. In Dhanbad division more than two hundred employees were dismissed from their jobs for participating in the strike. In spite of the three activities of the Government, Eastern Railway was effected badly by the strikes, so as the markets in Calcutta was too upset. In this situation the fish market was in a critical condition, vegetables like potatoes, onions etc. became scarce and the prices started rising. The perishable items got adversely impacted. A retail seller in north Calcutta explained that the whole sellers had brought fish to the Calcutta markets in trucks and had demanded increased prices to meet the additional expenses (Hindustan Standard, 9.5.74). Vendors were not capable of bringing green vegetables to the market and did not had enough stock to manage the supply. In the south Calcutta market the situation was more grave. The vegetables and other perishable goods used to come from Canning and these goods were distributed from Sealdah South stations which was nearly paralysed due to the immobility of the trains from 8<sup>th</sup> May morning, thus, the markets in these areas encountered with great paucity and shortage of daily edible goods. The first week was totally hopeless and terrible for the porters and vendors. It was also very much difficult and unfavourable for the owners of the small hotels located nearby the station areas. The strike of the railwaymen caused enormous inconvenience to the small traders and businessmen of the places like Sealdah and Howrah.

Hindustan Standard reported that the prices of edible oils increased steadily. The manufacturers of soya bean oil, ghee, dalda etc were of the opinion that the costing of the production became excessively escalating every day. The manufacturers of the products like soap, detergent etc. stated that the raw materials had become so scanty due to the railway strike, they had to reduce the productions of these goods (Hindustan Standard, 11.5.1974; p.5). But the demands of these items were high so there arouse a gap between the demand and supply which ultimately multiplied the cost in the market. Supply of cooking gas was turned to be very irregular during this phase, the household had to wait for long time to get refilling them. Petrol and diesel were similarly meagre in meeting the demands of the Eastern region. Distribution of different products grew uneven every day, therefore it

endangered the industrial production moreover, the economic and financial growth of the country. The Railway Minister L.N. Mishra has told in Parliament quoting an estimate given by a Congress M.P. that a loss of one rupee to the Railways means a loss of ten rupees to the nation, it cannot be very much off the mark (Hindustan Standard, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). The day to day progress of the capital of the eastern region was impeded due to the railwaymen's strike. This struggle in many ways restricted the progress of the economic system of the country. In spite of that, this struggle encompassed the entire industrial working class of the country and embraced every individual citizen of India. Sukhendu Sekhar Chakraborty<sup>17</sup>, member of the Guard's Council in Burdwan station confirmed that people of their area spontaneously assisted them with food, shelters and even with money, especially at the concluding part of the strike, when they were in deep financial crisis. Local people provided mental and moral support to them.

People's responses were varied, some argued in favour of the railway workers and some went against their struggle. Many had empathy and fellow feeling towards the railwaymen, at the same time they condemned the confronting attitude of the trade unions and the Central and State Governments. The passengers of these regions described how much trouble and inconvenience they had to bear every day. Some were of the opinion that a poor country like India could not probably afford to provide any unreasonable demand and some people did not find any justification behind the strike. Some believed that Railways as a life line of the country should be kept outside the periphery of the politics (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 14.5.1974; pp.1 & 3). An electrical engineer of the Government of India, who left Howrah by Lucknow Express, said the country should have a rational wage structure, many in the country were given different pay scales for the same type of work; the railway employees also were victims of it but he described the strike as 'unwise' (The Statesman, 27.5.74). As the movements of suburban trains were heavily disturbed, the supply of perishable goods became inadequate and deficiency obviously occurred in the markets both in Calcutta and its surrounding areas. In the suburban areas the majority of people used railways as their daily means of communication. The daily commuters had faced immense

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mr. Sukhendu Sekhar Chakraborty (member of the Guard's Council in Burdwan region of Eastern Railways in 1974) in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, Eastern Railways at 7:00 p.m. on 20.01.18 at Barasat

harassment and hassle during these all twenty days of railwaymen's strike. The bus services of the city tried to ply with the situation. In Calcutta more trams were introduced to carry passengers, but the burden of people was so high that it turned to be troublesome day by day because the bulk of the people who predominantly were depended on the railways, tried to get the other option. Thus it grew more and more grinding and strenuous for them to cope up with the situation, resultantly many had to cancel, drop and postpone their daily schedule and travel plans.

