

Chapter VI

The Strike and its Impact in the Northeast Frontier Railways

This chapter discusses the causes and developments leading to the strike and the developments related to the strike in the Northeastern Frontier Railways. The N.F Railway's authority had never headed to the demands of the workers hence the grievances were never redressed. As a result of this the workers were aggrieved. The result was the eruption of various types of labour unrests throughout the N.F Railways. In this chapter we concentrate on the situation of the N.F Railways in the period of the strike. The consequence of the strike in this zone was deep and diverse. Therefore the chapter examines the impact of the struggle of 1974 in N.F Railways. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section has focussed its attention on the grievances of railwaymen in N.F Railways. In this section we also look at how the workers of N. F. Railway along with the other zones had prepared themselves for the general strike. The second section of the study discusses the strike situation throughout the N.F. Railway Zone. It summarises the developments that took place in the entire N.F. Railways in this period. The third section analyses the impact of the strike in the N.F. Railways as the struggle had a long term effect both economically and politically.

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Grievances of the N.F Railway Workers and their Preparations for the Strike

In this section of the study we begin with a brief history of the N.F Railways. It was eventually difficult and burdensome to construct and build the most vital segment of transport industry i.e., the establishment of the railways and it was more laborious and grinding since the area was composed of mountains, rivers and jungles. More importantly if it was constructed in frontier states. India's north-east frontier region had showed its own

problems since the British company started establishing the railways. Thus the maintenance and protection of workers in this region unveiled several complications whose remedies were tough to trace. Although the British Rail Boards on India's frontier was primarily concerned with the areas in India's north-west, north-east had also some fascinating story which remained unheard (Kerr, 2012; p.57). The Northeast of the Indian territory was inhabited by various types of tribal people – economically poor socially backward. The geographical position and climatic condition of the north eastern frontier both were extremely unfavourable for establishing any industry, especially for the construction of industry like railways was really a laborious and unbelievably troublesome work. This region was usually too wet due to heavy rainfall throughout the year. Weather and mountains were the main constraints in this area for the construction of railway tracks in the earlier phase of British era. Apart from this the disturbances of the border areas and the question of boarder security were consistently a matter of concern to the administration in the pre and even post independent India. As a result during the British period the process of railway construction in this region was confined to a small area and the construction was erratic and inconsistent as well. The first sixty five kilometres of railway track was constructed in Assam in 1881 from Dibrugarh to Margherita by Assam Railway and Trading Company. The Badarpur-Lumding section was a part of Assam Bengal Railway that was constructed in 1892.

After independence it was observed that there was no good railway connection between Assam and the rest of the country. Thus, the Government of India had initiated the Assam Rail Link Project to expand the communication systems in the entire foot hills of the Eastern Himalayan region. On 14th April, 1952 the North Eastern Railway was formed by amalgamating two railways such as Assam Railway and Oudh and Tirhul Railways. It was again divided into two zones – North Eastern Railways and North East Frontier Railways on 15th January, 1958 (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>; and indianexpress.com). It comprised of the areas of the states of north –eastern region – a part of Bihar, North Bengal and entire Assam were included in the N.F. Railways. It had four divisions in 1974 – Katihar, Alipurduar, Tinsukia and Lamding with Zonal Headquarter in Maligaon, Guwahati. We should also mention here about Darjeeling Himalayan Railways (DHR). It was another important functional railway in the hill stations in Darjeeling hills of eastern Himalayan range. It

started working from April in the year of 1879 with the head quarter in Kurseong upto 1948. The area of DHR was extended upto Kishanganj. In 1950, the narrow gauge line for Kishanganj was dismantled and new metre gauge line was constructed from Kishanganj to Siliguri Junction; before 1950, the stations of D.H. Railway were under: 1. Siliguri; 2. Siliguri Road; 3. Store yard; 4. Panchanoi; 5. Sukna; 6. Rongtong; 7. Chunbhati; 8. Tindharia; 9. Gayabari; 10. Mahanadi; 11. Kurseong; 12. Tung; 13. Sonada; 14. Ghoom; 15. Darjeeling (Chowdhuri, 2004; p.19). In October, 1948 the government of India had taken over the charge of DHR and merged it with Assam Railway in 1950 in the month of November. District offices of the Railways were constituted in Siliguri –the northern part of West Bengal: 1). District Engineer, Siliguri Junction; 2) District Mechanical Engineer, Siliguri Junction; 3). Assistant Controller of Stores, Siliguri Junction etc. New Jalpaiguri was originally New Siliguri but due to some political pressure, it was renamed as New Jalpaiguri (NJP). When broad gauge was constructed at NJP, it had become an important junction and a gateway to the entire north east region. The two Engineering Districts of Siliguri and NJP were entrusted to supervise the major and minor bridges of this area. The following were the detail of those ones:

	Meter Gauge Section	Broad Gauge Section
Major bridges	101	91
Minor bridges	823	450

(Choudhuri, 2004; p. 26).

Later on DHR was included under the supervision of N.F. Railways. Diesel engine repairing shed was established in 1962. Approximately this diesel shed comprised of seven hundred to seven hundred fifty workers and resultantly a colony grew up out of the demand of accommodation and it was built in the north bank of the river Mahananda which came to be known as the Diesel Colony. The significance of Siliguri Junction declined when N.F. Railway authority declared to establish Divisional Head Quarters in Katihar, Alipurduar, Lumding and a Divisional Office in Tinsukia. This decision was executed from May 1969. Therefore, all the important offices based at Siliguri and NJP were moved to Katihar and

these two junctions were kept under the complete supervision of Katihar Division and as a result the station of Siliguri Junction and especially the importance of Siliguri Road Station became less and left useless and irrelevant and near to a dead station.

The usefulness and necessity of the railways in this region was identified by the British in the colonial period which led them to construct the railway track in the hilly areas of Himalayan range. The Terai, Dooars and the Darjeeling hills of North Bengal were famous for timber and after the growth of plantation i.e., the tea industry, the export of tea had become necessary. The urge for developing the communication system in this area was felt and DHR was established, the need of connecting this area with the rest of the country was also recognised. The poor people of this region at the same time got the opportunity to increase their earnings and the livelihood of the people had progressed gradually. New tea gardens and railways provided employment to the general mass. This affected on the overall economic growth of the region which improved every small means of better living of daily life. Education and health facilities started changing and it was easily assumed that a touch of urbanisation impacted on the enhancement of social status of the people. Thus, the railways had helped innumerable in developing and changing the economic geography of the region. Exploitation of labour had emerged parallel with economic development. As deprivation went high, labour unrest increased automatically.

When AIRF was formed in 1924, the N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union was founded and was affiliated with the AIRF. It carried the legacy of Bengal Assam Railway Employees' Association. After independence when the regrouping was taking place in 1953, Assam Railway was amalgamated and North East Railway was constituted then the union came to be known as North East Mazdoor Union. Finally in January, 1958 N.F. Railway was formed. N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union was formed with its head quarters in Pandu (Assam). The President of this union Hareswar Goswami and the General Secretary was Suren Goswami. When a good number of district offices were set up in Siliguri, a diverse group of employees were posted here. Then the trade unions at the local level felt the necessity of a united forum and united actions to articulate and communicate their demands and discontent. Thus, the trade unions felt that the workers lacked awareness and addressed their main areas of disappointments, e.g., minimum working and living facilities. For influencing the authority the unity of the workers was an ardent need. Whenever there was any demand on the part of

the workers, the administration always resorted to heavy repression and this scenario had become very common since independence.²² Authority always tried to dominate the workers and did not allow them to raise any voice against their deprivation. It is because of this the newly recruited railway staff at Siliguri Junction decided to form an association in 1949-50. On the advice of the Leftist leader Priya Gupta, who was posted at Siliguri Town station at that point of time, a committee was founded under the banner of Assam Railway Labour Association (ARSA, Regd. No. 211) on the 14th of December, 1950 with B. Ghosh, the Wireless Operator as President and Santosh Chandra Sengupta, Clerk as Secretary along with thirteen other executive members amongst Comrade Gopal Banerjee and Comrade Nabajyoti Chowdhuri were also present in that ad hoc Committee which was constituted (Chowdhuri, 2004; p.33). DHR had its separate workers union – D. J. Railway Union which later decided to integrate itself with ARLA. Another merger proposal was raised. The Rail Road Workers' Union of Siliguri Unit also merged with ARLA Siliguri Branch Unit in 1953. They had organised several movements in this region after their amalgamation.

In 1956, the workers demanded for Terai allowances for bad climate. The Mazdoor Union raised its voice against long term grievances of the workers. The Mazdoor Union representatives submitted two separate memorandum detailing their grievances such as: 1) Arrear - Terai Allowance; 2) system of double increment of a single unit quarter; 3) hill allowance at Tindharia; 4) house rent allowance at Tindharia; 5) standard rent of railway quarters; 6) Assam compensatory allowance etc. (Choudhuri, 2004; p. 41). The workers of the entire North East Railway planned to go on strike against the authority on the decision of removal of Comrade Priya Gupta in 1957, but it was withheld when Guruswami and Priya Gupta requested that it would not be wise to take such a decision in that situation but Siliguri Unit of Mazdoor Union showed an optimism and firmness in this circumstance. Meantime the bifurcation of North East Railway took place and N. F. Railway came into existence in 1958. In 1960, a five days strike was held throughout the country. It was the first united agitation of the all the central government employees including the Indian Railway

²² Sri. Jatindra Kishore Sarkar, Train's Examiner posted at N.J.P station, was a member of U.C.R in 1970 earlier a member of Mazdoor Union, corroborated the above statement. In many occasions whenever the workers went to the authority asking for demand the N.F Railway management showed no willingness to meet them. Sometimes it happened that the authority utilised the recognised unions to suppress their voice. (Interview with Sri Sarkar on 28.1.17 at Pensioner's Office N.J.P Unit, N.F Railways, Siliguri at 11.30 a.m).

Workers'. N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union along with the other units had joined in the strike and this action was dealt with heavy hands; the working class of the country thus faced a brute force utilised by the Central Government. The reasons behind the workers resentment mainly revolved around the structure of their payment; long duty hours and poor accommodation facilities. When the workers found that the minimum requirements of livelihood went out of reach and sufferings increased day by day, began to articulate their demands and planned to place them before the authority. The rise of prices of essential commodities made the situation worse. Bimalendu Chakraborty²³, member of N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union, posted at first in Chittaranjan Locomotives in 1958 as a draftsman and then transferred to Pandu, Assam informed that the hardships and sufferings of the daily life agonised the railwaymen. Chakraborty had commented that Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India too took very firm steps to suppress the Central Government Employees strike and as a result it was withdrawn after five days. Huge victimisation took place, workers were charged with several cases and faced break in services, removal etc. In Siliguri the strike was complete and the railway workers actively participated in this agitation. Nabajyoti Chowdhuri informed that on 7th July, 1960, a very big procession of all the Central Government employees at Siliguri rallied over entire town. Basanta Ghosh and Baswan Singh, MLA was also present on that occasion (Chowdhuri, 2004, p. 44). Leaders like Priya Gupta, Peter Alvares etc. visited Siliguri during the period as Assam was debarred from joining the strike due to the internal communal disturbances of the state. Before the strike began an agitation occurred in Siliguri, as a result of which curfew was promulgated on 8th July, 1960 and from 11th midnight an indefinite strike had started. Several workers of Siliguri Town, Siliguri Junction and NJP had been victimised and the recognition of the union was also withdrawn. High Court of Calcutta restored the recognition of the union. In 1968 a 'one day token strike' was organised and most of the workers of this region including DHR had participated in the strike.

The main reason behind the successful launching of any strike in this region was the deprivations of the workers by the railway administration. It was noticed that from this period there was a growing discontent amongst the workers. For long railway workers of

²³ Interview with Mr. Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12.2016 at the Pensioner's office of Siliguri Town Station Unit, Siliguri at 12:00 noon.

this region felt that the railway management manipulated them to extract the highest profit from the industry by exploiting and denying them the share from this earnings. Economically most impoverished and underprivileged section were generating major portion of the profits for the industry. They realised that no recognised trade unions were competent to assert their causes of despair. On the other hand, Railway Board claimed that they were not able to fulfil the demands of the workers due to their financial condition the situation was not always the same. Railways made profits too. The following table shows that there was a substantial growth observed in the Indian Railways.²⁴

Selected Rail Road Statistics, 1950-51 to 2004-2005

Measure	1950-51	1980-81	2000-2001	2004-2005
Route kilometres	53,596	61,240	63,028	63,465
Track kilometres	83,706	104,480	108,706	108,805
Track kilometres (electrified)	1,253	13,448	36,950	43,364
Revenue freight carried in tonnes*	73.2	195.9	473.5	602.10
Ave. train load, broad-gauge, tonnes,	489	884	1,223	1,490
Passenger carried	412	2000	2,861	3,178
Suburban passenger carried*	872	1,613	1,972	2,126
Non-suburban* passenger carried	1,284	3,613	4,833	5,378
Grand total* staff (permanent Indian Railways Employees)	91,360	1,572,200	1,545,300	1,422,200

*In millions

(Source: Kerr, 2012; p. 176)

Railway workers in the Northern Frontier railways demanded for better accommodation facilities. Nearly 40% of the workers in Dibrugarh and Lumding were not

²⁴ A rail road system in 1950-51, still suffering from the human and physical disruptions of 1947-48, and not fully recovered from the depletions of World War II, had by 2005 been rebuilt, changed and developed beyond all expectations current in the mid-twentieth century.

provided with any quarters to live along with their families, those who were staying in the railway quarters had complained several times to the authority about the poor conditions of the quarters, but they always remained ignored and unheard (Brahma, 2016; p.107). Nikhil Bhattacharjee²⁵, the member of United Committee for Railwaymen was a Guard, posted at Badarpur, Assam in 1973 and a member of Zonal Action Committee of NCCRS confirmed that the ‘gang huts’ – the one room quarter mainly allotted to the class IV workers of Indian Railways were so unhealthy and sub standard, suffocating and filthy that workers lived for years in those quarters which were mostly built in the colonial period. These ‘gang huts’ did not have a proper system of ventilation, sanitation and were very much unhygienic, dirty and nasty. Samaresh Chandra Som²⁶, a second Fireman at Alipurduar Junction was a member of UCR in N. F. Railways spoke about the uniforms, those were supplied by the management were so poor in quality that the workers did not even like to wear that during their duty hours. The workers like Som who was mainly engaged in the heavy engine, specially the fireworks required proper uniforms and during the time of steam engine duties the workers had to work with water, coal, fire, grease etc. for which they needed proper uniforms. He stated that the railway management of Alipurduar Division was tremendously corrupt. The tender for uniform was given to those who could well bribe the management staff. Quality was compromised for money. There was a huge case of malfeasants and malpractices documented but no official measures were taken against any of them. Dishonesty, corruption and mismanagement were the common features of the dealing staff in all the zonal railways. Lots of cases of discrepancies in the railway management in these regions were noticed but no one had questioned the authority not even the union leaders. The union leaders were bribed so that they ignore such corrupt practices and avoid the complaints of the general workers.

