

## **Chapter VII**

### **The State and the Railway Strike of May 1974**

In the previous chapters we have looked at the nature of workers' resistance in the Indian Railways since its inception during the colonial era and after independence till 1974. We focused on the emergence and development of the railway trade unions in the British period and their activities throughout the country up to 1974. We have also discussed the grievances of the railway working class which forced them to protest against the authority. These resistances had evolved and grown day by day and ultimately the workers launched an indefinite general strike in May 1974. We concentrated on the two Railway Zones i.e., Eastern Railways and Northeast Frontier Railways however due consideration was given to the overall background of the country. We described how the railwaymen prepared for the general strike and the situation that prevailed in these two zones. The impact of this strike in these two zones was analysed in this study. This chapter is a study of the response or responses of the State towards the railwaymen's strike in May 1974. It also looks at the attitude of the Government while dealing with the striking railwaymen in 1974. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is aimed at assessing the role of the state towards the working class movement in the country. It reviews the attitude of the State while negotiating with the trade unions before the strike started and the steps taken by the Government to deal with the trade union leaders during this time. The second section has focused its attention on the reasons behind the heavy repression that was let loose over the railway employees by the Government to crush the movement.

# 1

## The State and Negotiations

In India rapid economic development was targeted through Five Years Plans. Industrialisation was also an important objective. Five Years Plans were designed to meet the demands of a socialist economy and to achieve its various goals. In India these Plans could not fulfil the needs of commoners and the toiling masses rather it strengthened the hands of the capitalist owners. The downtrodden were not able to get minimum basic needs of the livelihood. In the industrial sector, the wage level of the workers from the very beginning did not satisfy the need based demands of the employees. And when the real wages devalued or the money value had dropped from the mid-fifties, it got a diminishing effect on the financial status and on life of the whole nation. Rise in prices and inflation had an immense effect on the real wages of the industrial workers which resulted into a huge decline in the wage structure. Thus, the situation became grave for them since the early 1960s. In the banking and textile industries D.A. was automatically linked with the need-based minimum wages of the workers, but in other sectors the two were not linked. The 15<sup>th</sup> Indian Labour Conference had granted and accepted the formula and the principle of “automatic linking of D.A. with the need-based minimum wages”. The ‘interim relief’ was also accepted by the Government under the pressure of protests by the trade unions throughout the country. Due to the opposition of the Finance Ministry to implement the need-based minimum wage norms set up by the 15<sup>th</sup> Indian Labour Conference, the Second Pay Commission prescribed a minimum wage of Rs. 801/- as against the demand of Rs. 1251/- (Chakraborty, 1987; p. 64). The publication of the recommendations of Pay Commission and wage legislation of the Government created another critical circumstance for the Central Government employees. These wage fixing norms and principles stirred the government employees all over the country and various forms of struggle started bursting forth among the central as well as the state government employees (Sen, 1977; p.387). The trade union movement in India inevitably gained its momentum from this time. The Second Pay Commission allowed dearness allowances to continue as a separate element of

remuneration. The Commission accordingly recommended grant of dearness allowances at the following rates:

- a) basic pay below Rs. 150/- Rs. 10/- per mensem;
- b) basic pay of Rs. 150/- or above but below Rs. 300/- Rs. 20/- per mensem

(Sen, 1997; p. 389)

The report of the Central Pay Commission was criticised and opposed by the trade unions in the railway industry. A special convention was held on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1960 with all the representatives of the Central Government employees', trade unions. The representatives AIDEF (All India Defence Employees' Federation), CGEC (Central Government Employees' Confederation and NFPTE (National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees' met in Bombay on April 2-3 and formed a Joint Council of Action (JCA) of thirty members. With V.G. Dalvi (NFPTE) as President and Peter Alvares (AIRF) as its Secretary and framed ground rules for functioning of JCA, it also finalised a 'Six Point Charter of Demands' which highlighted two basic demands like the need-based minimum wage and linking dearness allowances with cost of living index (AIRF Publication, 1999; p.15). Thus the central government employees' organisation i.e., JCA urged the Government to reconsider the matter but it simply rejected to review the issue. JCA gave a call for an indefinite strike from 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 which was considered as the most significant struggle in the country. It lasted for five days. The leaders of the trade unions requested Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Labour and Home Minister to meet the trade union leaders and instead of negotiating with them, the Prime Minister branded the central government employees as anti national. Above all Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance (ESMA) was imposed banning the right to strike on and from 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1960. He also declared that the workers struggle was a "civil rebellion" and he was determined to meet the strike firmly. In a particularly shrill radio broadcast he accused the leaders of fomenting chaos and sabotaging the economy; Nehru mobilised the police and para military and made aggressive preparations to meet the strike by passing the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance which made the strike illegal (Sherlock, 2001; p. 47). Police, Home Guard and Territorial Army were fully prepared to meet the strike. Lathi charge and police firing during the strike

days caused several injuries, hospitalisations and even deaths. Repression was immense and as a result, the strike was called off unconditionally within five days. On 17<sup>th</sup> July, the striking employees had joined their duties which marked the end of a revolution of the central government employees. Due to this strike the entire coal belt in the country was paralysed, it was successful in the Eastern and Western parts of the country in the Railways and Post and Telegraphs in West Bengal and Bombay (AIRF Publication, 1999; p. 15). This struggle was a failure in terms of material concessions but it had been a lesson for both the workers and their trade unions as well. It at least attempted to establish a link amongst the industrial working class belonging to the different sections of the systems. In the face of terribly adverse circumstances though this strike ended without immediately achieving any of the demands, it itself had a deep imprint on the future struggles of the working class of the country, the white collar employees in particular (Sen, 1997; p. 370).