Hindustan Standard on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1974 reported that when the correspondents visited the areas in the Sealdah Division, they came across a station only about 36 kilometres away from Sealdah wore a deserted look. The name of the station was Gocharan which meant grazing field of the cattle and the reporters found on the first day of the strike that not even a single individual was to be found only cattle was visible. The strike had far reaching consequences on the rural life at the same time. The small stations in remote places were mostly under lock and key as the railwaymen left their duties and joined the fight. The bread and butter of these rural areas depended on the markets of the city areas. Rail services in these areas were entirely paralysed, therefore, the poor farmers and wage earners started worrying. They were anxious, if the strike continued in this manner then what would be their fate and inevitably they would have to starve. In South 24 Parganas all the small stations were the important centres of agricultural productions. They supplied huge amount of fruits, rice, vegetables and suppliers of egg too. Interestingly the trading of these commodities were performed by the village women or they were the intermediaries, who travelled to Calcutta everyday by train and earned money for their family livelihood. The families of these women were hit hard by the rail strike. However, they began to search for other means of transport these commodities to Calcutta markets. Trucks and tempos, private buses and rickshaws, cycles and humans all carrying vegetables and fruits – the procession begins every morning from South 24 Parganas towns, such as Baruipur and Sonarpur and heads for Calcutta; the buses are packed to the bursting point, the trucks are dangerously overburdened, the rickshaws groan under the load; litchis, coconuts, cucumbers, spinaches of all kinds (Hindustan Standard, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1974; p.5). This had an impact on the prices of the commodities. Another aspect of the economic activities of the state was affected. The daily wage earners underwent tremendous hardship because the railwaymen's strike created

a stagnation in the entire production and distribution units of the industries, therefore it indirectly impacted on the labour market as a lack of demand of labour was felt by the money lenders. The employers on the other hand, reduced the rate of the daily wage of these labourers who were initially paid only Rupees 2.50/- per day which was so less for maintaining a minimum livelihood. Long twenty days of shut down of an important industrial sector had really been a matter of worry especially for these sections of village dwellers, economically they became crippled. Although, these people were financially saddened but were sympathetic towards the railwaymen's struggle.

The Divisional Head Quarters in Howrah and Sealdah and the station areas were under the control of military and para military forces. It seemed that the stations have become the base camps of army and their troops operation. The State Police also was active and vigorously alert in these places during the strike days. Eastern Railways comprised mainly of the places in West Bengal and few in Bihar. The Government of West Bengal at that point of time in the 1970s was led by the Congress headed by the Chief Minister Siddhartha Sankar Ray who had a good liaison and rapport with the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Centre. Ray was among those few important advisors on whom Gandhi relied a lot and whose suggestions and advices were considered as valuable and significant for the administrative system of the country. Ironically, the industrial relations in West Bengal had deteriorated due to the factual conflicts and cleavages which appeared because of the differences of opinion and disagreement on common issues.

The Labour Minister of West Bengal, Gopal Das Nag reported to Siddhartha Sankar Ray that in any industry, any kind of dispute and disruptive element always had a tendency to hamper the smooth functioning of production system. This type of strained relations and pessimistic attitude of the trade unions and the management had impeded the process of development and growth of industries and economy as well. But most importantly this type of incidents demoralised the new investors and discouraged them from investing in fresh ventures and in the projects initiated in collaboration with the State government. Unhealthy industrial relations generated disinterest in the investment opportunities by the industrialists and the financiers which ultimately created tension and economic slowdown in the progress. A large number of man days since past four/five months were lost and it was the promise of the Roy Government to restore industrial peace to develop the overall economic situation of

the State. The workers' agitations like tool down, mass sick leave, gherao etc in the one hand and lockouts on the other, were considered to be the reasons for the set back of industrial growth. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the management that it must identify the areas of conflicts and resolve the issues. The Government was determined to continue and increase with industrial production, hence labour unrests were no longer tolerated. Siddhartha Sankar Ray tried his best to precipitate the cooperation among the labourers, their unions and the employers. He also attempted to promote collaboration and peace in the industrial sector. The trade unions of different political parties especially the Congress and the CPI led trade unions were brought together at least to some extent, for eliminating the frequent labour unrests in the state.