However, the workers were mainly vocal about their economic grievances. As the prices of essential commodities had been increasing, they were not able to cope up with the situation. Railway workers of N.F. Railways in Assam used to shout slogans against the Indira Government even before the strike proposal had been passed – these were like “Dash

²⁵ Interview with Sri.Nikhil Bhattacharjee, convenor of local Action Committee in 1974 strike, on 22.12.2016 at Pensioners’ Office, Siliguri Town Station Unit, N. F. Railways at 11 a.m.

²⁶ Interview with Sri. Samaresh Chandra Som on 25.01.2017 at AILRSA Pensioners’ office at Alipurduar Junction at 11:15 a.m.

taka teller keji, Indira Gandhir bhelki baji”, etc. The railwaymen were so much aggrieved that they started blaming Indira Gandhi for every inconveniences they were facing. They were also disappointed on the issue of frequent disciplinary actions taken by the authority against them on little and insignificant matters too. Authority resorted to the devices of penal transfer, retrenchment, disapproving promotions etc. to punish them even on personal grudges. In N.R. Railway the superior and subordinate relation existed prominently which ultimately created a sort of bitterness and hostility among the employers and employees in the railways. Surprisingly, the railway trade unions never fought in the interest of the railway workers rather they played a dual role. They always remained busy to satisfy the management so that they could be retained in power and receive personal benefits, hence never confronted the authority for broader cause.

There was another reason behind the workers’ resentment which had persisted since the colonial period and that is the system of hierarchy in every sphere of work. The category sentiment had inevitably grown up and a marked difference between different grades of the workers was predominant in the railway industry. Casual workers were the sufferers of this phenomenon. Pallab Kr. Majumdar²⁷, a casual worker in Katihar Division posted at Thakurganj in 1974 was a member of the Mazdoor Union he informed that most of the casual labourers were incorporated under the umbrella of AIRF, because the casual workers always demanded for fixed pay and decasualization. They were paid only Rs. 3.5/- per day and were appointed for 120 days but always terminated on 119th day from their work and after a gap of one or two days or a week again were given some other work by the same or different department. Usually the casual workers had to visit different departments for works. The departments of signalling system, construction works mainly the construction of bridges required more skilled and unskilled labourers. They were not entitled to get any facilities and benefits from the industry. Majumdar regretted that these casual workers were termed as “Murgir deem”, it meant that if any mishap took place like accidents or sickness, they were simply terminated from their services and got no benefits from the authority. They were compared with the ‘eggs’, if the eggs got spoiled, the management just dismissed the casual workers they were not in the position of any use. The position of the casual labourers

²⁷ Interview with Sri Pallab Kumar Majumdar, a casual worker employed in Katihar Division on 23.12.2016 at Siliguri Junction Pensioners’ Association, at 6:30 p.m

was similar to 'eggs'. Once anything odd took place like accidents or diseases, they were not entitled to get any facilities from the concerned department. What the departments used to do was that they simply terminated or discontinued the railwaymen from their jobs. Meagre payments, long hours of duty (14-16 hours at a stretch per day) under the sun and rain and inhuman treatment on the part of the officers, compelled them to revolt against the authority. This segment of the workers was also huge in number, who were extremely annoyed and discontented hence they therefore actively participated in the general strike of May 1974. He also confirmed that the working condition in Katihar division was even worse than any other place as the environment at loco sheds, diesel sheds, workshops etc. was too unhealthy, suffocative, injurious and harmful that the workers frequently feel ill. Day by day the grievances of the workers had increased and reached its peak in 1974. The Three Pay Commissions that came into existence from 1947 to 1974 could not solve the problem of erosion in real earnings of the railwaymen because the price rise was incredibly high and D.A. formula that was used to bridge the gap, had failed to serve the purpose. The bonus as deferred wages was also not permitted to the railwaymen. In the entire North Eastern States it was more difficult to manage the livelihood of the family of eight to ten members because the region was more costly than the rest of the country. In the hilly region, there had always been a scarcity of essential commodities which ultimately led to price hike. Thus the people who could not afford them bore the miseries of daily life. The prices of edible oil and kerosene became very high at that point of time.

In the meantime on 19th September 1970, United Committee for Railwaymen (UCR) was formed by the former leaders of the Zonal AIRF who rebelled against the decisions and directives of the AIRF. After observing the inactiveness and the policy of appeasement of AIRF towards the Railway Board and Management, the local leaders had decided to mount their struggle separately. The entire union activities of N.F. Railways were dominated by the UCR and Mazdoor Union during these days they became powerless. Interestingly a greater unity was built in N.F. Railway by coordinating the unrecognised categorical associations and UCR played a pivotal role in this regard though the national leaders opined that this craft unionism exhibited a harmful trend in the broader perspective of the trade union movement of the country. But this pro-unity approach of N.F. Railways had pushed the railway workers a step forward towards achieving greater goal during the preparations of the

May 1974 strike. Category sentiment was considered as a serious constraint towards broad based integrity and unification of the trade unions. In August 1973, AILRSA strike had manifested such unity and strength. The leftist front in West Bengal was too prominently active in this zone. The Rail Road Association along with other trade unions in the N.F. Railway led various types of agitation and Jyoti Basu played a crucial role in uniting the railway workers and accumulating strength in the entire N.F. Railway zone and the workers' solidarity was the result of this effort. The general workers had been brewing with discontent with the opportunist attitude of the recognised unions which forced them to unite and strengthen a platform to fulfil their demands.

In the areas of North Bengal especially due to the Naxalite movement the union activities went down and UCR acted as a craft union providing a ground to raise the voice of the workers against the long deprivations by the authority which left unheard since long back. Here we should mention about an important incident that occurred in Siliguri which led to an indefinite strike paralysing a vast areas of N.R. Railway e.g., Siliguri, Katihar, Alipurduar and Bongaigaon. A small tussle in a railway school named 'Bani Mandir Bidyapeeth' took place which resulted into the arrest of four Loco men. This arrest aggrieved the workers in Siliguri Junction. The workers protested against the arrest and went on strike and as the news of assault and arrest and strike had spread in the nearby areas, the regular functions of railways halted completely. Hundreds of thousands of railway workers assembled in protest against this incident in the loco shed at Siliguri and accompanied their colleagues and then made a sudden move and stopped their work. They infuriated with anger when they found that on 25th July five hundred soldiers were deployed at the stoppage of New Malbazar Station near Siliguri, attacked the railway workers and ransacked the grocery shops and railway canteen, hence devastated the entire area. (Sherlock, 2001; pp. 100-101). Siliguri and its surrounding areas were strategically very significant connecting the eastern border areas of India. Thus, MISA was implemented and army was deployed to carry on the regular functions of the railways. Mr. Shyamalendu Bikash Kanjilal posted at Siliguri Junction, Sanjit Sarkar at Alipurduar were prominent local leaders in this agitation. A large number of workers of N.F. Railway were arrested and some of them were removed from service. Massive demonstrations, processions, rallies took place. People from all sections

condemned the arrest and victimisation²⁸. A 'bandh' on 30th July 1970 was held in Siliguri and Alipurduar against the decisions and responses of the authority demanding the release of the arrested leaders. At last the Railway Minister had directed the General Manager of N.F. Railway to take necessary measures and negotiate with the workers and advised that everything should be resolved immediately. Therefore, the Railway authority promised that no victimisation and disciplinary actions would take place against the striking workers and then the strike was called off.²⁹

The UCR had emerged as a propelling force in this region. In N.R. Railway it played a crucial role and launched several workers' movements in every division of N.F. Railway upto 1981 specially upto 1975. During this period it gathered enormous power and popularity among the railway workers. It had a militant approach which attracted the workers as they started believing that it was strong enough to initiate any movement in the interest of the railwaymen. Thus, the leaders of the UCR were able to bring the workers under their domination and eradicate the differences of opinion and accommodate the workers into their organisational set up. They tried to diminish the barriers between the leaders and the grass root workers which has been the characteristic features of recognised unions the superior-subordinate relationship of the railway industry. During 1970-72 in N.F. Railway, UCR and AILRSA of N.F. Railway zone cooperated with each other to inspire the railwaymen to launch a bigger movement. As a result when NCCRS was formed to launch an indefinite general strike including all the division of the railways, UCR was not prepared to collaborate with them. UCR had not agreed with the decision of complying with the unions like AIRF which had betrayed them several times. It did not intend to join hands with the Mazdoor Union in the nationwide general struggle. Initially it argued for separate and independent movement which UCR would have easily organised in this zone. Malay

²⁸ Smt. Smriti Kanjilal corroborated and confirmed the above statement on the basis of her own experience. She said that the local people supported the railwaymen and their cause of protest. They criticised the authority for all the measures, taken against the railwaymen, hence they even rally in protest of the occurrence. Interview with Smt. Smriti Kanjial, wife of Sri. Shyamalendu Bikash Kanjilal on 18.1.2017 at 1.00 p.m. at her Lake Town Residence, Siliguri.

²⁹ Interview with Sri. Sanjit Sarkar on 24.1.2017 at 11:00 a.m. at his residence near Ram Krishna Mission, Alipurduar

Chandra Das³⁰ informed that as UCR represented all the shades of unions and categories of workers, it was enough capable to mount any mass movement in the entire N.F. Railway zone.

Although the two powerful recognised unions such as Mazdoor Union affiliated by AIRF and Employees Union affiliated by NFIR co-existed with the UCR as craft union, all workers unitedly participated in all types of agitations in this zone. In May, 1974 strike too, it was observed that all the trade unions were well represented. The success of AILRSA strike in August, 1973 acted as an inspiration to the workers of N.F. Railway. AILRSA all India President P.K. Barua was actually serving in the N.F. Railways and from Guwahati, Assam. Though fragmentation of unions led to the weakening the process of strengthening the workers' support base, the strike of AILRSA was successful in this region, not only the agitation of 1973 but almost all the labour unrest became successful here. Moreover, commenting on the alarming financial position of the railways, the Minister reported that the opening deficient in the last financial year was Rs. 9 crores but it had already gone upto 167 crores owing to the strikes at different times this year on the Railways (Hindustan Standard, 31st December, 1973; p.8). He was of the opinion that the recommendations of the Pay Commission made the situation more difficult for the Indian Railway industry as the Indian Railway faced a serious fiscal crisis due to the workers' unrests on the one hand and on the other hand the crisis had increased out of cost of maintenance and assistance provided to the production units. In this moment L.N. Mishra declared that it was impossible to concede to the demands of the loco men. Resultantly the loco men went on strike from 2nd August to 13th August, 1973 and the entire north east region was completely cut off from the rest of the country. However, it appeared as a dress rehearsal of the all India general strike of May, 1974.³¹

³⁰ Sri. Malay Chandra Das, a retired Chief Train Staff posted at Siliguri Junction in the years of turmoil in the railway industry, i.e., during early 1970s was a member of UCR. Interview taken on 04.01. 2017 at Mazdoor Union office, Siliguri Junction at 6:30 p.m.

³¹ Sri. Jnanendra Chakraborty posted at Malbazar Junction under N.F Railways as a Permanent Work Inspector from 1972 was of the opinion that the unity of the loco running staff during their strike in August 1973, was pioneering in the sense that the railway workers had learnt that the solidarity of the working class was the only factor which was able to influence the authority. The intensity of the strike in the entire N.F Railways was really incomparable with the early ones hence they conceived

In February 1974 when more than two thousand delegates representing more than one hundred and ten unions recognised and unrecognised from all the zones of the country met in New Delhi and NCCRS was formed, P.K. Barua was shocked to hear that an Action Committee of NCCRS on the zonal, divisional and local basis had to be formed to launch the general strike throughout the country. The leaders actually did not have any faith on AIRF and a common platform of the workers under the banner of AIRF was really beyond imagination. The AILRSA had emerged as a result of the betrayal and non-effectiveness of the former. When the time had come to launch a united struggle leaders like Barua became confused whether the AIRF was to be relied upon or not. Several times in the N.F. Railways the workers agitated against the authority to get their demands fulfilled but AIRF did not take any initiative to fight with the management. About two thousands workmen of railway workshop staged mass demonstration on January 21 under the banner of N.F. Railway Mazdoor Unions in front of L.R. Gosain, Chief Mechanical Engineer of N.F. Railway demanding the early finalisation of forty point charter of demands submitted earlier on September 6th last year to the Works Manager; the demands included immediate payment of various types of arrears dues; filling up of all vacant posts, stoppage of infiltration of outsiders in intermediate grades in local workshops (Assam Tribune, 2.2.74; p.1).

In February 1974, the Secretary of NFRMU, J. N. Saikia stated that N.F. Railway authority had incorporated the policy of ‘anti-labour’ as several posts in railway services and in workshops in Dibrugarh remained vacant and since the last few months the authority had not shown any interest in filling up the gaps. Union leaders insisted that N.F Railways had the capability to solve the problem of unemployment in this north-east region by ensuring the appointment of youths to these vacant posts. But they did not take any initiative in this regard. Therefore, the problem of unemployment in Assam remained the same. Little effort and dynamism of the railway authority could be a great help, at least, to some extent for eradicating the problem of unemployment. It had become an issue of public sentiment in Assam especially. These sentiments were well utilised during the May, 1974 strike. As a result UCR refused to rely on the decision of AIRF and rejected the idea to form any association for this purpose. But later on they joined with the NCCRS at national, zonal,

the struggle as their preparation for launching of a more broad based movement. Interview with Sri. Chakraborty on 28.1.2016 at Coochbehar Pensioners’ Office, Station Chowpati at 4.30 p.m.

divisional and local levels. Bidhan Sen from Mazdoor Union posted in Maligaon was elected as General Secretary of N.F. Railway's Zonal NCCRS and its Action Committee. Haromohan Das from Pandu had become the Joint Secretary of the Action Committee to lead the upcoming agitation. The unity which was achieved was very hard to get and this unity was challenged several times in several occasions. The leadership, especially of the Mazdoor Union was reluctant to constitute a Coordinated Committee at the local level. But the Convenor of Zonal Action Committee and Working President of Mazdoor Union, Indibar Kongar played a very optimistic role in the entire process of uniting the workers at all levels. The Action Committees were actually assigned with a great responsibility to organise and prepare the workers to launch and continue the nationwide struggle. Specially when in the midst of the negotiations, the important and eminent national leaders got arrested. In many cases in N.F. Railways the leaders had to depend on their own credentials, capabilities and resources to prepare and launch the indefinite strike.³²

In the Siliguri branch the Action Committee of NCCRS was formed with Nabajyoti Choudhury as the Convenor. The convenors had the great responsibility of overall supervision of the strike preparations. Fitting to the local situation, demonstration, mass meeting, joint convention with democratic masses including youths, students and rural masses were held with more and more participation of the workers; public meetings were held and pamphlet and leaflet in thousands were distributed to the public and different democratic organisations reciprocated (Chatterjee, 1988; p.6). Keeping the past experiences of divergent forces and tendencies of the workers in mind, the Zonal Action Committee had conducted numerous meetings with all levels and categories of workers to convince them that they should not be entrapped by the external factors like bribes, lucrative job offers, increments etc.