However, Prime Minister Nehru directed all the Chief Ministers of the States to form a proper regulatory machinery to redress the grievances of the Central Government employees. Guljarilal Nanda, the Union Labour Minister prepared a scheme for all the Central Government Departments and Public Sector Undertakings, which had many anti-labour clauses and policies. The scheme was debated in the meeting of the General Council of AIRF at Trivandrum on July 22<sup>nd</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1962, Working Committee meeting at Kurseong on October 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup>, 1962, and consecutive general meetings at Coimbatore, Waltair, Pandu and Nagpur on 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1963, 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1965, 26<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> March, 1966 and 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1966 respectively. The Government then had clarified the scheme for establishing Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) in the Railways; the scheme was formally inaugurated by Nandaji, as Home Minister on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1966 (AIRF Publications, 1999; p. 16). Unfortunately, the bureaucratic approach of the Railway Board restricted the day-to-day cooperation in the functioning of the industry and long run planning. The hierarchical system and the organisational corruption had once again obstructed the process. And hence went against realising the targets of the industry and could not generate any benefit and foster good in the socio-political and economic spheres of the country.

Mainstream revealed a fact that the government had invested Rs.900 crores in the Fourth Plan and yet the system was unable to move even 20 crore tonnes of goods, more than 25% of the total strength of eleven thousands and wagons were in a state of disrepair

although the cost of a wagon had gone up by three times in the last five years; the wagon maintenance had deteriorated instead of being improved (Mainstream, 25.5. 1974; p.13). However, the years during 1966-68 were hard for the industrial workers because price rise and inflation had already begun to influence the daily livelihood of the people of the country. The demands of fixation of need-based minimum wage, working hours, leave etc. were the compulsory issues to be implemented. Revision of Dearness Allowance was the issue to be revised while the employees in the LIC, Oil Companies and various other industries had been conducting bitter struggles against introduction of automation which alarmingly threatened the job security of the workers and reduced job potentials but the Labour Commission in its report said, 'Rationalisation and automation have an important role to play in the developing countries' (Sen, 1997; p. 391). The recommendations and declarations of Labour Commission and Government and inability to cope with the current situation compelled the workers and their organisations to go against their authority. For redressing the problems and disputes and restoring industrial peace Industrial Relation Commission at State and National level was formed and vested with immense power to settle any dispute. Ultimately it turned into almost a dictatorship to decide all the matters related to the workers and their trade unions and even the power of prohibiting the right to strike. Therefore, the trade union leaders approached the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi to intervene in the matter but it appeared that she did not have any willingness to conciliate the issues. Meanwhile ESMS was promulgated by the Central Government. National Mobilisation Day was observed on 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1968 protesting against the decisions of the government to curtail the workers' rights. Finally 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1968 all the central government employees called a "one day token strike" against the present circumstances and their economic sufferings. Again As per AIRF source Mrs. Gandhi's government unleashed tremendous repression over the workers. Large scale victimisation took place. Five thousand eight hundred and twenty five railwaymen including their family members were arrested, eight railwaymen were killed in police firing at Mariani and Bongaigaon on Northeast Frontier Railways and Bikaner and Pathankot on Northern Railway, in Delhi at Indraprastha Bhawan one employee was beaten to death by police; over six lakhs central government employees including over four lakh railway employees joined the strike, services of about forty eight thousands temporary employees were terminated for simple participation in the

strike, besides suspension of over six thousand employees and dismissal of six hundred (AIRF Publication, 1999; p.18). A large section of the workers were involved in this struggle throughout the country. The consequences of this strike were the appointment of Third Central Pay Commission and in the railway industry, the appointment of Railway Labour Tribunal under the chairmanship of Justice Miabhoy.

The attitude and response of the government had repeatedly been trending towards authoritarian rule not to accept and bear any opposing force which could obstruct the course of the smooth functioning of the state. These two struggles of the Central Government Employees in the country had indicated that the government did not have any willingness to negotiate or settle any issue or dispute with the working class or their organisations. They resorted only to confrontation to deal with the general mass of the democratic country. Workers' resistance on the other hand, gained power and the workers started their own struggle to fulfill their demands. Interestingly, when the AIRF submitted a memorandum to the Railway Authority for the approval of the 'leave' of the railway workers during the period of strike in 1960, they found that this period of absence of the workers were treated as the period of suspension from duty. And this also had 'limited effect' on the retirement benefits of the employees. AIRF insisted on regularising the service and pressurised the authority to grant the salary for the period of leave. It was also pointed out that in the Post and Telegraphs Department this had been followed. But in the Railways the authority said in their orders that pay and allowance for the period of suspension should, be limited to what had already been allowed to the employees by the appropriate authorities. Their Order No. 53/3/63-DISE dated 31.3. 64 at Sl. No. 4/1 in the marginally noted proceedings. The reference from the Post and Telegraphs was received, i.e., in March, 1964 when the question of affording relief for this category of staff on similar lines was considered but was not favoured until 1972 .... benefit accrued due to re-adjustment of the date of increment in each case, if not during the period of suspension, then from the date of the revocation of the suspension should be allowed'. But the office Memorandum of the Ministry of Home Affairs revealed that –

- a) “the unauthorised period of absence should not be regularised by grant of any leave.... except in the case of those who resigned or were removed or dismissed,

but were subsequently re-employed, the pay last drawn may be allowed to the strikers who re-joined duty ...

- b) the period of unauthorised absence is likely in most cases to fall between the 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 and 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 – both the days inclusive and in the departments which observed Sunday, the 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 as holiday, the employees who resumed duty on the 18<sup>th</sup> July may be deemed to be absented themselves without authority upto the 16<sup>th</sup> July only” [File No. E (LR) II November, 1976 E (LU) 72 ST1-91/1-16 B (K)].

After several petitions and memorandum the Railway Ministry had approved the pay and allowances for the leave which was restored again during the period of 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1960. Board’s communication no. E (LU) 70 STI-29, dated 15.1. 72 envisaged that the period of suspension of the employees who participated in the 1960 Strike which was treated as non-duty should be treated as duty for the limited purpose of:

- 1) Leave,
- 2) Increment,
- 3) Retirement Benefit [Vide No. E(LR)II NOJ 76 E (LU) 725 TI-91/1-16 B(K)].