West Bengal Government intended to have a larger control over the activities of the extremely spirited and powerful Marxist believers and to establish a sort of opinion and regulate their activities and roles in every day's political affairs. In spite of these measures taken by the State Government several lockouts and strikes could not be averted which actually reflected the inability to circumscribe the political process of the State. In the meantime the rail strike was declared and Siddhartha Sankar Ray had got the opportunity to exhibit its pro-industrial attitude and capacity to have command over any labour disturbances or to manage any turbulence in a skilful manner within the state boundary. Thus, the State machinery as well as the Railway Authority became equally active to maintain law and order situation in the state. The government utilised every means to break the confidence of the workers of Indian Railway. The All India Radio (AIR) was well exploited by the Central and the State Government for propaganda. It influenced the general people and the railway workers in the country throughout the strike period. AIR had successfully shaped the news regarding the strike situation which ultimately put indirect pressures on the national as well as the local leaders who were in jails and convinced them to take decision in this direction.

In West Bengal the whole state apparatus was engaged to maintain the regular routine work of the railway industry in Calcutta and its surrounding areas. Trains were struck in various stations and junctions e.g. Punjab Mail was terminated at Ondal station where police and BSF manned the cabin, signalling systems and booking counters and other back and front offices remained empty. Armed forces tried their best to move the Punjab

Mail but could not turn the red signal into green. Interestingly, one after another railway officers came and tried to run the trains but were not able to budge the train even an inch towards Calcutta. These attempts of the police, armed forces and Territorial Army resulted into several accidents and several passengers were injured and wounded in the Kharagpur-Howrah line. In Bhadreswar-Mankundu line two passenger trains collided with a goods trains and therefore, hundred people were injured. A young man was burnt badly when a train caught fire in Sealdah Station. All these were occurred due to the inexperience and inefficient operation of the railway system. Notwithstanding the Army was ready to assist the Post and Telegraph department. Due to the strike of the railwaymen Postal department especially the G.P.O in Calcutta could not deliver its consignments and the attendance of the staff in postal department was very poor. The reason behind this was the immobility of the trains and the call for Central Government Employees' strike was responsible for this absence. Only a handful of employees had joined their work. So the army was deployed to dispatch the shipments and to carry on the Telecommunication services uninterrupted. The tea merchants of Calcutta and the buyers had requested the Calcutta Tea Traders Association to postpone the weekly tea auction in the city because of the dislocation of the railway communication system. The tea agents from different places, such Delhi, Bombay etc. faced so much inconvenience in transporting, the samples and payments were also withheld and could not be committed due to problems related with the Postal Department and their staff. The Calcutta Municipal Corporation was seriously concerned with the system of water supply throughout the city because the coal stock of the Corporation was nearly to be over within a few days. The railway strike had threatened the entire system of the state administration. The strike had disconnected the city of Calcutta with the small towns and the whole of eastern region from the other part of the country. The nerve centre of the entire eastern India and the capital of West Bengal were virtually detached from the rest of the country and from the distant districts of the State (Jugantar, 12.5.74). The various actions and incidents that occurred during the strike days, not because of the directions of central leadership, but they took place because the railway workers and their families who fought for the demands, considered them as just as they felt the dire need of it and had suffered in their daily life.

Ultimately the endeavour to stand up against the government's strike-breaking operations could not resist the railway workers from gradually surrendering the movement (Sherlock, 2002; p. 404). The strike fizzled out and ended with huge repression, victimisation, arrests, betrayal, loss of national income, stagnation in industrial progress both in the face of industrial relation and economic growth. As per news paper reports about 1,17,000 employees of the Eastern and South Eastern Railways were affected by break-in-services for participating in the May 1974 strike (Hindustan Standard, 1.6.1974; p.1). Brajesh Prasad Choudhury<sup>18</sup> mentioned that removal, break-in-service, suspension order were the common weapons where were applied against the striking workers. In fact the authority had termed the strike as "illegal" and whoever had participated in this illegal strike and conspired against Indian democracy must face punishment like arrest under MISA, DIR etc. A spokesman for the Eastern Railways was quoted in the Press by saying that "on May 8<sup>th</sup> officers would approach the employees by going door to door to request them to join their duties under police protection, he said if they refused they would be asked to vacate their quarters, loyal workers would be provided with all facilities" (Sherlock, 2002; p. 377).