In Guwahati in the months of January, February and first week of April in 1974, the loco running staff had abandoned their duties for one day protesting against their long hours of duty. Loco men in N.F Railways had been facing physical hardship which was hard to bear but the management had no sympathy for them. Even after their agitation in 1973 they

³² Bimalendu Chakraborty posted at Pandu as an Assistant Drafts Man in 1967 was a member of Zonal NCCRS in N.F Railways, interview taken on 24.12.2016 at 12.30 p.m. at Pensioners' Office, Siliguri Town Station Unit, NF Railways, Siliguri.

had to work for long hours. The time between “sign-in and sign-out” of the duty took almost 14 hours which agonised the loco men enormously. They again wanted to go for ‘dropping their works’ and ‘work to rule’ agitation continuously from the month of April 1974. The movement of essential goods like coal, food grains, petrol etc. had been disrupted heavily for several days in Guwahati and many places there. The railway services in Assam region were partially obstructed due to this unrest. Apart from goods shortage, train services were also dislocated because the loco running staffs of Guwahati had decided to abandon the trains immediately after the completion of ten hours of duty and they unitedly had followed this for fifteen days. Disclosing this to newsmen at the N.F. Railway Headquarter at Maligaon the Chief Operating Superintendent of N.F. Railway Jagadish Lal said today that during the twelve day old agitation a total of one hundred and two trains including thirteen passenger trains were abandoned en-routed at way side stations. He said approximately one thousand and five hundred wagons on the broad gauge and eight hundred wagons in metre gauge had been immobilised and added that due to the congestions in various yards it had become increasingly difficult to receive supplies of vital items (Assam Tribune, 28.2.74; p. 1). News papers reported that the official sources said more than three hundred loco running staff of North E.F Railways had been suspended and more than twenty were arrested because the loco running staff had abandoned the trains and other kind of duties on the completion of ten hours of their work. The loco running staff demanded for maximum of ten hours of duty but the N.F Railway authority did not take any measure in implementing this schedule. Thus, the authority took action against the agitating railwaymen and deployed Territorial Army to keep the trains running (Hindustan Standard, 6.4.1974, p.2). Despite all the General Manager in Maligaon declared that N.F. Railway Authority had already implemented the ‘ten hours’ duty schedule for loco men but it could not be implemented altogether, they required time to complete the process.

News papers reported on 7th March that Chief Minister S.C. Sinha appealed to the loco men of N. F. Railways to stop the agitation for the sake of the people of North East region. He requested to the Loco Running Staff Association of N.F. Railways to consider the graveness of the situation as the loco staff unilaterally implemented the decision of dropping of trains after 10 hours of duty. Several difficulties, such as hoarding of essential goods, profiteering, black marketing etc. led to scarcity in market and price rise of every small

commodity. Power supply in the vast areas of Assam had been disrupted heavily. The frontier states were absolutely depended on the railways and the question of border security was also a matter of concern in this region. In these circumstances, the Chief Minister felt the urgency to remind the Loco Running Staff of the N.F. Railway about the wide spread and serious repercussions of their agitations and the harmful effects thereof on the life of the ordinary citizen (Assam Tribune, 7.3.1974, p.1).

The all India general strike was proposed to begin on and from the 8th May 1974 morning from 6:00 a.m. in all the zones of Indian Railways and the strike notice was served on 23rd April. In the perspective of launching a united struggle throughout the country the loco men's associations and the craft based union's hindered solidarity and it was difficult to convince them for changing their attitude towards an all India strike. Acceptance of Fernandes among them was weak and only holding meetings and conferences with the local level trade unions and their leaders did not secure the desired commitment of solidarity. In the N.F Railways the national leadership of AIRF conducted several meetings and conferences to discuss the preparations of the strike with the UCR leadership. Because they ascertained that for assuring success in this Zone, UCR was the major factor. Railway workers had an antagonistic attitude towards the AIRF and undermined the solidarity drive of the recognised unions. UCR suspected the older policy of the recognised unions and hence opposed the change. The sentiment of overwhelming support was absent in this zone during the early phase of preparation of the struggle.

The attitude of the government from the beginning showed that it was keen to use power to maintain regular services in the public sector undertakings like railways. In the background of economic crisis of the country any kind of labour turmoil which might lead to another loss of national purse, would be dealt with force. The official sources declared that the workers should devote their energy to increase industrial production and enhance the country's economic position so that the shortage in agricultural production could be handled to meet the growing requirements of the people and overcome financial crisis.

Meanwhile on 23rd April, 1974 the Zonal NCCRS had served the notice for the general strike which was going to take place from 8th May throughout the N.F. Railway zones. In pursuance of the decision of the Rashtriya Rail Mazdoor Sangharsh Samanya

Samiti, the strike notice was served to the General Manager, N.F. Railways after a massive rally of railwaymen at Maligaon Headquarters on 23rd April evening. They proposed total withdrawal of labour for an indefinite period to achieve their six-point charter of demands, which was going to commence from 6:00 a.m. of May 8th 1974 (Assam Tribune, 24.4.74; p. 1). Indibar Konger, the Convenor of Action Committee of N. F. Railways along with the other leaders on 23rd April held a meeting and addressed the workers for inspiring and motivating them to join hands to participate in the struggle. All the unrecognised and craft unions had joined hands and voiced their demands which included: payment of bonus, need-based minimum wage, eight hour duty per day, linking of dearness allowances with cost of living, supply of subsidised food grains, decasualisation and grant of all trade union rights. The Employees' Union of N.F. Railways affiliated to NFIR decided to refrain from participating in the strike. They described the strike as politically motivated and interested more in sectional and personal gains rather than in securing economic rights and demands of the railway workers. Employees' Union (NFIR affiliated) resorted to every measure to restrain the railwaymen from associating and involving in this struggle. They also organised counter activities in public forums in various places in Assam like holding of meetings, rallies etc. to convince the workers and explaining the consequences of the proposed strike. Pradyutananda Sarkar³³, Controller in Lumding Division i.e., a management staff and a member of Employees' Union affirmed the above matter.

The news of the arrests of national level leaders such as George Fernandes, H. S. Chowdhury etc. integrated the railwaymen in different areas of N.F. Railways. They protested against the treacherous action of the government. At Rangia station the workers walked out of their respective offices. In Lumding Divisional Head quarter, the official staff left their work and demonstrated against the arrest of the leaders like P.K. Barua who was among the other total seven hundred arrested railwaymen. News papers reported that five leaders of the N.F Railways were arrested in Katihar on 2nd May 1974. In Guwahati and Lumding railway employees held demonstrations in protest against the arrests as well as those of other Employees' Union leaders in different parts of the country (Assam Tribune, 3.5.74, p.1). In Katihar Division the convenor of the Action Committee was Sri. Sanat

³³ Interview with Sri. Pradyutananda Sarkar on 28.1.2017 at 11.30 a.m. at his Magazine Road Extension Residence, Cooch Behar.

Kumar Sen³⁴, a Fireman posted in Katihar Junction since 1963 was a member of UCR. Sen along with other his colleagues protested and rallied against the authoritarian attitude of the government. They were determined to launch the strike by involving more and more workers for an indefinite period. In Katihar the Action Committee rendered its best effort to consolidate the workers to initiate the preparation of the indefinite strikes and strengthen the morale of the workers. He argued that strong trade union sentiment and an honest and fresh approach towards working class movement had helped the workers in this Division to acquire power and solidarity and firmness for the movement. Sen communicated that several meetings and gatherings were organised in this division for encouraging the workers in favour of the strike. Following the government's line of action, all the Action Committees of N.R. Railways decided that eminent leaders of the trade unions should go underground in order to avoid arrest and police threatening and torture. Therefore, in almost all the Divisional Headquarters and important Junctions no leaders were found available.

On 3rd May 1974, every division under N. F. Railway observed 'Protest Day' against the decisive attitude of the government and its decision to arrest the frontline national leaders of the Action Committees of NCCRS. The Convenor of the Action Committee of N.F. Railway Indibar Konger stated that the government had provoked the railway men to go on strike, but the NCCRS was thinking of a negotiated settlement with the government. In some places "pen down" agitation took place. In Dibrugarh and Luming several meetings and rallies were held in protest against the arrest. On 3rd May in Guwahati, a meeting was conducted by the Action Committee that might be the longest and largest meeting ever held in the N. F. Railway because all the prominent leaders of the trade unions and the workers of all political colours had attended the same to prepare the action plans of the strike days. The leaders were directed not to stay in their railway quarters but to meet in a proposed and fixed place every day in order to get information about the day to day happenings and developments. Sisir Kumar Nandi³⁵, a signalling staff, member of All India Signalling Staff Council and AILRSA was posted in Guwahati in 1974 attended the meeting and witnessed the enormous volume and strength of the meeting. The railway workers were

³⁴ Interview with Sri. Sanat Kumar Sen on 4.1.2017 at 6-30 p.m. at Mazdoor Union Office at Siliguri Junction Unit, Siliguri.

³⁵ Interview with Sri. Sisir Kumar Nandi on 9.1. 2017 at Pensioners' Office, NJP, Siliguri at 3-30 p.m.

so aggrieved that nothing could restrain them from joining the strike. They had already begun sporadic revolts at local levels from 3rd May onwards. On the other hand, the Employees' Union, along with the Congress party members propagated against the strike notice and tried to dominate the railway workers in Guwahati and its surrounding areas. In Guwahati a meeting of Presidents and General Secretaries of the District Congress Committees of Assam has appealed to the people in general and Congressmen in particular to mobilise public opinion against the proposed strike by the railwaymen (Hindustan Standard, 3.5.74; p.8). Ajit Kumar Das³⁶, a Fireman of NJP station was the member of Fireman's Council and AILRSA and before the May strike had joined UCR asserted that from the early days of April the strike preparation had started. He was assigned to the duty of collection of money. He expressed his gratitude to all the members of railway trade unions who had not thought twice to contribute money for this purpose. As it was an indefinite struggle, they required enough money to continue the movement. He told that the people of nearby areas, employees of other Public Sectors and astoundingly a large number of management staff and members of NFIR also had contributed as much as they could donate. Before the strike began, almost all the quarters of the NJP Railway Colony became free of male members and only the women members of the families remained in the quarters. The railway men fled from the colonies and work place.

Interestingly all the trade unions played a very crafty and skilful role in this movement in all the zones of the railways including AIRF, AILRSA and so on. All of them were striving for power and position. AIRF had been preparing grounds to regain its power. AILRSA wanted to retain its newly achieved position and credibility. The interests of the trade unions became the main obstructions in the path of their unity. Every section of the trade union tried to play a wild card to judge their status. They strived for unity but pivoted around their own interests and welfare. However, the basic consensus on unanimity and solidarity achieved by the railwaymen by this time was absolutely unparalleled and historic. Evolving a class consciousness among the industrial workers symbolised the maturity of the working class, hence a pro-unity drive and broad based cooperation achieved by the railwaymen must embrace the entire working class of the country for larger good of the

³⁶ Interview with Sri. Ajit Kumar Das on 9.1.2017 at Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit at 12.10 p.m in Siliguri.

downtrodden. As a significant component of the organised working class in the country, the railway workers had the accountability to encompass the less well placed segment of workers and indeed were responsible for all the disadvantaged and oppressed mass of the country (Sherlock, 2001; p. 343).

II

Situation in North Eastern Frontier Railway Zone during the Strike

This section of the present chapter attempts to look at the situation that persisted in the entire North-eastern Frontier (NF) Railway Zone during the railwaymen's struggle of May 1974. Indian Railway workers went on strike from 8th May to 28th May, 1974 i.e., the strike action lasted for twenty days throughout the country. It was an action of the rank and file worker who got united and fought for accomplishing some of their demands. Along with the other eight zones of the Indian Railways, N.F. Railways had equally been the partner of the nationwide action of the industrial working class. This section of the study looks at the different type of developments that occurred in the various divisions of the N.F. Railways.

The railway workers were well aware regarding the consequences of the strike for an indefinite period against the authority. They were also conscious about how important a role the railway industry played in every day life of the Indians. It was a well known fact that the railways had been a major contributor to the national purse hence the railway industry was in a dominating position in the economic process of the country. At the same time the Railway Ministry was not ignorant about the outcome of any kind of industrial deadlock, which might arise out of workers' unrest. The Ministry knew well that this type of dispute was going to damage the country's financial pace but also obstructed developmental activities. Both the trade unions and the authority knew that the strike was going to be detrimental. Ironically both the parties were eagerly waiting to show their strength and powers. Discontentment of the railway men had been proliferating every day on various issues. This discontent bursted in a rebellion in the form of the strike. Apart from general

issues like pay structure, bonus, dearness allowance, working and living conditions, the railwaymen surprisingly had developed an agitating mind which might have been the consequences of years long deprivations and exploitations. The Railway Ministry had calculated the potency of the railway workers struggle observing their thrust for unity. They also had the clue that how much harm an indefinite strike in the most important segment of transportation industry could cause. But the authority let the strike take place because they prepared themselves differently and intended to show their power to the entire industrial working class of the country. Although the Action Committee of the strike movement from the very beginning repeatedly stated that this struggle was purely an industrial agitation and had no connection with any political party and did not have any political motivation. It was urged that if the authority had fulfilled some of the vital demands which could bring some qualitative changes in the economic status of the railwaymen, the Action Committee could have not resorted to the strike decision. But the adamant attitude of the government had compelled the trade unions to go for an indefinite strike. Hindustan Standard published a letter of Fernandez to Mrs. India Gandhi on 5th May 1974 in which he had complained that both the Railway Ministry and the Railway Board were obviously not giving a true picture of the situation on the railways nor of the “mood and temper” of the railwaymen. He complained that, the Railway Minister was ignorant of the issue that the men who were the life line of the country, worked round the clock to keep the wheel of the industry moving, were amongst the worst paid employees in the public sector. He asked the Prime Minister whether the railway men’s work were “less arduous, less hazardous, less important than the employees of the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), State Bank of India (SBI), Reserve Bank, Nationalised Banks, Hindustan Machine Tools (HMT), Hindustan Steel Ltd., STC, MMTC, Modern Bakeries to name a few Public owned undertakings (Hindustan Standard, 7.5.1974; p. 1 & 8). Nevertheless it could be said that this movement was obviously a historic movement launched by the working mass and downtrodden of the country. The railwaymen’s strike of May 1974 must be the guiding force for the future course of trade union movement of the country.