In the meantime, in the national political scene the CPI had slowly gathered power and importance. In 1962 and 1967 elections we see a growing strength of CPI in India, which obviously accelerated the strength and solidarity of the working class of the country. They tried to persuade and influence the formation of labour policy in India. During this time splits in the Congress Party had provided an opportunity to the trade unions to flourish. Consolidation of the working class and the emergence of consciousness in the broader political context had the capacity to reshape the country’s socio-economic and cultural spheres and also to influence the day to day life of its people. Consciousness among the down trodden had inevitably been a new trend in political and social order to restructure the society and hence, was able to generate a considerable degree of maturity in the democratic system. In this context the working mass was trying to challenge the might of the state and government. Mrs. Indira Gandhi explained the attitude of the state regarding the current status of the political parties and the working class in the democratic countries. In her words

“the inability to accede to power by democratic means may lead some parties to offer constitutional or extra-constitutional challenges, for young democracies, imperative to guard against such developments... The responsibility for preserving democracy is not confined to the ruling party it develops equally on the parties of the opposition and the people as a whole” (Gandhi, 26.1.1976; p.37). The entire period from 1960s up to mid 1975 i.e., up to the proclamation of National Emergency was considered as a period of absolute turmoil.

The exhibition of power and strength by the trade unions and also by the government was really a threat for the people and for the country’s growth. Mainstream felt that it was against this background of continued incapacity of the government in facing boldly the challenges on the economic front posed by the vested interests that the nation’s standing in the world abroad had considerably eroded particularly in the last one year (Mainstream, 11.5. 1974; p.5). Workers’ movement in different industries like jute and engineering industries in West Bengal, cotton textile in Bombay had occurred frequently which had common issues to resolve by their concerned authorities. The left parties prepared a strong ground in various states. In anti-working class line of politics of Congress and building of mass unity as a democratic force by the left were the two confronting corollaries of the Indian politics during this period. Mass discontent and upheaval in the industries became regular events and the authority had to suppress this discontentment with force for continuing the economic pace of the country. By this time, protests in the forms of rallies, demonstrations, go slow, work to rule, strikes etc. occurred in various states including the states where the left parties were not so active. The more the state became harsh and firm in its position, the more the workers took the militant approach and resorted to direct actions. What is noticed is that the government of India took an increasingly tough posture in meeting the challenge from the working masses (Marxist Review, January 1974; p. 339).

In 1966 and 1970 when the steel city of West Bengal i.e., Durgapur was hit by strikes, the entire township was turned into police camps, houses were randomly searched, men were severely attacked, workers were indiscriminately beaten, section 144 was regularly imposed, arrests became a common affair, union activities were seriously restricted. On 27<sup>th</sup> August 1971 a general strike was jointly called by the different trade unions in West Bengal and the strike was successful and got immense support from every segment of the Indian industries and every section of the people of the state. This struggle

was also threatened by the government and police was utilised enormously to control the situation. In Bombay two lakh textile workers showed a significant unity while they struck against their employers. This lasted for five days. In Coimbatore, the struggle was conducted jointly by CITU, AITUC, HMP and Socialist Textile Workers' Union. The strike by forty thousand workmen started on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1971 and lasted for fifteen days; in the coir industry, Kerala seven thousand coir workers demonstrated on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1971 at Erenakulam district under the auspices of the Joint Action Committee; nearly one and half lakh industrial workers in Calicut district participated in one day token strike on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1971 in support of the struggle of the workers of Mavoor Rayon Factory for bonus (Sen, 1997; pp. 405-406). The state did not have any desire to tolerate any kind of opposition or revolt from any corner of the mass, they presumed the workers' agitation as an attitude to subvert the system of representative democracy and an onslaught on liberal political system and destructive to the norms of policies and purposes of the welfare state. Moreover, Mrs. Gandhi was of the opinion that "in last twenty five years we had withstood more than one military challenge, economic crisis and threats of secession ... the people have voted for secularism, even though it was believed and propagated that Indian politics was dominated by religious factions and sentiments, they had rejected appeals of the extreme right and of the extreme left of the reactionaries and of ultra revolutionaries and had supported the democratic middle path to socialist development" (Gandhi, 26.1. 76; p. 36).

In the meantime in the railway industry factor and that was the process of disintegration of the workers and fragmentation in the trade unions had cropped up. The railway authority tried to encourage the matters by entangling itself with corrupt and unscrupulous practices. As the recognised trade unions failed to identify the just demands of the railwaymen and became ineffectual to raise their voices to reduce the grievances of the workers, they took the department wise initiatives to fight against the year long deprivations and injustices of the industry. Thus, it prompted category sentiment among them and motivated the workers to establish craft based unions or category wise associations in the railway industry. By the beginning of the 1970s almost one hundred categorical councils existed in the railway industry. Resultantly in August, 1970 All India Loco Running Staff Association was finally formed to combat the disputes of the railway industry. The craft unions though interrupted the functions and activities of the organised trade unions, but they