Government resorted to every propaganda and every means to press the workers' struggle. It had claimed that the demands of the workers would cost huge burden on the national purse which would be impossible to bear. Surprisingly, it permitted the expenditure of double amount to suppress the movement<sup>19</sup>. The Government had assured a forty percent rebate to the landlords for their production, but surprisingly it had augmented cloth prices by 30 to 40 percent. B.T Ranadive was of the opinion that when the Government had granted Rs. 100 to 120 crores by way of reduction in tax rates to the capitalist manufacturers, indirectly it allowed the traders of vanaspati, sugar, cement, food grains etc. to accumulate more profits. But all of these reductions and rebates ultimately increased the freight rates which were borne by the pockets of the general public. Ranadive complained that the ruling Government had continuously claiming that it could not afford money to fulfil the workers' demands due to the scarcity of fund but the same government had exhausted Rs. 162 crores on the atomic explosion and again afforded Rs. 90 crores for further atomic research and developments (Ranadive, 1999; p. 6). Nrisingha Chakrobarty maintained that one did not

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Sri. Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury on 20.01.2018 at 8.00 a.m

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Suvendu Mukherjee on 19.1.2018 at 2.30 p.m

need to justify the demands of the railway workers and the false claims of the Government about its inability to meet them. The railways like the other infrastructure industry were used to help the capitalist traders, he agonised because it was really meant by describing them as “public utility’ department which indicated everything (Chakraborty, 1975; p. 8).

Mrs. Gandhi’s government viewed the railway worker’s struggle as a political challenge, so they did not hesitate to extinguish the entire course of action. Cases of repressions were countless. In West Bengal it was really threatening and miserable for the railwaymen. West Bengal Government treated the strike as a political challenge thrown to the ruling Congress party by the leftist leaders of the state as the left parties in the State whole heartedly supported the battle of the railwaymen. By this time the left parties in West Bengal began gaining power in the political and social planes. Thus, Siddhartha Sankar Roy had resorted to brutal force to suppress the every little action of the railwaymen. Police did not spare the women and little children of the striking workers. In all the railway colonies a vast number of CRPF, BSF, and Paramilitary forces were deployed to handle the situation. In the Eastern Railway Zone in all its colonies the male members of every family fled away to escape the immense torture and arrest. Armed forces visited the rail colonies every now and then and compelled the householders to open the doors of their houses. Even at midnight police used to come at the colonies, scattered everything in the quarters in search of the striking workers. New Age reported that when police could not trace out the striking workers, their anger fell on their sons and relatives – police arrested Noni Gopal De, a student of class IV because his father was a striking Points man Hemanta Kumar De. Similar incidents and cases were piled up hugely, e.g., a student of class VII Madan Gopal Ghosh was arrested because police could not trace his father Dhirendranath Ghosh (New Age, 1974; p.6). Many women got hurt and young girls were forced to put off their clothes in front of the armed forces, these took place in Chitpur Yard rail colony. This type of incidents were common in almost all the rail colonies throughout the country, the police and paramilitary forces had terrorised the families of the striking workers as a result of which hatred and anger were generated among the people against the railway authority and the democratic government in India. Maya Mukherjee<sup>20</sup>, wife of Sri. Suvendu Mukherjee shared the experiences during her stay in Kanchrapara railway colony in the strike days.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Smt. Maya Mukherjee on 19.01.18 at 6:30 p.m. at her Kanchrapara residence

Women were injured by bayonet, were charged by lathi and several other ways they were tortured and even physically assaulted by the Police and CRPF personnel in the Kanchrapara Railway Colony. Still these incidents had remained fresh in the memories of hundreds of the railwaymen and people. Kanchrapara became the centre of violence, atrocity and brutality that was unleashed by the State Police, CRPF and Paramilitary forces. Peculiarly the Congress hooligans and goondas had joined hands with them. Maya Mukherjee herself was the victim of police torture whose leg got fractured and wounded bitterly as the police had beaten her by holding the hairs, resultantly she was hospitalised for seven days.