The provocative arrests in the midst of the negotiations throwing to the winds all norms of democratic behaviour incensed the workers. The strike in fact started on 2nd May in the Southern Railway including its workshops and continued after the all India strike

which took place from 8th May (Siddhanta, 1974; p. 63). In the N.F. Railway in some places especially in the areas of North Bengal, it started on 7th May, 1974 and continued till 29th May, 1974. In Assam on 4th May when a bulk of trade union leaders of the railways were arrested in different divisions, the railway workers started protesting against the treacherous moves of the government and the railway authority. A total of 26 railway workers were kept behind the bars in Assam. The State Secretary of the CPI (M) of Assam condemned the arrests of the leaders, Achintya Bhattacharya stated that “unwilling to meet the just and pressing demands of the masses and faced with their peaceful united struggle, the government had resorted to the path of wanton repression, arrest of leaders and attack on the civil liberty of the people” (Assam Tribune, 5. 5. 1974, p. 1 & 6). The trade unions/associations of other industries in North Eastern States demanded for the release of leaders of railway trade unions, they said otherwise the situation would further deteriorate. Jatindra Kishore Sarkar³⁷, an ex-Train Examiner posted in NJP, member of UCR recollected that he left his quarter on 6th night and fled to Kurseong and then to Darjeeling. He stayed there for ten days mainly to avoid arrest. He informed that majority of the striking workers of NJP Rail Colony escaped from their work place and houses because of police harassment and pressure from the authority. He affirmed that in NJP, most of the striking workers were the members of UCR who actively participated in the struggle and the members of LRSA also remained spontaneously absent from their duties from 7th to 29th May, 1974.

Dhrubalal Banerjee³⁸ a senior Train Clerk, posted in NJP stated that a large number of loco running staff were engaged in the tram yards, marshalling yards of NJP who successfully escaped from the yards on 6th May night and took shelter in the nearby areas. He reported that in the end of the year 1973 in NJP station, extension works had been initiated by the authority and for the establishment of broad gauge line. Few of them began to function during the early months of 1974. Thus, all the gauges - narrow, metre and broad gauge tracks were operational in this phase. Thus, N.F Railways employed quite a good number of labourers for this extension works. According to D.L Banerjee when the strike began on 8th May 1974, all these workers casual and permanent went on strike and the

³⁷ Interview with Sri.Jatindra Kishore Sarkar on 8.1.2017 at Pensioners’ office, N.J.P Unit, N.F. Railways, at 12:00 noon)

³⁸ Interview with Sri. Dhrubalal Banerjee on 8.1.2017 at 1:00 p.m. at Pensioners’ Office, and NJP unit, N.F. Railway, Siliguri

entire area including the station premises wore a deserted look. Moreover, the UCR at NJP was very much active and the railwaymen were well known for their solidarity and united struggle. Abhiram Sarkar³⁹ a courier clerk in Executive Engineer's Department in Bongaigaon and member of Mazdoor Union described the situation that existed in Bongaigaon before and during the strike days. He said almost all the supporters of the strike had stopped working and from 6th May evening. On the 6th of May morning he was sent to the head quarter, Maligaon in Guwahati to deliver an important letter. When he reached Maligaon in the evening he found that the atmosphere of the office of Engineering Department was quite gloomy and tensed. A small number of workers were present in the department and he did not find the concerned person to whom he was supposed to handover the letter. He witnessed that from the 7th morning the strike started at Maligaon head quarter, thus he could not return back to Bongaigaon because of the strike action the train serves were fully disrupted. He had to stay in Maligaon for next 6 days and after 6 days when he managed to come back, was arrested by police and sent back to Bongaigaon. Police kept him under their custody for the next fourteen days, as he had denied to resume his duties. He narrated how the arrested workers of Bongaigaon were forcefully sent to their respective offices and departments. He also remembered that from the 24th of May most of the workers had returned back to their duties in order to avoid police torture. According to Sarkar with the passing of time cruelty and atrocities by the police and armed forces multiplied and became more intolerable. The CRPF and Police did not show little leniency to the women and the children of the striking workers while interrogating and pressurising them. This indirect harassment strained the striking railwaymen.

Assam Tribune reported on 5th May that the N.F. Railway authority had cancelled 14 pairs of Mail and Express trains to conserve coal thereby to facilitate carrying food grains and other essential commodities (Assam Tribune, 5.5.74; p.1). This attitude of the railway authority had indicated that from the very beginning they were prepared to meet the workers' struggle firmly. Interestingly N.F. Railways management released a press notice in the leading news papers of north east which was published in the Assam Tribune which read:

³⁹ Interview with Sri. Abhiram Sarkar on 9.1.2017 at Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F Railways at 12:30 p.m.

while efforts were being made to maintain as many passenger carrying services as possible during the threatened Railway strike commencing from 8th May, it was possible that certain trains on run at 06:00 hours on 8.5.74 may have to be terminated intermediate points...During the proposed strike on the Railways, it was possible that Gatemen at level crossing gates may not be available to separate them at train timings, as such it had been decided to keep all the level crossings gates open that treat them as unmanned, the users of road vehicles were requested to stop short of the Railway level crossings gates and after looking out on either side or any train movement, cross them only after they were sure that it was safe to do so, the inconvenience caused to the users regretted as the circumstances would be beyond the control of the Railway Administration (Assam Tribune, 7.5. 1974; p. 1).

The General Manager of N.F. Railways had made several announcements against the proposed strike such as on 2nd May 1974 it warned that “Absenteeism from work without authority made you liable for punishment under Section 119 of DIR (Defence of India Rule)”.

Meanwhile, from the national perspective, the AITUC explained that the grants in aids and the amount of subsidies which were allocated by the government to the big industrialists of the country were of equal amount as the amount that was needed to spend on the wage bill or the demands of bonus by the railwayman. The railway trade unions ascertained the economic policy of the administration to appease the industrialists hence, the industrial workers reacted against the government. In the railways sporadic agitations increased day by day and in N.F. Railways united struggle of the disappointed workers hit the authority badly. As per T.N Siddhanta’s opinion this solidarity transmitted self-reliance and immense hope of success among the railway workers. This confidence had incorporated those workers who usually avoided any type of tussle with the authority. ‘Long drawn strike in the vast railway system involving lakhs of workers divided in innumerable categories with uneven development of organisation, consciousness and experience should be distinguished from a strike in any factory or in one particular industry’ (Siddhanta, 1974; p.70).

Jugantar reported on 8.5.1974 that the areas of Darjeeling Hills were completely detached from the rest of the state. Darjeeling Mail and Howrah New Jalpaiguri First Passenger trains were cancelled. All the railway links from Sealdah and Howrah to NJP and Darjeeling via Siliguri Junction, Tindharia and Kurseong were totally paralysed and the area remained almost abandoned. Train services became extremely irregular in North Bengal including in the hills and the plains, the entire area was dislocated due to the railway strike. Hindustan Standard reported on 9th May 1974 that due to a sudden absenteeism at Malda and NJP stations a complete end to the railway services in these areas. Apart from this a bandh on 7th May in Siliguri and surroundings caused immense difficulties, hence 281 wagons on the broad gauge and over 450 on the metre gauge lines were held up. All the goods and passengers trains were terminated in these areas and any short or long distance trains could not proceed towards their destinations (Hindustan Standard, 9.5.1974; p.1). Immobility of the trains caused immense problems for the porters, vendors, small shopkeepers near the big stations especially in Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Katihar, Malda etc. Peons and Cooks of the railway industry were in strike, so the stations became standstill and every action of these stations seemed to get numbed. N.F. Railway official sources from Maligaon declared that they were unable to operate trains in schedule times and more trains were to be cancelled. Hindustan Standard reported on 9th May that Armed forces were called by the N.F Railways authority for maintenance of the services of the telecommunication and trunk telephone lines because they suspected that these might be affected during the course of the movement, thus army came and took the charges to provide minimum services to the local (Hindustan Standard, 9.5.1974; p. 1) people.

A significant portion of workers of N.F. Railway went on mass leave before the indefinite strike began in NJP Junction and Katihar thus, the situation became really adverse for the movement of trains and the train services in these stations got crippled from the first week of May. In Katihar Division the mobility of trains had been disrupted since 7th May 1974. The official sources revealed that innumerable goods and passenger trains were declared as terminated from day one of the strike. On 8th May, Up and Down Assam Mail from Lucknow to Guwahati had reached Katihar station but the authority was incapable to run the trains towards their destinations because of the scarcity of the loco running staff, more precisely in Katihar Junction not a single driver was found who could run the trains.

Between Farakka and New Jalpaiguri and Malda and Katihar the total region collapsed due to the railwaymen's strike thus, the government servants, in other offices and in the railways too were not able to attend their duties and the willing workers of the railways were resisted by the striking employees. In Guwahati station, a group of retired personnel willingly offered their services and agreed to assist the N.F. Railway authority to maintain the wheels move on and keep the railway rakes operational. Jugantar reported that from Maligaon Headquarters the N.F Railway authority released a press notice acknowledging their gratitude to these personnel who helped the authority to keep the trains mobile and to minimise the effects of the indefinite struggle by the rank and file workers in Guwahati (Jugantar, 8.5.1974; p. 1 & 5). In Katihar the deadlock continued and all the trains mail, passenger and shuttle were declared to be cancelled due to the unavailability of the loco running staff especially the scarcity of drivers created a huge problem. And those who were working in the head quarter and in the junction became exhausted because of continuous duty since the last three-four days from 7th May morning shift.

In Kurseong and Tindharia workshops most of the workers participated in the strike, as a result of that these workshops were absolutely under lock and key. In Siliguri the strike was complete and the meetings, gatherings, rallies etc. was organised by the Local Action Committee of Zonal NCCRS. These meetings were usually held in the Railway Market, especially near Siliguri Junction and Town Station areas. Trade union leaders used to attend these meetings in disguise. In Malda the strike was supported by majority of the workers but participated by nearly 80% of the total employees. In Katihar, the strike was much intense and lasted until the strike was lifted on 28th May morning. In Guwahati and Dibrugarh almost 99% of the workers had remained absent from their office. In Guwahati station few passengers were seen and handful of staff had come to attend their duties. Booking counters were locked. Assam Tribune reported that on the first day of the strike only one train i.e., Guwahati-Lucknow Express left the station at 2-15 p.m. with very few passengers (Assam Tribune 9.5.1974; p. 1 & 6).

In Alipurduar, which was mainly a railway town, the entire areas inclusive of surrounding dooars wore a deserted look. No trains had moved from Alipurduar Junction on 8th May and the strike was potentially powerful as the leftists had a base in this region and the workers passionately participated in the action. Territorial Army tried to run some goods

trains but their attempts were unsuccessful. According to Kalyan Kumar Gupta⁴⁰, an Accounts Clerk in the Divisional Head Quarter, Alipurduar a member of UCR workers from all categories of railway industry had spontaneously joined the agitation, not only that the categorical councils were too united and got engaged with its full force under the umbrella of NCCRS. He said that the newly appointed workers in Alipurduar Division also participated in the struggle. He was of the opinion that there was no compulsion on the workers from the trade union leaders for joining the strike; employees were driven by themselves to join the struggle. He narrated that the newly appointed workers of N.F. Railways as he was also a freshly recruited employee, joined only in 1972 cooperated with the trade union activities whole heartedly. This section of the workers realised the need of protest for their future survival. Gupta narrated an interesting incident which took place in Alipurduar Junction on the second day of the strike. The Territorial Army began to run passenger trains from the station but not a single passenger was there inside the train and they went upto 5 to 6 kilometres ahead and came back to the station. From morning to evening almost in every hour, at least once they repeated the same. While doing this the Territorial Army kept on honking the whistle throughout its way on and back. The real intention behind this activity was to show the people of the area that normal railway services were available and no labour unrest in the railway industry had occurred.

In the morning of 9th May a shuttle train moved between Pandu and Narengi with few railway staff. Bimalendu Chakraborty⁴¹ was a Draftsman posted here in 1965. He described the situation that existed in this area during the strike days. Pandu was a small town grown up mainly with the railway colonies. Even before the strike started when the railway workers had been preparing themselves for the indefinite struggle the place itself seemed to be in a war like situation. On the one hand when the workers were conducting meetings, conferences, organising rallies, processions, on the other hand, the government also started cancelling trains, preparing their line of actions, deploying CRF, Para Military Force, Armed Force, alerting police etc – an environment of fear and suspicion persisted

⁴⁰ Interview with Sri. Kalyan Kumar Gupta on 25.1. 2017 at AILRSA Pension Office, Loco shed Patti, Alipurduar Junction at 10.30 p.m.

⁴¹ Interview with Mr. Bimalendu Chakraborty, member of UCR and convenor of local Action Committee on 24.12. 2016 at 12:00 noon at Pensioners' Office, Town Station Unit, N.F. Railways, Siliguri.

here. On the first day of the strike, not a single railway worker had turned up for their work. According to him, years long deprivation and exploitation compelled them to join their hands together and instinctively they participated in this movement. He told that in the entire areas of the northeast, the strike was so intense that the other industries in Assam especially the tea industry was badly affected by the rail strike. He informed that from 6th May onwards almost all the local leaders along with the members escaped from their workplaces to avoid arrest including himself. They contacted the workers through the local people and kept in touch with them and met them at night. In crowded bazaar area they used to meet each other and instructed the fellow workers about the necessary steps to be taken as the situation arose. Chakraborty had to travel to different places up to Lumding and Tinsukia for mobilising the workers and enhancing their mental strength and confidence. In the first two weeks the strike was powerful and complete but after that it started to lose its potentialities.

In the N.F. Railway a peculiar feature was observed during the strike days, not only that after the strike ended a craft bias strongly existed which impeded the broad based coordinated action and therefore till end they could not remain united. Chakraborty said that some members of Mazdoor Union (affiliated to AIRF) had in many places in N.F. Railway Zone betrayed the workers' and along with the NFIR members tried to get personnel gains from the authority. Even the men who argued for united struggle and considered the categorical councils as a weak platform to launch any coordinated action, later on at the peak of the strike days played a dual role. The militant attitude of the employees had been the basic characteristic of this zone which was an influencing factor in any workers' movement but by the course of time it had developed a double standardness and showed a duality in character.