had exhibited their zeal and determination towards achieving the goals. In 1973, when the loco running staff had decided to go on direct action, they asked the Railway Board to consider the requirements and demands of the railway employees. When their attempts to persuade the Railway Ministry went useless and futile, AILRSA resorted to ‘mass absenteeism’ in the month of May, 1973. This time the Railway Minister took some initiative and assured to negotiate and settle the issue and the strike was withdrawn. But after the withdrawal of the Railway Board and the Railway Minister L.N. Mishra dismissed the strike as illegitimate and branded it as political one. Not only the Railway Board but the two recognised unions, i.e., AIRF and NFIR were hostile towards the strike and agreed that the workers were exploited by some politically motivated leaders. The Railway Board surprisingly did not keep any of its promises and kept on victimising the workers; did not even release those workers who were arrested during the May Strike. The attitude and responses of the government had fuelled again the loco running staff and they struck on and from 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1973. This time the railway services were badly hit by the agitation and Railway Board admitted that out of total nine zones six zones were completely paralysed. Railway services were halted to a large extent and trains did not move in most of the zones, specially the N.F. Railways became stalemate. Not only that a significant number of trains all over the country were cancelled due to unavailability of the signalers, firemen, drivers, guards etc. It seemed from the behaviour of L.N. Mishra that the Railway Board was never hostile or antagonistic towards the loco running staff. Thus, the Railway Board, observing the graveness of the situation tried to negotiate with the AILRSA leaders. They sought to convince the strikers to bring mobility in the industry. But the Association was determined and held that a settlement on the grievances was an urgent need and it would not agree to a return to work till the arrested leaders were released (Sherlock, 2001; p. 182). The leaders were invited to Delhi to talk with the Railway Minister and the Railway Board representatives on the demands of the loco men. The bureaucracy attempted to influence the course of the negotiation arbitrarily but the representatives of the loco men stick to their position and ultimately resolved the matters. “On the 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1973 a wireless message was issued to the Chief Ministers/Governors of the state governments advising them that the agitations of the loco running staff had been called off and that the striking railwaymen who had been arrested under the Defence India Rules and other Acts might be released

immediately as permitted under the law, except those persons charged under the laws for acts of sabotage, damage to railway property and violence” – was the letter issued by A.K. Chakraborty, Director, Railway Establishment on 31.8. 73 (Sl. No. 1-2, 3,4,5,6). But L.N. Mishra personally assured Samar Mukherjee, M.P. to release the loco men arrested in different places of N.F. Railways such as in Lumding, Pandu, New Jalpaiguri and in Malda. “Instructions have already been issued to the Railway administrations to regularise the break in service caused due to their participation in the illegal strike in accordance with my statement in the Parliament on 13.8. 73. In regard to the penal transfer cases, these have been reviewed and wherever transfers have been ordered during the agitation, these have been ordered to be cancelled” ... (No. E(LU) 73/ST 1-62). This letter was written in favour of Samar Mukherjee.

The success of the struggle of the loco men depended in their ability to unite quite a large section of the workers. The reasons were that they were fighting against inhuman duty hours which sometimes extended upto 32 hours with the minimum being 14-16 hours at a stretch (Chakraborty, 1987; p. 78). The Railway Management agreed to limit the duty hour’s upto 10-12 hours. This victory boosted the confidence of the loco running staff. At the same time a feeling of satisfaction was generated in the Railway Board that they had become successful, at least to some extent to bring splits in the united and organised labour movement in the railway industry. Priya Gupta declared that the “Railway Ministry has now adopted a clear cut policy of weakening...the railway trade unions movement in India...by undermining the recognised unions (Sherlock, 2001; p. 161). AIRF leadership accused the railway authority for its deliberate effort to separate and divide the railwaymen so that the category wise unions could upset the established norms of broad based workers’ struggle and employees-employer relationship. In the railway industry the eruption and emergence of craft unions had provided a platform to voice the grievances of the workers. Fernandez had rightly said regarding the leadership of AIRF that they had become “faction ridden and vested interests had developed at various levels of leadership, instead of drawing on the collective strength of the workers, most of the time, many of the leaders tried to draw sustenance through official patronage (Fernandez; 1984; p.28). While the recognised unions remained either passive spectator or active traitor, the authority had encouraged the movements of the categorical councils. By negotiating with the craft unions, Railway Board

played a dual role in the process of collective bargaining and effectiveness of the trade union movements. To Fernandes by the middle of 1973, they had become powerful enough to dictate terms to the Railway Board bureaucrats (Fernandez, 1984; p. 28).

The success of the AILRSA struggle influenced the trade union leadership to formulate new plans to accomplish the demands of the railwaymen and an atmosphere of confrontation was precipitated among the trade unions and the workers in the railway industry. Not only that the early months of 1974 was marked as a period of working class militancy. It encouraged the rank and file workers to achieve solidarity hence the pattern of working class unity had changed. The recognised trade unions attempted to ameliorate their organisational limitations and enhanced their inherent strength to reach absolute unity and to mount a movement of the railway workers throughout the country. This agitation was an effort to challenge the might of State and the authoritarian tendency of the government. The Railway authority, after the withdrawal of the agitation by the loco running staff in August blamed the struggle for halting the movement of goods and passenger traffic in many places but it was evident that the railwaymen had been trying to contribute possible assistance for the growth and development of the national economy and industry. The Ministry claimed that efforts had been initiated to gear up the existing sick units of the industry and activate them to increase production. Hindustan Standard reported in November, 1973 that Mrs. Gandhi felt that the habit of going on strike or the provocation on the part of the trade unions for agitating against the authority should be stopped. She however did not deny the democratic right of the workers to go on strike but emergency situations like war when they must voluntarily give up this right. According to Mrs. Gandhi the present economic situation was so grave that it could be compared with war like situations (Hindustan Standard, 12.11.1973; p.1). The Railway Management had to be more specific and systematic in its day to day production and more particular in optimising the existing services. Government had planned for modernising and refurbishing the industry and investment of Rs. 2350 crores had been made for this purpose. The amount had been financed for undertaking the techno-economic feasibility on rapid development of country's transport system. It aimed at the constructions of new lines connecting important sectors with heavy industries and manufacturing of component parts of railways such as wheels, traction, gears etc. These were encouraged to ensure the uninterrupted expansion of the industry. Investments were

made to improve and upgrade the locomotives, their workshops, repairing works, rolling stocks etc. (Hindustan Standard, 17.12. 1973; p.7). The International Development Association and the soft lending World Bank affiliate had announced a credit of eighty million dollar (60 crores) to assist Indian Railways' Programme of modernisation (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 20.12. 1973; p.1). In this situation any kind of workers unrest might dislocate the plan wholly and the upgradation was turned upside down. The Ministry of Railways had criticised and condemned the attitude of the workers to resort to strike at any point of disagreement and their attempt to paralyse the transport artery of the country especially in the alarming economic situation of the industries and nation as well.