31<sup>st</sup> May 1974 was observed as ‘Solidarity Day’ by the various trade unions functioning in the country, viz., AITUC, CITU, UTUC, HMS etc. George Fernandes after releasing from jail heartily greeted the striking workers irrespective of political allegiance for participating, cooperating and supporting this strike. The leaders who intended to take some opportunities and make political careers propagated against Fernandes and blamed for the failure of the struggle and made him accountable for the entire discourse. On the basis of all accusations he was terminated from the post of the President of AIRF. Some factional force within the leftist trade unions acted as an agent of betrayal. It was purported by many trade union leaders of this area and general railwaymen that in Burdwan and Asansol the strike was not so powerful as the Loco running Staff Association led by CITU was indifferent and inactive before and during the strike days. Not only that during this period, many instances of treacherous activities were reported against the local leaders. It was alleged that one reputed leader of their organisation Sri Gopal Pandey, a Loco Fitter at Ranaghat and Vice-President of Joint Council of Action, the Sealdah Division did not only stay away from participating in the strike himself but in fact he objected the workers in most of their actions at his Loco shed and earned cash rewards from the authority for the anti-strike role (Biswas, 1977; p. 11). Actually, the problem lied in the question of support and alliance with the Government. CPI and its trade union partner AITUC became very much embarrassed when the indefinite general strike of the railwaymen was decided and executed. CPI had lost its importance and influence in National Politics in the post independent era. When Indira Gandhi’s Government came into power, after the split in Congress, it required support to be in power. The CPI played a considerably significant role in this regard. It supported the Congress from outside to form the Government and started gaining power and

rebuilding its position in National Politics. It also had seen improving its trade union activities and support base. If the trade union wing of CPI had joined the strike of the railwaymen, then it meant that the party went against the policies and decision of the Union Government. The entire higher administrative personnel such as Mrs. Indira Gandhi, L.N. Mishra and Raghunath Reddy who initiated the entire strike breaking process, were criticised and condemned by every section of the society. CPI followed the mid way, officially could not go against the decision of the Government because from outside they supported the Congress ruling government which was formed in 1971 in Lok Sabha election. CPI had also the obligations and own interests towards the working class because its main support base belonged to the industrial belt of the country and a control over the labour force. In West Bengal the problem and position of CPI was more critical. As Sherlock had pointed out that the strike caused particular problem for the West Bengal Unit of the CPI where the party was formally supported Congress, called Progressive Democratic Alliance. But on the contrary the CPI youth wing, the Yuva Sangh went against the alliance and openly advocated in favour of the railway strike (Sherlock, 2002; p. 427). This wing revolted against the CPI, especially when the Congress supporters and police terrorised the innocent family members of the railwaymen, raided the railway colonies, arrested the workers and their family members, and rallied against the railway worker's struggle. Therefore, a clash between the mother party and its youth wing arose and the gap between them was widened revolving around the railway workers strike.

The CPI in West Bengal took pro-Indira stand and campaigned in favour of the Government during the strike days. But the CPI (M) got the opportunity to show its pro-working class attitude and gained power and strength. Nevertheless, after the strike was called off, CITU organised a meeting consisting of all left parties, where the proposal of a Legal Aid Committee was raised and accepted and on the basis of this proposal Legal Aid Committee for the railwaymen was formed. The main purpose of this Committee was to look after the cases of victimisation like break-in-service, removal etc. and fight and defend them in the Courts. Bhola Bose<sup>21</sup>, member of Eastern Railwaymen's Union, posted in Sealdah Division in 1974, was entrusted with the responsibility to look after the cases of

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<sup>21</sup> interview with Mr. Bhola Bose on 22.01.18 at 5.30 p.m. at his residence at Karunamoyee, Salt Lake, Kolkata

victimisations. He had to supervise the process of the enquiry and investigation of the Court cases against the railway workers especially who were removed from their services. The victimised railway workers were not in a position to fight the cases in the courts because they were already crippled financially. Therefore, this Committee provided some kind of relief to the railwaymen. The Legal Committee was associated with the Democratic Lawyers' Association. The renowned lawyers were Somnath Chatterjee, R.C. Deb, Salil Ganguly, Bikas Bhattacharjee etc. who were mainly based in Calcutta stood by these victimised workers.

Some political analysts were of the opinion that one of the strongest reasons behind the implementation of Internal Emergency in June, 1975 in the country was the internal disturbances like the All India General strike by the railway workers in May 1974. The strike had created and left such impact on the national politics that it led to such consequences. Critics often said that Indira Gandhi's government became worried about the consequences of the ever biggest workers' movement in the country. It was also argued that the impact of this strike was far-reaching and along with many reasons of imposing National Emergency in June 1975. Internal emergency caused immense sufferings to the life of the millions of countrymen for years. AIRF sources released that thousands of individuals were detained under MISA and DIR during this phase (AIRF Publication, 1999; pp. 21-22). The method of suppressing any workers' agitation by Indira Gandhi's Government, exhibited its inclination towards authoritarianism.