But the problem arose when the Action Committee found that they had only limited resources and capacity to counter this anti-unity force. As Samaddar had rightly pointed out that this struggle projected 'with no unity, no wholeness, no identifiable organisation' and also lacked a definite subject to fight (Samaddar, 2015; p.46). This was perhaps the tendency of every railway zone throughout the country. Actually these people suffered from the problem of multiplicity and self division therefore did not want to be associated with any institutional order and its base. This scattered nature of the movement resulted into the ineffective resistance against the powerful and authoritarian nature of the administration.

In Katihar, on the first day of strike, when a mail train began moving from junction, a violent crowd consisting of nearly five hundred men and women threw bricks and stones on the police and home guards. Police blasted tear gas over the mob and then lathi charged over them as Assam Tribune reported on 9.5.1974 (Assam Tribune, 9.5.1974; p.1 & 6). More and more trains were terminated in different stations in N.F. Railways. The local passenger trains between Katihar-Guwahati, Badarpur-Lumding and Rangia-Rangapara were cancelled as no passengers were travelling and staff were absent from duties. The authority cancelled the trains especially due to the scarcity of loco running staff in this zone. N.F. Railway authority ran only food grains special goods trains from Malda to Assam and then they tried upto Lumding. But the staff attendance in various stations in Assam was so limited that after five days of the strike began supply of essential goods in Assam could not be maintained properly and the Food Corporation revealed that food scarcity in the next seven days would be felt if the situation remains unchanged. In the meantime when on 9th May it was declared that 15th May was to be observed as 'Solidarity Action Day' in India and in North Eastern States all the Central Government Employees Associations such as Bank, Defence, Life Insurance etc. met and decided to observe the solidarity day. The unity of all the section of workers in the Indian industries was truly valuable and it must be protected. When the 'three point formula' was offered by the government to end the strike it was rejected by the Action Committee of NCCRS, all the workers from the other industries extended their support. The leaders who got arrested assured the railwaymen to continue the strike as it must fetch some fruits for them.

In N.F. Railways including Assam the situation remained same after one week of the struggle. Heavily crowded two-three mail trains were running throughout the N.F. Railway zones Katihar, Alipurduar and Lumding. Apart from these stations all the main junctions and small stations wore a deserted look and the regular activities of the nearby places which depended on the railways were disrupted immensely. The Chief Minister of Assam appealed to the railwaymen that any successful labour movement required a support from the general mass and in this case, as the people were the worst sufferers, railwaymen lacked their sympathy. He suggested the railway workers to withdraw the strike in these hours of national crisis, especially when in the north eastern states border security was a matter of concern. Smooth running of trains was needed for the remote and interior places in the

border areas. Movement of military and Border Security Force got restricted and as a question of national security Central Government had directed the Government of Assam to maintain at least regularity in the movement of the Army and the BSF. Thus a bulk of Territorial Army had been posted in these sensitive areas.

The Statesman reported that on 10th May 1974 the movement of the limited number of passenger services in the hill regions of north east were stopped totally. Only food special trains were given preference and moved to Badarpur in Cachhar district which was in a “peculiarly vulnerable position having a tenuous communication link with the Brahmaputra Valley (Statesman, 10.5.1974, p. 1 & 5). Only a few trains were moving in this section of N.F. Railways. Nikhil Kumar Bhattacharjee⁴², posted in Badarpur was a Guard and a member of Guards Council of India and when NCCRS was formed, he was appointed as a convenor of Local Action Committee of Badarpur. He discussed about the situation of strike in Badarpur and nearby places. He told that the place was severely hit by the strike. The striking workers before the strike started escaping their colonies because the workers and their families were wholeheartedly in favour of the struggle. He was of the opinion that sometime they observed that the Congress supporters, the members of the Employees’ Union and even the police helped the striking railwaymen by providing food and shelter and by not arresting them. Sometimes they gave financial assistance too and helped them to escape in a safe place. Due to heavy rainfall and natural calamities in this area temporarily the workers movement got distracted and mobility of trains was also hampered heavily. Only food specials were running and all the mail, fast, express trains, even goods traffic also were cancelled. In order to meet coal crisis some goods train carrying coal from coal mines of Assam were in operation.

Assam Tribune reported that although the attendance in N.F. Railway establishments was on gradual increase and trains under revised schedule were being run, the overall situation remained unchanged till the 7th day of the indefinite strike launched by the railwaymen (Assam Tribune, 15.5. 1974; p.1). Ananda Bazar Patrika reported that till 16th of May wide range of areas of N.F. Railway – Bongaigaon, Dibrugarh and Pandu were completely paralysed. Workshops, loco sheds were also unattended and no connectivity was

⁴² Interview with Sri. Nikhil Kumar Bhattacharjee on 22.12. 16 at Pensioners’ Office, Town Station Unit, N.F. Railways, Siliguri at 11-30 a.m.

noticed. Even the tele communication system had become non functional. The zonal NCCRS also demanded that the workers were in a mood to continue their struggle till the honourable settlement was achieved but the Railway authority rejected their demands outrightly (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 16.5.74; p. 1 & 5). Slowly the booking counters started opening in Guwahati, Lumding and Tinsukia and two to three trains were running shortly. But an undercurrent of tension prevailed in the entire Assam region, the families of the striking workers agitated on the one hand and the government tried to crush the strike on the other hand. This tussle between the two had created an atmosphere of enmity, disbelief, suspicion and a strained relationship never brought industrial peace and harmony.

Surprisingly N.F. Railways had advertised for vacancy in the railway services under N.F Railways on 15th May as it suffered from acute crisis of staff. Those railway employees who were dismissed from their services were to be replaced by some fresh recruitment. N.F. Railway authority from Maligaon Head Quarter claimed that overwhelming response from the youth of the state was received and they would be absorbed within the days after completing the appointment procedure. The authority also mentioned that there were a lot of regular vacancies too which were to be filled up by this time. Hundreds of boys had applied for these posts which were mainly the posts of loco men class III and IV. N. F. Railway management spoke to the correspondent of Assam Tribune on 15th May that clerks, loco running staff and several other categories of workers would be appointed in the respective posts in near future. The news papers detailed that the authority tried to run 22 goods trains out of 42 in Guwahati and Lumding. Wagons were placed here for unloading but the target could not be achieved. It also accounted that two hundred home guards had been engaged in running trains both the passengers and goods in Assam region of the N.F. Railways. They had been carrying out their duties, working in the engines of the trains from Dibrugarh to Alipurduar including the branch lines of Lumding, Badarpur and Rangapara; Assam home guards had also been entrusted with the responsibility of guarding all the bridges throughout Assam zone (Assam Tribune, 17. 5. 1974; p. 1 & 6). Anita Chakraborty⁴³ corroborated that the women members of the striking workers family organised a rally in support of the struggle of the railwaymen and against the atrocities of the police and armed forces at

⁴³ Interview with Smt. Anita Chakraborty wife of Sri. Bimalendu Chakraborty on 2.1. 17 at 5-00 p.m. at her residence, Gatebazar, NJP, Siliguri

Pandu. While they were approaching towards the office of the Superintendent of N.F. Railways, police came and interrupted the rally to proceed further and suddenly a group of lady police had beaten them up badly which caused injury to many women who were later on admitted to the railway hospital. She said that the Pandu Railway Colony was completely vacated by the male members as they fled away from their quarters. Police and paramilitary force used to come in the colony in search of the striking workers. When the armed forces did not find any railway employee in the colony, harassed the wives, daughters and even the small children of the family.

In the newspaper dated 18.5. 1974 it was stated that about four hundred Territorial Army men were flown to New Jalpaiguri and Siliguri in special flights to maintain the train services, because the railway management here stated that movement of trains in this region had been languishing very much till now, therefore they required a good number of Territorial Army including the railway personnel such as drivers and maintenance staff (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 18.5. 74). Tushar Chatterjee⁴⁴, an Assistant Station Master posted in Rangia since 1970 was a member of Station Masters' Association and became the member of broader Divisional NCCRS of Alipurduar. He described how they stayed in tension and anxiety during the strike days. From the beginning of the strike, the Station Master of Rangia fled from his workplace and when the strike started there was no employee had turned up and the station remained vacant. He stayed in his quarter for the first few days then he also left his workplace otherwise police might force him to join duty or get arrested. He took shelter in the nearby jungle and at night he used to stay with his friend in the town. He recounted that for the first one week not a single train had passed by through this station and the station seemed to be left abandoned. Ticket counters were not opened for almost ten days, no cabin man, no signaller had joined their duties. Only one goods train carrying essential commodities and food stuff reached at Rangia from Alipurduar on 18th May and then it proceeded to Tempura via Rangapara. According to him, after ten to twelve days, acute food scarcity arose in Rangia, as it was a small place without its own source of production. Therefore, they had to depend on the import of goods. The small shops or the

⁴⁴ Interview with Sri. Tushar Chatterjee on 24.1. 17 at his Court Complex residence, Alipurduar at 7-00 p.m.

mercantile houses of Rangia were on the verge of closure as no passenger trains and people travelled through this place and majority of the railwaymen were in strike.

In Lumding Division the normal activities of the railway industry was completely halted as the loco running staff were totally absent from their duties. The office staff and station masters of different stations were absent from work. In the Divisional Head Quarter only handful of workers had continuously operated all the functions of the respective departments. These workers were not allowed to go home from the evening of 7th May onwards. Pradyutananda Sarkar⁴⁵, Controller, posted in Lumding Divisional Head Quarter was a member of Employees' Union affiliated with NFIR. As his trade union denied to join in this struggle he also abstained from joining the strike. But he witnessed that the office of the Head Quarter were deserted because a large number of workers participated in this movement, not only the Head Quarter but the different junctions and small stations under this division were paralysed due to the massive inattentive men on the part of the employees. He informed that the strike affect was so strong in this division that they even did not get any news regarding the developments that were taking place in various places. From the head quarter they tried to contact with the different offices and stations but they were unable to connect with any station masters for the first three or four days. Thus, the intensity of the strike could easily be estimated. Sarkar was of the opinion that Lumding was among the worst affected areas of N.F. Railways nearly 99% of the staff in all the offices did not join the work. He shared his experience during the strike days. They stayed in their offices for the first five day and they were supplied with food and other essential commodities during their stay in the offices. Sarkar commented that it was really a strange experience to remain confined inside the office premises for five long days. But after five days they were permitted to stay in the quarters only at nights under police protection. They had to return back to their duties early in the morning escorted by the police cordon. From the beginning of the second week of the struggle the situation gradually started improving, still approximately fifteen days they had followed the same routine.

Meanwhile, the authority claimed that in the entire N.F. Railway Zone nearly 4000 striking workers returned to their works. Not only that quite a good number of trains also

⁴⁵ Interview with Sri Pradyutananda Sarkar on 28.1. 17 at his Magazine Road Extn. Residence, Coochbehar at 11-30 a.m.

moved to different directions from the 12th day of the strike. The official spokesman alleged criminal interference by the striking railway men at Katihar when one relieving Points man attempted a murderous assault on a loyal Points man there; the loyal Pointsman H. Saha was injured by relieving Points man Ganesh Prasad Gupta who was immediately removed from service and his property was attached by the police and the N.R. Railway administration made an ex-gratia payment of Rs. 300/- to the injured Points man, the spokesman added (Assam Tribune, 19.5. 1974; p. 1 & 6). The N.F. Railway authority declared that about three hundred employees had been dismissed from their services since the strike started upto the end of second week of the struggle. They also asserted that these employees were sacked on alleged charges of dereliction of duty, assault and intimidation to loyal employees and obstruction to the police and the dismissed employees were from different categories of the staff of the N.F. Railways (Assam Tribune, 19.5. 1974). There was a marked improvement in the various zones of the Indian Railway including the different divisions of N.F. Railways from the end of the second week. But the trade union leaders especially the President Indibar Konger and the General Secretary Bidhu Sen demanded that the management skilfully propagated to influence the workers and general mass of the state.

Jugantar reported on 21st May that Cachhar district in Assam became completely dislocated from other parts of the state as well as from the country (Jugantar, 21.5.7; p. 5). The authority of N.F. Railways could not run any passenger and goods train since the strike began in this area and no improvement was noticed too. The movement of trains between Badarpur and Lumding had ceased absolutely. Most importantly this route was the only means of connecting the hilly region of the north east with the rest of the country and the railways were the most favourable means of transportation and provided necessary assistance with regard to border security. The Authority on the other hand claimed that 12 drivers reported for their duties but no train had moved into this region. In Lumding after a good number of railway employees were arrested, a situation of panic and fear existed among the families of the striking workers and it indirectly led to an atmosphere of tension and hostility and the people became antagonised towards the railway management. At the same time police harassment played a negative role in the minds of the local people. Several incidents of intimidations were reported and in a few places railway tracks, sleepers, fishplates were missing. Various types of interference by the miscreants with the railway

equipments were identified by the home guards were posted in different places by the N.F. Railway management. Thus, even at the end of second week, the train movements remained out of gear. The railway authority accused the workers for breaching the service rules, hence penal measures were to be taken against these miscreants. Nevertheless, railways proclaimed that maintenance of discipline of the industry by its employees was an important aspect in the railways. The railwaymen must acknowledge this service regulation in the entire tenure of their jobs. The efficient functioning of the railways must be the goal of every railway personnel but unfortunately they had forgotten their duties, responsibilities and purpose of their work. Numerous purported cases of sabotage of railway equipment were reported in the press during the strike. There were stories that power lines were cut, fishplates were loosened or removed from tracks, fire dropped from steam engines, signals tampered with and rolling stock set on fire; the truth of each individual report was impossible to verify given the untruth of other official claims it seems likely that many were fabricated to discredit the strikers (Sherlock, 2001, p.402). Violation or breach of conduct was related with an individual or few, it could never be the collective effort or a conspiracy of all. Amrita Bazar Patrika reported from Guwahati on 22nd May that the Action Committee of NCCRS of N.F. Railway decided to continue the struggle till the government resumed to talk and negotiate. D. B. Ghosh, Assistant General Secretary of Mazdoor Union announced this (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 22.5. 1974; pp. 1 & 5).