The Railway Ministry was worried due to the threat of the agitating loco staff in different zones especially in the NF Railways demanding 10 hours of duty as per the promise of the authority. The Hindu reported that the loco men in N.F. Railways refused "to work beyond 10 hours". This work schedule had been "causing dislocation of traffic". The workers were abandoning passenger trains at points short of destination and a large number of passengers were being put to great inconveniences (The Hindu, 6.1. 1974; p.1). In this connection it could be said that the concluding years of 1973 and months prior to May 1974 strike were bad and there was a state of turmoil<sup>59</sup>. In the month of February when the railway men had planned to launch a countrywide struggle, the state had prepared their plan of actions to handle the workers in the railway industry. L.N. Mishra addressing in a Conference argued that since the last few years the railway industry had been hit badly by the several agitations, sporadic labour unrests and struggles by the workers, as a result of that production slowed down and hence the railways could not deliver any good for the economy and for the nation. Though the employees were of the opinion that the economic hardship due to the steady price rise of essential commodities specially the food grains and edible oil made the life of the railway men miserable, Railway Ministry announced to appoint a cell to evaluate the current position of the employees and fulfill their requirements (The Statesman, 5.2.1974; p.4). Meanwhile the Railway Ministry submitted the 'Railway

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<sup>59</sup> Industrial relations in India deteriorated at that point of time and experienced worst decline in industrial harmony, e.g., in the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the dispute between five unions and the management relating to wage resulted into the closedown of the organisation and was settled and the lockout of sixteen days was lifted. It marked a victory of the management over the trade unions.

Budget' proposals for the year 1974-75. The opposition leaders criticised it as anti people and accused the department for mismanagement, corruption and waste of resources and poor control mechanism over the system and the bureaucrats.

Meanwhile the railway workers and their trade unions altogether had formed a common platform to launch a nation-wide struggle if their demands did not get fulfilled. As a result NCCRS had been preparing for a bigger movement of all rank and file railway workers. The Railway Minister cleared his position and expressed his willingness to meet not only the individual leaders but with all the trade union leaders together to avert any unwanted situation. Though he told that the government had decided to be firm and tough to deal any such situation, the Ministry was ready to initiate any fresh step to avoid deadlock in any industry. Railway Board wished to utilise the Permanent Negotiating Machinery (PNM) and Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) that were intended to attain the expected formula purposefully for redressing the resentments of the workers. From 10<sup>th</sup> April a number of meetings amongst the representatives of the NCCRS, Railway Board officials and the Ministry were held but no official meetings took place till then. To prevent the threatened railway strike, the government agreed to conduct industrial negotiations. But the authority had instructed the General Managers of all the nine zones of Indian Railway about their line of actions. Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi had conceived the proposed strike as a 'disruption of railway traffic' which was considered as anti-national and deplored that a handful of railway men were 'holding the nation to ransom' (The Hindu, 2.4. 1974; p.1). The first formal meeting to negotiate with the trade union leaders was held on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1974. The Labour Ministry communicated that it was agreed to sit with the railway trade unions' representatives to talk over the issues but it was the AIRF which was sticking only to the decision of direct action. In the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion both the parties had agreed to start official negotiations from 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1974 to finalise the issues across the table. NCCRS declared that if the negotiation failed on 15<sup>th</sup> April they had to take drastic step to launch countrywide indefinite, general strike from 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974. Times of India reported that the Deputy Railway Minister Mohammad a Safi Quereshi inaugurated the discussion with the national leaders of the Railway Trade unions and started point wise negotiations on the charter of demands of the railway workers on 29<sup>th</sup> April and the Railway Minister assured that there would be no penal transfer or arrests, i.e., any kind of

victimisation had not been initiated from the administrative level especially when the deliberations were going on (Times of India, 18.4.1974; p.1). The government did not show any flexibility to accept the demands of the railway workers, e.g. the demand of need-based minimum wage; Dearness Allowance linked with the wage and bonus etc. were the three main demands of the railwaymen which the Railway Minister denied to consider rather rejected these demands as impossible to accept. Thus, the trade unions said that the authority had been provoking the workers to go against the government. As a result the NCCRS had asked the respective Zonal NCCRS to serve strike notice on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1974. But still the NCCRS was keen to avoid the proposed strike through discussions.

The Railway Authority had planned to keep the industry alive and continue to provide the services. The Times of India reported that the Central Railway's effort would be to move coal, oil and food grains, in that order of priority, there would be no passenger services except in Sundarban section and "maintain only supply of coal to Bombay and Power Houses at Nasik and Bhusawal (Times of India, 24.4.1974; p.1). Railway Zonal Headquarters had continuously been cancelling the trains in various Divisions to combat with the upcoming strike situation and they started cancelling the trains, immediately after the strike notice was served to the respective offices by the trade unions. Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that threatened with an 'indefinite' strike on the railways from 8<sup>th</sup> May, the Railway Ministry decided to cancel a number of passenger trains from April 27 to conserve coal and took a tough stand by warning to their employees that any strike participated by them would be punishable, with imprisonment extending over three years under the Defence India Rules (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 25.4. 1974; p. 6). In E.R, several local and long distance trains were cancelled. S.E Railways released a notice which stated that for maintaining essential economic activities of the country, preservation of coal was necessary, hence they cancelled a number of suburban and long distance trains. The Railway Board from the very beginning held the opinion that this struggle of the railway workers was politically motivated.