The strike position started changing from the end of the second week (20th May 1974) of the strike. Gradually the workers were resuming their duties. Mobility of passenger and goods traffic to some extent, was noticed by this time and train services also became little operational in Guwahati, Bongaigaon, NJP etc. stations. On 20th May Assam Tribune reported that under the Lumding Division in three railway colonies of Nowgong district curfew was imposed on the 18th May following the clash between striking workers and the police. Authority was of the opinion that everything was under control but as a precautionary measure they had implemented curfews to avoid any 'untoward incident'. Steel-helmeted police forces were posted at strategic points and continued round the clock patrolling at Lumding and its suburbs (Assam Tribune, 20.5. 74; p. 1). However, the strike situation in entire N.F. Railways had been improving steadily. A large number of willing workers had started joining in Bongaigaon, the strike was almost non-existent from the

conclusion of the second week. According to Assam Tribune reporters thirty mail, express and passenger trains started running on 20th May which included the Tinsukia-Dangori (Sadiya) passenger, Mariani-Jorhat-Furkating passenger and Lumding-Badarpur passenger trains. Sixty goods trains were already moving against the target of 55 and 22 ran till midday of 19th of May against the targeted 55. Among the goods trains five were food specials and four were petroleum specials moving for the eastern region. It also reported that 52 units of tank wagons were abode at New Jalpaiguri and 74 units at Noonmati-Digboi-Tinsukia (Assam Tribune, 20.5. 1974; pp 1 & 3). There was a contradiction between the claims of the authority and the trade unions. Union leader D. B. Ghosh demanded that only a handful of workers had joined and he insisted that the police with the help of anti-social and the Congress goondas entered the quarters of the railway employees in search of the striking workers. Those who returned to work had come under tremendous pressure. He estimated that only 872 staff had joined duty on different divisions of N.F. Railways, the division wise breaking was in Katihar 287 against the total strength of 23,000, Alipurduar 162 against 27,000, Lumding 210 against 19,000 and Tinsukia 93 against 9,000 and at railway Headquarter at Maligaon only 76 staff out of 3,700 had joined duty (Assam Tribune, 21.5.1974; p. 1). Newspaper reported that N.F. Railway authority had sacked nearly 1000 railway workers who were mostly from various places of North Bengal. According to official sources as revealed to the reporters of the Assam Tribune that 1,350 employees were dismissed in N.F. Railway on the charges of gross dereliction of duty, assault and intimidation of loyal staff and subversive activities (Assam Tribune, 24.5.1974). Resultantly removal from service, police torture and repression indirectly played a significant role in breaking the morale and the mental strength of the workers. Although the Railway Ministry claimed that outstanding improvement was noticed in the railway services and 25,000 absentee staff resumed duty, but surprisingly, an unit of Territorial Army operation had been dispatched through air to Assam region of N.F. Railway as the exigencies of the situation demanded so (Chatterjee, 1988; p. 58).

In the mid of the second week of the strike in almost all the zones, various type of incidents of accidents had been reported. Frequent accidents occurred in the railway industry – Hindustan Standard detailed about these accidents eg.,

- a) nineteen persons were injured when the 119 Up Howrah-Kharagpur passenger trains bumped into the rear of the 83 Up Howrah-Ranchi Express outside Sankrail station;
- b) eight persons were injured when a private car rammed the Gahdhidham-Ahmedabad Express at a level crossing near Viramgram, the level crossing was unmanned;
- c) six wagons of a goods train of the N.F. Railway were derailed at Cooch Behar station as a result of mechanical defect;
- d) Dn Assam mail frightfully was crowded with commuters hanging from windows and a few sitting dangerously on top of the compartments in between Madarihat and Hashimara stations, passengers on the top hit the overhead bridge, fifteen persons were injured (Hindustan Standard, 24.5.74; pp. 1 & 2).

Meantime an ample number of loco running staff ranging from drivers, guards and firemen to gang men etc. had resumed their work. The law and order situation had been revamping in all the divisions of N.R. Railway. Assam Tribune reported on 27th May 1974 that the 69 passenger and 104 goods trains including 4 food grains special and 1 salt special trains started moving from Eastern Railways to Assam. In Dibrugarh 96 wagons were loaded with coal in Borogolai-Ledo area as the employees were resuming to their duties in a good number. Divisional Headquarter insisted on that here the staff attendance reached nearly 80% by the end of second week (Assam Tribune, 21.5. 74; pp. 1 & 6).

On the other hand, leaders of the Central Committee of trade unions met in Delhi to decide on the fate of the strike and after considering the position of the strike its workers as the movement was fizzled out throughout the country, the leaders were in favour of the withdrawal of the struggle. The most important reason behind this decision was that financially the striking workers had been crippled and heavy repression by the government also had been breaking the confidence of the railwaymen. Bimalendu Chakraborty⁴⁶ commented that the news of the withdrawal of strike was reached at Pandu on 27th May at

⁴⁶ Interview with Sri. Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12. 2016 at 12 noon

late night but when the workers came to know about the decision unconditional withdrawal from 28th May morning at 6:00 a.m. they were annoyed and distressed. The workers had suffered a lot but they had to accept the decision of the national leaders and to be abiding by their directives. According to Sri Chakraborty, workers did not join their duties on 28th May here but on 29th May 1974. Kalyan Kumar Gupta⁴⁷ of Alipurduar Division affirmed this information as in Alipurduar Division too the workers had joined their work on 29th May instead of 28th May morning. Not only that all the workers together in procession, went to the Divisional Head Quarter and office of the Divisional Manager and submitted their joining letters to him in a victorious mood. In Siliguri, Malay Chandra Das⁴⁸ told that the railwaymen became immensely disappointed with the decision of unconditional withdrawal of the strike action. The workers of this zone predicted that if the strike would have continued for another two days, it might be able to convince the authority and might secure some concessions for the railwaymen. It was a 'black day' for them and they did not want to go back to their work and they perceived this decision as an act of 'betrayal'. To the workers this treacherous decision of the national leadership had insulted those who suffered a lot, faced tremendous trouble from day one of the agitation. Now financially they have collapsed, physically and mentally tremendously exhausted, tolerated immeasurable repressions but gained nothing. They obtained no honourable settlement, no recognition or no negotiation with the authority on any of their demands. Therefore, the railwaymen who braved every torture, harassment and assault, were disillusioned with the nature of the trade union leadership and with the process of administrative decision making and experienced the nature of authoritarian character of Indian democracy.

However, N.F. Railways demanded that after the withdrawal of the strike the situation had become normal and rapidly railway services were getting back to normal. The General Manager of N.F. Railway assured the general people of the north eastern states that all would regularise within a short span of time. N.F Railway authority ensured that a systematic supply of essential commodities and food staff had been arranged and everything would get normalised within three to four days of the withdrawal of the struggle. Official reports were optimistic from the beginning, when the strike was at its height in the first few

⁴⁷ Interview with Sri. Kalyan Kumar Gupta on 25.1. 2017 at 10.30 a.m.

⁴⁸ Interview with Sri. Malay Chandra Das on 28.12. 2016 at 7.00 p.m.

days after 8th May, it was said that the position was ‘better than anticipated’ or ‘not as serious as we expected’ (Sherlock, 2001; p.387). When the Indian railwaymen decided to launch an indefinite struggle the government had planned to disorganise, disorder and upset the strike action hence it started arresting the trade union leaders both the national and local level leaders selectively from the table of negotiation throughout the country. As a result the ordinary workers became perplexed and were misled by its propaganda. Thus, they were easily broken and forced to resume work. In this situation the strike ended but the general railway workers remained in isolation. The rank and file workers of the railway industry had the strength to challenge the establishment of the country but their efforts went in vain due to the lack of broad based unity and accountability amongst themselves. Absence of working class consciousness had obstructed the process of consolidating the industrial workers and leading their movement in India.

III

Impact of the Strike in the North Eastern Frontier Railway Zone

In the previous sections of this chapter we had discussed the grievances of the workers in the North Eastern Railway zone and the preparation of the worker’s for launching an indefinite general strike in all its Divisions. We also described the situations that persisted during the days of the struggle in the entire areas of N.F Railways which comprised of the places of the States of Assam, part of Bihar, Darjeeling Hills and the plains of North Bengal. This section concerns with the impact of the strike by the railway working class in this Zone.

The strike struggle in almost all the Divisions of N.F. Railways ended on 29th May morning instead of 28th May 1974. The aftermath of the agitation was not at all favourable for the striking railwaymen. The magnitude of the railway workers struggle and their determination to challenge the authority were accompanied with the heavy cost of their own service such as they faced break in services, removal, suspension, arrest under DIR and

MISA. Railwaymen fought a heroic battle to stop police atrocities. Kajal Nayan Gupta⁴⁹ a Guard of goods train, posted in Malda and a member of the Guards' Council and UCR maintained that police and CRPF took the hold over the railway colonies of Malda two days before the strike started, i.e., from 6th May all the railway colonies of the town went under the control of the armed forces. He added that he was successful in escaping the police arrest during the strike days as he fled away from Kishanganj station on 8th May, 1974 morning. But he was arrested by the police under 'Penal Measure' after the withdrawal of the strike. Interestingly, Sri Gupta got his bail from Purnia Session Judge's Court and his case was declared as 'null and void' by the Calcutta High Court, thus, he returned back to his service after six months. He got his remuneration for these suspended periods but it was only half of his monthly wages. However, he portrayed the intensity of the strike. In Malda, before the strike started many workers were passive to join in the agitation but when the strike began, i.e., from 8th May, 1974 all the rank and file workers expressed their willingness to join the movement and were driven by the pro unity and solidarity thrust of the movement. Gupta blamed the leadership in Malda which never tried to reach absolute solidarity at the bottom level workers thus the process of uniting the railwaymen was partial here. According to his opinion, the leadership itself could not reach unity which affected the solidarity process of the workers in this division. They failed to attain complete agreement and consensus in the entire course of the movement. Although majority of the workers had participated in the movement and the area was completely paralysed during the strike days. But Sri Gupta also said that even if the strike was unconditionally and unilaterally withdrawn, the railwaymen were in a victorious mood, the magnificent unity, courage and determination of the railwaymen were rewards of this struggle.

The number of the employees under N.F. Railways was approximately 80 thousand. Since the inception of this struggle the participation of the workers was enormous and it was a complete movement. Times of India correspondent reported that the strike had paralysed goods and passenger services in different sections of the N.F. Railways. Guwahati station was the main point of entry to Assam and other parts of north east region which wore a deserted look. Despite the official claim of substantial improvement in the situation, up to

⁴⁹ Interview with Sri Kajal Nayan Gupta on 9.1.2017 at the office of the Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways at 11-30 a.m.

10th of May only a single train, the down Assam Mail, passed through Guwahati; at Maligaon Head Quarter of N.F. Railways most of the employees stayed away from duty (Times of India, 11.5.74; p.1). Therefore, it was quite easily assumed that the magnitude of the workers' strength and their potentiality to stand against the government's harshness was extremely high. Because the authority from the negotiating table had been vehemently opposing every demand of the workers and every single approach of the trade unions was rejected. As a result of government's firmness and hostility towards the workers' cause, in many places of N.F. Railways the workers had to resume their duties before the calling off the strike⁵⁰. Due to immense repression and terror attacks unleashed by the authorities, only half of the total striking workers had been with strike up to the end of the struggle and rest of them resumed to works before its withdrawal (Biswas, 1977; p.13).

While analysing the intensity of the railway workers' movement in 1974 and the character of the overall trade union movement in N.F Railways, the striking workers had their own views to examine the entire discourse, based their own experiences. Amalendu Bikash Kanjilal⁵¹, posted in Maligaon as upper division clerk and a member of UCR regretted for the roles played by the right reactionists and left adventurist forces of Indian trade unionism during the most prominent working class movement of the country in 1974. These two sections of trade unionism actively existed in the N.F. Railway Zone. They always tried to get some economic and political benefits from every action of the workers. Kanjilal accused these sectarian forces of politics for destroying the foundation of the trade union movement in India in general and in N.F Railways in particular. He said that in the railway industry in every sphere of its activity, it is based on a hierarchical method of functioning and a very undemocratic manner of decision making. The recognised trade unions in their internal matters always ignored the opinions and interests of the lower level workers. But it was necessary to listen to the grievances of the workers for the smooth

50 Sri. Jyotirmoy Sarkar was a Khalasi in Signalling inspection Department in Bongaigaon, posted here from 1971 and a member of Signalling Staff Council and AILRSA, corroborated that from the beginning of the strike the N.F Railway authority had resorted to brute force and showed firmness in dealing with the striking railwaymen. Maximum number of workers fled away from their quarter and took shelter in different places but those who could no manage to escape, faced immense harassment. Thus, from the mid of the second week the striking workers started joining to their duties. Interview with Sri. Sarkar on 9.1.2017 at Pensioner's Association NJP Unit, N.F Railways, at 3.15 p.m. p.m

⁵¹ Interview with Sri Amalendu Bikash Kanjilal on 18.1. 2017 at his residence at Lake Town, Siliguri at 11:00 a.m.

functioning of the industry. Corruption was another factor which was a major impediment in reaching industrial growth. Kanjilal referred to the corrupt activities of the management and trade unions that obstructed the development of trade union movement in the country. Therefore, these factors eventually affected the growth and maturity of the working class movement in the Indian industries. Therefore, it could be said that the railway trade unions must aim at transforming the economic and social status of the working class. They must emphasise on the labour intensive line of struggle and strengthen their organisational base at every level of labour activity. According to Kanjilal in the N.F. Railways all the trade unions had to overcome all these drawbacks. In spite of all these troubles, there were innumerable sporadic struggles observed throughout the period of late 1960s and early 1970s till May'74 general strike in all the divisions of N.F. Railways.

In Siliguri and nearby areas the impact of the strike was quite different because of the ongoing Naxalite Movement which was in its full swing. Almost every day curfew was imposed here from 6:00 a.m. morning. The Railway authority attempted to resist the railwaymen's struggle with the help of the police and armed forces, therefore in Siliguri, the political upheaval of the society was equated with the industrial agitation which was purely economic in character. Thus, the police force started confronting and counter attacking the striking railwaymen and treated their peaceful struggle as a political agitation along with the Naxalite agitators. Police arrested the railway workers randomly without judging their position and tortured their families to a great extent. The then Police Commissioner of Siliguri Handa had become the symbol of terror and torment. Kalyan Kumar Choudhury⁵² posted in NJP as a carriage khalasi and the Zonal President of Loco Running Staff Council described the days of the strike. He also talked about the responses and reactions of the authority during and after the strike period. He informed that the train services in New Jalpaiguri, Siliguri Alipurduar junctions and in the hill stations of Darjeeling were completely dislocated. According to him, the main strength of this strike was the support and participation of the loco staff. The loco running workers had wholeheartedly joined this movement especially the loco employees of Alipurduar, Siliguri, NJP and Katihar remained absent from work from day one of the struggle. For this reason, the regular activities of these

⁵² Interview with Sri Kalyan Kumar Choudhury on 10.1. 2017 at the office of the Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways, at 11:30 a.m.

places were stopped totally. As a result, the authority tried its best to keep regularity in the railway industry and in the surrounding areas. A reign of terror prevailed in these areas by the police and armed forces and the administration desired to resist both the Naxalite movement and the agitation of the railway workers together by using brute force. “Shoot at Sight” order was issued if a group of five to six individuals were seen together during the time of curfew, this made the local people panicked, tensed and at the same time they were very much frightened in their everyday life. But the railwaymen never bowed down before the treacherous actions of the management, they fought their struggle bravely throughout the strike days, even after the withdrawal the workers had faced all cases of victimisation with courage and patience. The authority all along was extremely reluctant to settle the issues of the strike and was keen to utilise power to break the strengths of the railway workers. Choudhury acknowledged the help of the local people and some management employees were, too sympathetic towards the workers’ cause that these people assisted the striking railwaymen in many ways e.g., financial support was the most important help which they got from these local people and non-striking employees of the railways. They provided food and shelter to the striking railwaymen when they had to be underground and fled from their colonies and helped the workers to avoid police arrest. He said that in NJP this strike was very much intense during the first ten days of the struggle. NJP Marshalling Yards looked like a grave yard and the railway colonies also wore a deserted look, as all the inhabitants left their houses or remained locked inside the quarters, closed all the windows and the doors tightly, not even small children were playing outside the ground or no sound of crying of the babies were heard, it was felt that the wind had also stopped blowing in the railway colonies of NJP and the adjacent areas like Siliguri Junction also.