Though Mishra declared that no victimisation and disciplinary action were taken against the employees, he had ordered for mobilisation of Territorial Army in all the Zonal Railways, apart from this, Central Armed Forces like CRPF, Paramilitary Force, Border Security Force etc. were deployed in all the Divisions, offices, railway junctions, small

stations etc. which created an environment of tension and fear. The Eastern Railway and South Eastern Railway authorities decided to limit the transport of perishable goods such as fish, egg, vegetables, and fruits due to the proposed strike. By restricting the movement of these goods, the authorities had planned to replace the goods coaches of certain trains by passenger coaches to cope with the extra load of passengers following the cancellation of a number of long distance trains (Hindustan Standard, 28.4. 1974; p.1). In this respect, the railway trade unions raised a question that if the authority had any willingness to negotiate with the working class then it should neither provoke the trade unions to leave the path of compromise nor created an atmosphere of tension and distrust in the country. On the other hand Mishra promised to make arrangements for supply of food grains and other essential articles to the railwaymen at a cheaper rate. He also agreed to accept the demand of the limited working hours and decasualisation of casual labour in some departments which benefitted almost three lakh employment of workers in the railway industry.

The Statesman of 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1974 reported that ‘no progress was made at talks which were resumed on 27<sup>th</sup> April in New Delhi between the Deputy Railway Minister Qureshi and the representatives of railway employees’ Union (The Statesman, 28.4.1974; p.1). The Railway Minister was accused of delaying the discussion with the trade union leaders and he resorted to the tactics of delay to begin the discussions with the labour leaders. The Hindu analysed that a deadlock had been reached in the talks between the Railway Ministry and trade union leaders on the fourth day of negotiations. Again last minute effort to reach a settlement on May 2 had been agreed by both the parties (The Hindu, 1.5. 1974; p.1). Fernandes mentioned about the dominating nature of the railway management during the whole negotiation process, rather the Railway Board always tried to dominate the entire process of settlement with the trade union leaders. According to the labour leaders the mass of the country had supported the struggle of the downtrodden of the country. They were also overwhelmed to observe the encouragement on the part of the general people. On the other hand, the railway workers seemed to have been waiting for an opportunity to expose the real nature of the authority. Fernandez told to the Times of India on 29<sup>th</sup> April that “the National Co-ordination Committee had set up committees at each of the seven thousands stations of the country and he had instructed the railwaymen not to

listen to the radio or watch television and believe press reports (Times of India, 29.4.1974; p.6).

The Railway Board surprisingly, continued cancelling the passenger trains – long distance and suburban-local trains also. In the Western Railways the passengers faced a great trouble while they found the trains to their destination had got cancelled and they tried to travel forcibly without bookings and the picture was somewhat similar in every zone. Meanwhile, in this situation, the leaders of NCCRS were arrested on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1974 in the midst of the negotiation. The arrest of Fernandez including other important labour leaders in the railway front had a serious impact on the political atmosphere of the country. The death of V.C. Malgi, General Secretary of Western Railway Mazdoor Union, who was arrested by the police as a measure to prevent the upcoming strike on 8<sup>th</sup> May but he died in police custody in Bombay. This incident erupted the anger of the railway workers which resulted in the paralysis of Bombay and its surrounding areas totally. A ‘bandh’ was called and the entire area became standstill. The financial capital of the country spontaneously went on silence, mourned and protested peacefully against the government’s crafty attitude and action to disrupt the process of settlement of the railwaymen’s struggle.

All over the country the government directed the administration to arrest the union leaders at national or local level into preventive custody under MISA. Times of India on 3<sup>rd</sup> May reported that prominent among those arrested in Delhi were: P.K. Barua, H.S. Chowdhury, L.N. Gupta, A.A. Siddique etc. not only that in different cities like in Calcutta about one hundred railway employees including several trade union leaders were arrested from different parts of West Bengal; in Hyderabad, sixty two railway personnel and their leaders were detained under MISA in Andhra Pradesh; prominent labour leaders of Western Railways of Ahmedabad and Bhavnagar were arrested (Times of India, 3.5. 1974; p.1). At this point of tussle, L.N. Mishra time and again requested the railwaymen to desist from strike. He accused Fernandez because he refused to attend the meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> May as he had other engagement in Lucknow and he opined that it was a fruitless exercise to negotiate with the railway trade unions as the NCCRS had already prepared for all India indefinite strike. Mishra defended the acts of arrests of the trade union leaders especially the national leaders like Fernandez that the government had ‘sufficient evidence’ that Fernandez was not only planning the railway strike but was planning ‘something more than that’ and he wanted to

‘paralyse the national economy and create chaos in the country’ (Hindustan Standard, 4.5.1974; p.1). On the other hand, Fernandes requested Mrs. Gandhi to intervene in the matter. But she had already gone to a diplomat meet in Teheran instructing the bureaucrats to deal any opposition firmly and hence they followed the tough line of uncompromising attitude with any kind of revolt or opposition like this. All the opposition leaders in the Lok Saba looked at this action as an attempt of the government to shift the attention of the people from economic crisis of India that arose out of inflationary policies, corruption and its inability to control the problems of black marketing, hoarding and so many other things. The strike of the railway workers was well utilised by the government as it was successful in showing its power and authority to the people that any kind of hostile attitude or position was to be handled with tough hands. Moreover, the Railway authority made NCCRS responsible for the strike and the for the turmoil situation of the state. The railway trade unions discarded this blame of the government and raised the demand of unconditional release of all the arrested persons and normalise the situations. But whenever the trade unions appealed to the Railway Board for negotiated settlement or examine the conditions of the workers, Railway Minister kept on asking for the withdrawal of the strike notice first otherwise further talks could not be resumed. Since the arrest of the leaders and army mobilisation took place L.N. Mishra started warning the railway employees that they would lose jobs. Railway authority threatened the railway men for the bitter consequences of the strike and continuously branded the struggle as ‘illegal’ and participating in such struggle would lead to punishments like removal from services, break-in-service, and suspensions and so on. Government had circulated a secret notice to the administrations at every level for arresting the labour leaders on the basis of the formula of ‘not too early, not too late’ to disrupt the preparations and plans of leaders in all the zonal railways. All the payments dues like arrears, provident fund loans etc. were stopped so that the economically crippled workers were not able to prolong their struggle.