The workers under N.F Railways were of the opinion that the authority never had considered the local needs and demands of the railwaymen as worthy and a matter of discussions or a matter to be resolved. Thus, the call for all India united struggle for securing some just demands of the railway employees had generated a different kind of energy, self confidence and solidarity to fight and challenge the authoritarian rule of the government. In some cases the railway workers expressed their grievances towards the activities of the recognised unions in this region, even during the strike days. Members of the Mazdoor

Union in many places had betrayed the striking workers along with the police and the members of Employees' Union and won material benefits from the Railway Management.

Kailash Lala⁵³, an Assistant Station Master in Alipurduar junction and the Cashier of Station Masters' Council of Alipurduar junction since 1970, recollected some incidents that occurred in this division of N.F. Railways. He remembered how hundreds of railway workers were released in the dark nights in the dense forests of dooars, when they could not accommodate the striking workers in the jails, how they starved for long two or three days and how they roamed from one place to another simply to avoid police arrest, how they had to walk and run for several hours under the sun and rain only to evade police torture and how the innocent family members of the striking men were insulted, ill-treated and abused by the armed forces and by some goondas. For Sri Lala this story of humiliation and torture was so painful and no words would be enough to describe the grief of the sufferers. The memories of these old employees sometime betrayed them but still they became excited and annoyed while narrating their day to day experiences of those strike days. Sri. Lala said that in Alipurduar junction not a single train had moved upto the mid of the second week of the agitation i.e., upto 18th-19th Mat, 1974. The railway authority in the local areas circulated the false news of train's movement. He added that in Alipurduar junction all the small shops like the shops of stationery items, grocery, food stuff, hotels etc. remained empty and no visitors or passengers were found buying or eating anything. Therefore, these small businessmen had suffered a lot, in fact economically they became crippled due to the railway strike. Lala also recalled the incidents of betrayal and double crossing by the members of Employees' Union as well as by the Mazdoor Union. In N.F. Railways CITU also played a dubious role to weaken the struggle of the railwaymen. He said the behaviour and attitude of these leaders sometimes created confusions and anxiousness among the striking workers. In Siliguri, Sunil Bhowal, 'A' grade Fitter, Diesel Shed, Vice President, Diesel Shed Staff Council reported for duty on 15.5.1974 along with CITU followers; Sri Aurobindo Pal, Fitter, Loco Shed, Organiser, Loco Shed Staff Council, joined duty on 15.5.1974 along with CITU members of the Loco Shed under Police protection; in New Guwahati, C.L. Biswas, Trains Clerk, Operating Department, leader of CITU and Treasurer,

⁵³ Interview with Sri Kailash Lala on 10.2. 2017 at his residence in Police Line, Cooch Behar at 1:00 p.m.

Local Action Committee of NCCRS came out from the underground with his followers and held a meeting by the side of Anuradha Cinema, Guwahati and thus courted arrest, afterwards gave bond and went back to duty with its 1700 followers on 24.5.1974 (Biswas, 1977; pp. 13-14). Attack, counter attack and accusing each other had become the characteristic feature of this movement and eventually demoralised the workers. Above all the rigid and inflexible attitude and stand point of the government had created a stalemate situation. In N.F. Railways a great dilemma appeared when a large number of leaders went either underground or got arrested or had joined their duties, therefore, it became impossible for the general works to follow the instructions or took collective decision whether to go with the line of the struggle or collaboration.

Meanwhile, the trade union leaders believed that the outcome of the withdrawal of the strike would have been more advantageous for the workers and nation as well. As the leaders had realised that they had more dynamic role to play in accumulating the right of the working class. The National economy should not suffer more because the railway strike had brought a grinding halt to the growth and expansion of the industrial production. This agitation had engendered the economic pace of the country. Mining industry especially the iron ore and coal belt of the east had suffered a huge loss. The train services had got immensely restricted in the areas where the coal mines were located in Assam, thus the production in most of the industries came to standstill. Since the railways were apprehended as the second links of defence, the strike in the railways was a matter of great concern and challenge too for the government and the authority (Mukherjee, 1999, p.26). In the frontier states it obviously played a crucial role when the border security was a matter of concern. As a result of which the General Manager of N.F. Railways issued a notice in the leading newspapers of Assam like Assam Tribune before the strike started i.e., on 28th April, 1974 which circulated that “if any of the misguided staff take part in the illegal strike it would not be possible for me to save them from the consequences which include:

- 1) No pay;
- 2) Break in services;
- 3) Loss of Pension or Provident Fund benefits following break in services etc.

- 4) Forfeiture of all leaves, passes and P.T.Os and postponement of increment under the law such as imprisonment or fine or both;

Nation Needs Your Service: I would once again request to you and not to be a party to the illegal strike. The country needs your service very much at this moment and I am sure you will not let her down.

General Manager

Northeastern Frontier Railways

(Source: Assam Tribune, 28.4. 1974, p.1).

Therefore, it can be said that to pursue unharmed and undisturbed rail services the N.F. Railways authority had taken all the measures in its every Division. The N.F. Railways had decided to cancel trains to maintain essential services and to reduce travel hazards for the passengers and stock coal for emergency services. It also had made arrangements for deploying the Territorial Army to withstand the threats of railway strikes. Not only that while the government permitted to arrest national trade union leaders of the railway industry throughout the country, N.F. Railways too followed the same line of action in all its Divisions. In Maligaon, Guwahati, the N.F. Railway Head Quarter large scale arrests of trade union leaders and railway employees took place. Assam Tribune on 5th May, 1974 reported that all the trade unions openly protested against this and demanded the unconditional release of the workers. This step of the government had aggravated the trade unions in the Indian Railways and the workers of other industries. Barin Choudhury, General Secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress in a statement demanded the release of the leaders arrested in connection with the proposed railway strike and withdrawal of orders of the Police Superintendent of Kamrup prohibiting all the meetings, processions which were aimed at curbing fundamental democratic rights (Assam Tribune, 6.5. 1974; p. 1). The Government had instructed all the railway authorities and the state governments to implement various precautionary measures to resist the workers' agitation. It also implied that the government and the Railway Management had guessed the strength and unity of the railway workers which were achieved by this time were really unique in nature and it would have been troublesome for them to resist the workers' unrest once it started. Therefore, the

authority had become more active since the inception of the struggle. But the provocative actions of the government had forced the workers to go against the administration. Meanwhile the number of arrests in the N.F Railways in view of the proposed strike by the railway men from May rose to 57 on 6th May according to official sources (Assam Tribune, 6.5.1974; pp. 1 & 6). According to the trade union leaders, railway authority had reacted vehemently against the strike in order to terrorise the railwaymen so that they kept them aloof from participating in the strike.

The most important impact of the railway strike in N.F. Railway Zone was the food scarcity which had become an emerging matter of concern in the Eastern Indian States especially in Assam and its neighbouring states. The strike had effected the movement of food grain special trains carrying wheat and rice in the areas of the Darjeeling hills, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura etc. After ten days of the struggle i.e., upto 7th of May when the strike situation remained unchanged, the needs of the people of these states could not be fulfilled though sufficient stocks were available. Immobility of the goods traffic caused immense trouble as the supply of rice could not be arranged and as a result the price of rice had increased and the local traders tried to exploit the situation. In this circumstance dislocation of train services also led to the scarcity of necessary goods of daily use and scarcity of food in some place led to starvation. Assam Tribune stated that reports from Assam showed that ‘food riots’ had broken out in many parts of the states; food grain movement ‘had come to standstill’ while work in tea estates was paralysed for want of coal, fertiliser and oil (Assam Tribune, 22.5. 1974; p.1).

The Tea industry in Assam was the worst sufferer. From the day one of the strike not a single chest/box of tea had been released from the state by rail to any part of the country. A few buyers sent tea by road by bearing heavy burden of cost. Assam was the largest supplier of tea in the country and Guwahati was the sole ‘Auction Centre’ in the state. Almost all the warehouses were situated in Guwahati. These warehouses were affected heavily due to this agitation. As the delivery and despatch of tea were totally stopped, there was no room to store tea chests in these warehouses which were not only overburdened but tried to accommodate beyond their capacity. Auction Houses were almost in the verge of closure. The secretary of the Tea Auction Committee T.N. Hazarika informed the correspondent of Assam Tribune that “the sale of tea at the two auctions during the months

of April and May was 5,457 chests and 4,350 chests respectively was less than half of the normal sale”, he added that normally about “100-150 buyers’ participated in Guwahati Auction but in May it was participated only by ‘30’ buyers”, most of the buyers from Calcutta and other places did not come and those who came were hesitant to buy (Assam Tribune, 20.5. 1974; p.3). The buyers had to pay the total cost of the purchased products to the brokers within fifteen days of the auction because the brokers had to clear the amount to the owners of the tea gardens. Otherwise, the tea producers within the five days of the sale, had cancelled their licence. In such a background the small traders were most affected because they could not afford high transportation cost and if they waited till the railway strike ended, the teas got spoiled. The reason behind the high transportation cost was unavailability of the truck and the government was also helpless to control the transportation cost. Even the big houses could not maintain the supply of tea to the Indian markets. Assam Tribune reported that the representative of a reputed tea company which had six tea processing factories in India and was considered that largest buyers from Assam said they had not been able to despatch the entire quantity of tea bought at the last two auctions, i.e., in April and May (Assam Tribune, 20.5. 1974; p.1). As the N.F. Railways kept on cancelling trains in north east therefore, tea auctions in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri had been impeded enormously. The tea traders could hardly arrange any alternative system of transport for delivery of the tea chests to the brokers and the retailers inside and outside the State. Hence delayed delivery had increased the transportation cost exorbitantly. Decision of cancellation of trains brought untold misery to the people of the North Eastern India. Huge rush of passengers particularly for the long distance trains, had been steadily high. No rules and regulations could be followed and administered by the conducting staff because no small space in the trains was left unoccupied, even reservation coaches were filled with passengers. They were supposed to travel in an inhuman condition (Assam Tribune, 5.5.1974; p.1).

In Calcutta dock yard, ships carrying wheat from Russia had waited for long time but the process of unloading could not be started due the strike in the railways. These imported grains were meant to be distributed in the eastern States mainly in Assam. But the immobility of trains had delayed the process. Only few food grains special trains from Malda to Lumding Division were operated. The attendance in all the offices of N.F.

Railways Divisional Head Quarters especially in Lumding, Alipurduar and Katihar and also in the Zonal Head Quarter in Maligaon was very scanty and this remained the same till 19.5. 1974 which created great inconveniences in keeping the railway industry alive. Due to the railway workers' unrest the operational efficiency had gone down and additional expenditure had been incurred causing extra burden on the national economy. The agitation had encompassed several chains of disruptions which adversely influenced various other industries such as coal, steel, iron ore etc. and indirectly led to the general increase of price level and thus the cost of living. Several forms of labour unrest since last year especially following the loco running staff strike in August, 1973 like mass absenteeism, gheraos, work to rule etc. effected the railway economy enormously and at the same time the 'national purse'. Cancellation and curtailment of goods trains aggravated the crisis, the prices of essential commodities like food grains, fertilisers, petroleum products etc. increased and supply became highly restricted.

Utilisation of full capacity of railways remained untapped since long back. No measures had been identified to redress the problem but substantial increase in freight and fares was observed several times, in spite of that, the sufferings of the workers in the Railway industry have been continuing. It seems that the incurable rate of labour unrests in Railway industry had mooted some debates because these agitations had caused the national economy huge loss and pushing it towards the break down of the economic system of the country. The debates addressed one crucial question whether the railway management had failed to locate the labour problems in the industry and unable to maintain industrial peace or the organisations of railway workers could not act as an agent of harmonising the employer and employees relations (Neelakantan, 28.8.1974; Assam Tribune). However, a spokesman of the Indian Engineering Association, according to the reports of Times of India, May 24th 1974, warned that if the strike lasted for long time lakhs of engineering workers in eastern India would have lost their jobs. Newspapers reports indicated that the effects of government propaganda regarding the strike in the Indian Railways created a confusing situation and distrust among the the general public (Dhar, 1999; p. 22). Apart from this banking business had faced devastating consequences due to the railway strike and it had crippled the entire economic system of the country. From the beginning of the struggle all the banks refused to accept outstation cheques because they had not been able to

deal with the outstanding payments and receipts. The trade and business in the entire north east was badly affected. A setback in legal transaction was also observed in every segment of trading and payments were made in an illegal manner. With the refusal of the banks to discount railway receipts, whatever little goods movement was taking place by the rail and had come to a stop as far as private sector was concerned, the movement of goods was mainly confined to approved road transport companies', interestingly each bank, all over India had an approved list of companies and they refused to discount the bills of non-approved transport companies (Assam Tribune, 22.5. 1974; p.1). This had created an adverse situation in many places as money transactions got restricted the trade and business in this region had gone down and especially the scope of small traders was hit badly. The worst of all had occurred here and that was the emergence of parallel money transaction. It was developed during the strike days to cope up with the difficulties of the critical situations. It had provided golden chance to those who actually wanted to make a fate in this emergency situation. As the banking services had been dislocated, the economy of the metropolitan cities and the capital cities of the country was substantially interrupted and in every sphere of the banking system and in the business, disorder and instability had prevailed. The aftermath of this strike was also unfavourable in this sector as financial transaction slowed down the entire economy in banking business and took time to revamp its earlier position. Banking sources expressed their apprehension to the correspondent of Assam Tribune that the "present crisis might provide an opportunity for the enlargement of black money hoards by private parties and reviewed that a large portion of present transactions by private trade and industry was unaccounted since it was not carried out through the banking system...there could be no check on such transaction" (Assam Tribune, 22.5. 74; p.1).

Meanwhile, immobility of trains resulted into great inconveniences to the tourists in the Darjeeling hills, Dooars and in Sikkim. A large number of tourists including people from foreign countries had been stranded in Siliguri. People from different places of India and also from abroad who had come to visit these places got stuck in Siliguri since the strike started even before the strike began. From NJP and Siliguri Junction no train had moved to any direction and the whole area seemed to be in standstill. Newspapers also reported that 'rows of passenger coaches' and 'goods wagons' were 'standing idle' in the rail yards.

Therefore, these people became desperate for arranging food for their families and at the same time the paucity of cash was another vital problem before them. The tourists, without getting any option to solve their problem, they started selling their valuables like ornaments and jewellery to arrange money for going back to their home towns and buy food. Hindustan Standard reported that a “group of passengers were now hiring trucks to take them to Calcutta” and the “State Transport authorities had decided to operate extra buses between Siliguri and Calcutta to cope with the extra rush” (Hindustan Standard, 9.5. 1974, p.5). But this was not at all enough to carry such a huge amount of tourists. The Tourist Offices in Siliguri briefed that they were flooded by the requests and demands for making arrangements for transportation at least upto Calcutta. On an average about eighty tourists stood in the queue whole night before the tourist offices to book tickets for Calcutta by rocket bus and unfortunately the tourist office had only the allotments of seven seats. The whole day and night the office remained crowded with anxious and annoyed people. It was quit natural for the tourists who came for only four to five days to visit Darjeeling, but were bound to stay for fourteen to fifteen days in an unknown place with pouring of pockets. The whole area of North Bengal was badly affected by this strike. Kurseong was the worst affected among all because it had a large establishment of railways including the ‘Railway Press’ but interestingly the workers in these places maintained peace throughout the twenty days of strike and no official work in railway department was done here during this period . In Cooch Behar, people were distressed with the communication problem and no convenience was properly furnished to reduce the trouble of the stranded tourists in the total region of dooars and hills of the North Bengal (Hindustan Standard, 12.5. 1974; p. 8).

On the other hand the authority had resorted to force and other repressive measures to suppress the workers’ agitation. One day before the strike started the General Manager of N.F. Railways issued a notice in the Assam Tribune that:

Railway Men: Absenteeism from work without authority makes you liable for punishment under Section 119 of D.I.R.

General Manager

Northeastern Frontier Railways

(Source: Assam Tribune, 7.5. 1974; p. 1).

Two days before the strike was to begin at Katihar on the Northeastern Frontier Railways in Bihar, the Border Security Force marched in force up and down the “lanes and by lanes” of the railway colonies (Sherlock, 2001; p. 38). On 9th May Assam Tribune reported that 31 employees of the N.F. Railways were summarily relieved from service today for the acts of ‘extreme provocation’, of the 31 persons 9 were from lock foot-plate staff and rest from various other sections and departments according to a spokesman of N.F. Railways (Assam Tribune, 9.5. 74; p.1). It was also reported that N.F. Railway authority had decided to invoke D.I.R. which dealt with the absentees and absconders and in all the Divisional Railway Managers were directed to follow the instructions and take actions accordingly. Meanwhile, the railway employees began their struggle with full strength. In Maligaon Head Quarter the absenteeism was 99% and in other divisions like, Alipurduar and Lumding the response in favour of the strike was quite remarkable. In many places, e.g., Siliguri, Katihar etc. tussle between police and railwaymen was reported and sometimes these conflicts led upto arrests, punishments, torture and even implementation of curfew. Due to the conflicts the armed forces unleashed terror attack on the railwaymen. They let loose brute force against the workers for joining in this struggle.

Satya Narayan Singh⁵⁴, a driver of goods train, member of UCR posted in Katihar since 1970 remembered the days of horror in the month of May, 1974. He described the terror attack of the armed forces on the railway men and their families. Almost all the male members of the railway colonies in Katihar fled away to avoid arrest and harassment. Those who got arrested were bitterly beaten in police custody and then forced to join duty. The family members were mercilessly interrogated, insulted, abused and sometimes the women members were even physically assaulted by the police and para military forces. As a result of this immense torture, the local leaders of N.F. Railways in Guwahati and nearby regions went underground to escape this repression and Maligaon and Pandu railway colonies were left unguarded. Bimalendu Chakraborty⁵⁵ of Pandu corroborated that with another four local leaders he went underground and Police, BSF and CRPF did every harassment in the name of discharging their duties in Pandu. When a reporter of Assam Tribune reached the railway

⁵⁴ Interview with Sri Satya Narayan Singh on 8.2.2017 at Pensioners’ Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways, Gate Bazar, Siliguri at 1:00 p.m.

⁵⁵ Interview with Sri Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12. 16 at 11.30 a.m.

colonies of Pandu on 15th May'74, he found that most of the quarters were wearing sombre look, very few people were out on this streets and most of the quarters were seen with door and windows closed (Assam Tribune, 15.5. 74; p.6). Anita Chakraborty⁵⁶, wife of Bimalendu Chakraborty remembered the days and nights of terror during the strike of the railwaymen. She narrated the story of the reactions of the authority and the police forces. Armed forces used to come and enquire about the striking railwaymen and pressurised the families and even the small children to take out information regarding the workers. If they did not get satisfactory answers, they started harassing them, threw out all the utensils or clothes etc. from the quarters. Day and night no matter, they visited the colonies and asked unnecessary questions. Sometimes BSF and Para military force took out the roofs of the quarters with the help of cranes to find out the trade union leaders or local leaders of the railways. Mrs. Chakraborty told that at night the movement of the armed forces used to increase. The families of the striking workers were asked to vacate the railway quarter several times but they never even tried to leave the quarters for a single day in spite of lot of harassments.

In Pandu a staff reporter of Assam Tribune accounted that “a procession of one thousand ladies including women and students was taken out from Rest Camp Colony at about 4-30 p.m. was blocked by truck load of police personnel at the crossing near Pandu Bazar” and “while chasing the crowd” it “started beating the precisionist indiscriminately” and “injured twenty one persons, three of them were serious”. Thus all the trade unions, political parties in Assam such as Bharatiya Sana Sangh, the Guwahati District Socialist Party etc. condemned the atrocities of the police on the innocent railwaymen and their families which only made the situation worse. They requested the Chief Minister of Assam and N.F. Railways authority “to dissuade” the police “from such barbarous action of this kind by ruthlessly endeavouring and throttling the democracy and legitimate trade union movement of the railway employees by hood and crook” (Assam Tribune, 20.5. 74; pp. 1 and 6). However, along with the colonies, the railway stations also wore a deserted look. The N.F. Railway authority tried hard to maintain regularity in railway services but it was not possible for them to continue the normal activities in the railway industry in all its

⁵⁶ Interview with Smt. Anita Chakaborty on 21.1.20 17 at her Gate Bazar residence at 5:00 p.m. in Siliguri

departments. The intensity of the strike was unimaginable and workers' participation in the places like Malda, Katihar, Siliguri, Guwahati, Alipurduar and Lumding was beyond expectations. The workers irrespective of their categories had joined the struggle and they perceived this struggle as the last opportunity to get their demands fulfilled and upgrade and revived their position economically and socially and could afford at least to live an honourable life. The railway workers made tireless efforts to make this strike a successful movement. The employees had become so much hostile against their employer that they launched such a movement with their full strength and potentials to disrupt the normal functions of the industry and challenge the reactionary and antagonistic attitude of the government.

On the other hand this strike brought uncountable and unimaginable sufferings and hardships to the passengers, which was observed and which erupted nearly in all the divisions of N.F. Railways. As the passengers did not get proper information regarding the rail movements – both the passengers and goods traffics were dislocated. People became highly confused especially due to the role played by the All India Radio (AIR). Meanwhile, the AIR created a serious kind of uncertainty and indecision among the general public that trouble of travelling had been encompassed with irritation and annoyance. AIR kept on announcing that the railway industry was providing all its normal services to the nation and the trains were running as per schedule, but when the passengers came to the station and found that everything was disordered they were frustrated and thus, many incidents of tussles between the general public and the railway personnel took place in many stations. Ticket counters were opened under the control of CRPF guard. Amrita Bazar Patrika reporters visited the stations in Siliguri both the NJP and Siliguri Junction and they noticed that “no Up and Down trains on the N.F. Railways reached Siliguri” and the attendance of railway employees of Siliguri Junction and at the NJP stations were very meagre (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 11.5. 74; p.1). As a result of which the railway management had filed a case in Siliguri Sub Divisional Judicial Magistrate for issuing an eviction notice for the family members of the absconding railwaymen from the railway quarters in Siliguri Junction and NJP railway colonies also. Interestingly the magistrate instructed the families to show cause within the time limit of fifteen days for not evacuating their quarters. Meantime the N.F. Railway authority had cancelled trains both the passenger and goods to avoid harassment. In

this circumstance the N.F. Railways had felt a need of Territorial Army which helped them to maintain the wheels of the railways move on in this region especially in the areas of plains and hills of North Bengal. Two Units of the Territorial Army had been sent to NJP from Calcutta to assist the N.F. Railways, it was learnt on Tuesday the thirteenth day of the railwaymen's strike (Statesman, 22.5. 74; p. 1 & 5). The different areas of N.F. Railways, a number of cases of sabotage were recorded. In a 'suspected case of sabotage' about 132 sleeper keys, metal rods that fixed the sleepers to the rails were found missing between Tinsukia and Dibrugarh stations of the N.F. Railways this followed the reported cases of sabotage "when fishplates were found removed at four places between Katihar and Niathola" as accounted by Times of India (Times of India, 20.5. 74; p.1). As a result of joining this struggle and alleged violence and intimidation several workers had been dismissed from their jobs. The sources said that 1350 persons were dismissed on charges of gross dereliction of duty assault and intimidation to loyal staff and subversive activities; a total of 655 persons were arrested in connection with the strike (Assam Tribune, 24.5. 1974; p.1).

In this situation the N.F. Railways Unit of NCCRS Action Committee had decided to carry on the struggle till the government came forward and settled the issue of the railwaymen. But from the beginning of the third week of the strike i.e., 22nd May, 1974 onwards the strike started to fizzle out nearly in all the divisions of N.F. Railways with few exceptions. Maligaon Head Quarter reported 40,000 railwaymen had joined duty throughout the zone (Assam Tribune, 23.5.1974; p. 1). Strike situation in Bongaigaon, Rangia, Tinsukia and in NJP had improved a lot. Chittaranjan Mitra⁵⁷, Traffic Booking Clerk posted in NJP a member of Mazdoor Union discussed the situation in the concluding days of the strike. Many of the striking workers had decided to join their work and some were confused regarding their future steps as the local leaders were all in underground and no further directions were given to them. The railway services began to normalise from 23rd or 25th May, booking counters, loco men also became operative at the mid of the third week of the struggle. He criticised the role played by the members of Employees' Union who actually had helped to break the morale and confidence of the striking workers. They used to inform

⁵⁷ Interview with Sri Chittaranjan Mitra on 8.1.2017 in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways Siliguri at 1:30 p.m.

the police about the railway workers and also attempted to disrupt the workers' struggle. Assam Tribune corresponded that 'ticket sales at the Guwahati station was 38,000 'against 35,000 when all trains on schedule' and parcel service at the Guwahati station was opened on 23rd May (Assam Tribune, 23.5.1974; p.1). In Dibrugarh Division, the office of the Head Quarter noticed marked improvement in the attendances of the staff at the offices, workshops etc. Passenger traffic in all the stations was almost normal but attendances of the yards in Siliguri and Katihar was very much unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, the national leaders of NCCRS had decided to withdraw the strike. After the withdrawal of the strike, the entire Assam region was hit by severe scarcity and price rise of all essential products, e.g., food grains specially rice, wheat, edible oil etc. kerosene, commodities of daily needs, fertilisers etc. Within three days of calling off the strike, the N.F. Railways assured the Assam government to transport all essential goods including food stuff. Sources revealed that M. R. Reddy, the General Manager of N.F. Railways said that 'absolute guarantee' was given to carry all food stuffs following gradual improvement in staff attendance and five special trains carrying wheat and sugar were operated "to meet the minimum requirement of the region" at Tinsukia thirty to thirty five wagons for paraffin wax, dolomite at Alipurduar were loaded which were needed for steel plants (Assam Tribune, 1.6. 1974; pp. 1 & 6). On the other hand, the railwaymen and their families protested against heavy victimisation. They 'paraded in Pandu-Maligaon areas', shouted and demanded for early settlement of the strike. Police patrolling 'had been intensified in the areas to terrorise the striking employees'. Although official sources revealed that most of the N.F. Railways staff reported for duty within two days of the withdrawal of the agitation Union sources informed that Bidhu Sekhar Sen, Joint Secretary of Action Committee of Zonal NCCRS and Secretary of Mazdoor Union, N.F. Railways along with some other union leaders met the General Manager in Maligaon Head Quarter to appeal to him "to withdraw all removal and eviction orders, the General Manager was understood to have told them that he was awaiting instructions from the Railway Board in this regard (Hindustan Standard, 30.5. 1974; p.5).

The splits in trade unions and the emergence of craft sentiments had paved the way to weakening the process of broad based unity and the consolidation of the working class in the Indian Railways. Thus, the method of collective bargaining had miserably failed. The

existence of political factions in one industry had created a cleavage among the workers. N.F. Railways set an example in this direction. UCR was the most powerful unrecognised union in this railway zone. Nevertheless, it inevitably led to the fragmentation in the solidarity of the working class. Apart from this the N.F Railways was badly affected by several cases of betrayal. Members of Employees' Union and in some cases members of Mazdoor Union played a dual role and deceived the striking workers during the strike days. Bimalendu Chakraborty⁵⁸ convenor of local Action Committee, Pandu was of the opinion that the workers in Assam and in the areas of North Bengal had suffered from the treacherous activities and behaviour by their fellow workers within the different sections of the trade unions. These people continuously assisted and helped the authority, police and armed forces in the course of the workers' movement. He said that the main objective of the trade unions during those days was to secure the right to bargain with the authority. Unfortunately the unions in the railways could not voice the workers' demands and channelise their potentialities to lead a successful movement, above all failed to convince the authority. Resultantly, huge sacrifices of the workers of each and every zone remained ignored and unnoticed by their countrymen. Unpreparedness of the railway workers and their trade unions, financial, moral etc. acted as an instrument of failure of the struggle. Though Fernandez had called it a 'grand success' but it was associated with inevitable strife and bitterness within the workers' organisations and the authority and within the trade unions also.

58 Interview with Sri Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12. 2016 at Pensioners' Association town Station Unit, N.F Railways, Siliguri at 11.30 a.m