## II

### **The State and the Striker's**

In the previous section we discussed the attitude of the State and the readiness of the Railway Authority to meet the railwaymen's struggle in May 1974. We examined the response of the Railway Board during the process of negotiations with the trade unions. This section deals with the repressive measures that the State resorted to in order to handle the strike situation and the railway workers, and their organisation's during the strike days of May 1974. It analyses the attitude of the Railway Board and Management while suppressing the workers' movement in the industry. This section also studies the role's played by the railway trade unions during the strike days throughout the country.

We have seen that Indira Gandhi's government had utilised all its state apparatus to compel the railwaymen to surrender unconditionally and withdraw the movement unilaterally. The immensely united railway workers' struggle in post independent era on an all India basis which lasted for such a long period, entered into the history of terrific repression and torture that was unleashed by the government of the country. The government wanted to teach a lesson to all the industrial working class who were constantly agitating against the authority especially the workers engaged in Public Sector Undertakings and industries, hence it utilised the success over the railway workers' struggle as an example in treating the industrial labourers of the country. The Railway Ministry had realised from the very beginning of 1974 that the strike have become inevitable, hence it had planned to use heavy repression to meet the strike and took tough line of action to break the confidence of the strikers. As The Hindu reported that when the strike notice was served by the railway trade unions to all the railway zonal authorities on 23<sup>rd</sup> April Mrs. Gandhi had briefed in the Parliament that a strike in this important public utility sector would be a national disaster and the leaders of the unions who had given strike notice should have realised the grave consequences of their proposed step (The Hindu, 23.4.1974; P.1).

The Railway Minister decided to cancel a number of passenger trains from 27<sup>th</sup> April to conserve coal and warned the employees that any strike by them would be punishable

with imprisonment extending over three years under the Defence of India Rules (The Hindu, 25.4. 1974; p.1). Peoples' Democracy had revealed that 'more than 30,000 railway workers were arrested, more than 10,000 workers served with dismissed orders, their earned wages for the month preceding the strike withheld to starve them into submission their womenfolk and children attacked and beaten in their quarters and large number of them being thrown out of their quarters (Peoples' Democracy, 26.5. 1974; p.1). Not only that the government utilised all the Central, State and Railway Reserve Forces to combat the railway workers and created a war like situation. Army and Paramilitary forces had captured all the important railway junctions, stations, workshops, loco sheds, and railway colonies throughout the country to move on. The Government had used its armoury to its full extent over the railwaymen and the repression was unparalleled since independence till date. Government had managed the media such as Radio, Television etc. to manipulate the news regarding the strike situation, real incidents that were taking place in different railway zones and how the Rail Minister had been handling the crisis. The Statesman on 10<sup>th</sup> May reported that member after member from the opposition charged the government in the Lok Sabha that it was trying to break the railwaymen's strike by 'brute force' and the opposition leaders like Samar Mukherjee, Indrajit Gupta and Atal Bihari Bajpai etc. condemned the arrest of George Fernandes, Convenor of NCCRS and other leaders while the negotiations were in progress. Mukherjee assailed L.N. Mishra's claims that six of the eight demands were rejected by the authority and from the very start the government had been preparing for a show down through secret directives. The Government apparently took the attitude of settlement through negotiation but when the strike action had been knocking at the door, it suddenly changed its position and resorted to a completely different line of approach towards labour demands, known as P.C. Lal approach (The Statesman, 10.5. 1974; p.1 & 5). But the government stick to its decision of meeting the strike through force and Mrs. Gandhi discarded all the accusation and requests or appeals of the opposition parties and expressed his "firm determination to face the strikers with heavy hands. The Government arrested more than one thousand railwaymen mainly the prominent trade union leaders throughout the country, not only that the Railway Minister declared that the railway workers' struggle as 'illegal' and Mr. Mishra emphasised continuously that "the railways could not afford the

‘luxury’ of a strike at this time when the country’s economy was passing through a crisis” (Times of India, 5.5. 1974; p.1).

Arrests in the crucial phase of negotiations had revealed the attitude of the government. The railway authority defended its treacherous action by arguing that the government had no intention to ‘order, arrests and detention indiscriminately’ (The Hindu, 3.5. 1974; p.1). All over the country only the news of arrests of the trade union leaders were broadcasted. The Railway Minister L.N. Mishra was of the opinion that all the trade unions were functioning according to the labour leaders who were at the same time, the members of different parties such as Congress, CPI, CPM, Jansangh, SSP etc. These parties were involved in the political process of the country, hence tried to influence the course of national policies in various ways. The Railway Board accused Fernandes for creating an atmosphere of distrust and confusion which ultimately led to this nationwide strike. The detention of Fernandez made him a national hero and he most skilfully utilised this image and tried to re-establish his party’s importance in national political scene. Government on the other hand, as The Hindu felt “government took a calculated risk in attempting to call the bluff of the militant elements in the belief that the railwaymen’s unions were sharply divided over the strike issue and that even those which felt obliged to support the strike threat did not have their heart in it, so both the politicians and bureaucrats decided to play tough even at the cost of some dislocation in the movement of essential supplies, little realising that in the prevailing atmosphere in the country a limited strike on the railways could also have far reaching political and economic consequences” (The Hindu, 4.5.1974; p.4). The battle with the railwaymen had been associated with the rude suppression of the entire toiling people and labour movement as well, which had encountered a big obstacle in its course of maturity. People’s Democracy intended to unfold the reason behind this approach of the government, that “Big Businessmen made more profits, land lords filled their coffers, big traders had overflowing tills, because their profits could not be touched, no concessions could be gained to the people, no demand of the common people even to maintain their present abysmally low living standards could be met (Peoples’ Democracy, 26.5. 1974; p.1). The nature and extent of the repression over the railway workers indicated the intensity of the struggle. Nrisingha Chakraborty had recorded the measures taken by the government against the railwaymen for participating in the May 1974 general strike:

- 1) The workers were denied their due arrears of wages, loans from Provident Fund etc. so that they did not have enough funds with when the strike started;
- 2) The labour Ministry by issuing a circular exempted the railway authorities from paying the wage of the railway workers within the period of limitation as provided under Payment of Wages Act;
- 3) Essential Service Maintenance Ordinance was issued once again and though the Railway Ministry assured the Parliament that the government would not arrest anybody or apply MISA against the workers, 50,000 workers were arrested many of whom were subjected to summary trials...
- 4) Orders were issued not to give medical treatment to the striking workers or their family members;
- 5) 3,000 workers were summarily dismissed/removed from service under Rule 14(ii)/149 without any opportunity of self defence;
- 6) Prohibitive orders including curfew were imposed on all railway colonies and their surrounding areas so that the striking workers were not able to keep any contact with those who had not joined the strike or held meetings, processions etc.;
- 7) When the workers under warrant not found in their quarters their belongings were looted in the name of seizure. In worker's absence his son was arrested (Chakraborty, 1987; pp. 83-84

Maya Mukherjee<sup>60</sup>, wife of Suvendu Mukherjee of Kanchrapara corroborated that during the strike days, all the male members of Kanchrapara railway colonies fled away to avoid police arrest and torture. She described that when the strike started on 8<sup>th</sup> May'74, the railway colonies became police camps. RPF, GRP, Paramilitary forces kept on marching inside the colonies, threatened the women and the children, the whole colony where she along with her family resided was surrounded by the armed forces, frequently disconnected the power or electricity supply, cut the water connections and compelled them to vacate the railway quarters. Finally, when the female members formed the women brigade to restrict

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Mrs. Maya Mukherjee on 19.01.18 at 4-30 p.m. at her residence in Kanchrapara Main Road.

their activities and went to complain to the police station, the armed forces threw them out of the police station and ferociously lathi charged over the women brigade. As a result a large number of women got injured, fractured and hospitalised. Mrs. Mukherjee was beaten badly by the state police and her left leg got multiple fractures and she was admitted in the hospital nearly for two weeks. Not only Mrs. Maya Mukherjee, whoever went to protest against police atrocities, was treated with lath and bayonet. But when the women folk confronted them with wooden sticks, knives, brooms etc. the armed forces had to retreat. She remembered that a series of incidents of ill-treatment, torture and harassment by police and administration in Kanchrapara Railway Colony took place. Most of the times they kept the doors and windows of the quarters closed due to the fear of the police interrogation and hassles. According to Mrs Mukherjee real hardship of life began after the withdrawal of the strike. Because railway authority had imposed several restrictions on its employees e.g., no medical facilities, passes and wages were withheld for the striking workers, even they were not entitled to take loans from P.F, thus when the workers were terminated from service and remained at home as jobless, it was tough for the other family members to run them. Nearly all the striking workers in the Kanchrapara Colony were either dismissed or suspended from their services or arrested for the entire period of the struggle. Thus no salary was paid to them, no loans from any source like Provident Fund or Gratuity were disbursed and they did not know at that point of time, how long this uncertainty would prevail. They had suffered for three long three years because her husband had lost his job and got it back when the Janata Government came to power. The situation became completely adverse for the striking railwaymen and their families. The Peoples' Democracy had described that Kanchrapara in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal was remembered as one of the railway colonies where intense atrocities on womenfolk by the CRP and Congress goondas were committed during the railway strike and the heroic fight of the women and children against the repression was also remembered for years to come. In no time, women thronged to the full and there no room to stand in the verandah; girls of 13 and 14, small children, old women with injuries, with fractured hands, bandages on the wound – all came to tell the women's representatives of the atrocities committed by one Hazra, Officer-in-Charge of the police station, about Sri Jagadish Das, a Congress MLA and his goondas and women Home Guards, recruited specially for this purpose. Smt. Rita Adhikary was being taken to the

police thana when her small daughter, Ira is of class VIII hung on to the van weeping and asked the Officer-in-Charge “where were you taking my mother?” In reply she got a ‘special beating’ from the Officer-in-Charge and that too with a bayonet (Peoples’ Democracy, 2.6.1974; p.3).

Not only in West Bengal, all the state government surpassed all the limits of tortures of the Congress government in matter of suppressing the railway workers struggle. Incidents of police barbarism and brutalities were common throughout the country. Armed forces continuously raided the railway colonies specially those which were the important centres for trade union activities such as Delhi, Kharagpur, Katihar, Mughalsarai, Bombay, Hubli, Pandu-Maligaon so on and so forth. New Age of 12<sup>th</sup> May reported that 1,800 were arrested in West Bengal, 750 in Uttar Pradesh, 557 in Tamil Nadu, 300 in Madhya Pradesh, 276 in Punjab, 232 in Maharashtra, 210 in Andhra Pradesh, 174 in Bihar, 174 in Hariyana, 73 in Orissa and 51 in Karnataka; prohibitory orders banning meetings, demonstrations etc. were promulgated in all the railway centres, the mass arrests were followed by lathi charges, tear gassing and firing at least in 12 places. Police used lathi and teargas on the workers at Hubli, Jaipur, Jhansi, Pathanpur, Mangalore, Mysore, Madras, Katihar, NJP, Kalon and Kharagpur (New Age, 12.5.1974; p.10). The railway centres and workshops where the strike was intense and complete and where the participation was higher the police atrocities and barbarism was most severe.

To the Marxist Review the attitude of the government was “the utter cynicism, cold calculations and ruthless repression with which the Indira Gandhi leadership of the Indian bourgeoisie met the glorious struggle of the railway workers had conclusively established the fact that this leadership was the real spearhead of counter revolution in India (The Marxist Review, June 1974; p. 365). The government was criticized for planned attack on the railway workers as its attempt to divert the attention of the countrymen from its failure to control the present economic crisis to the working class movement that might accelerate the political economic crisis of the country. Mrs. Gandhi’s government resorted to tough line in handling the lookouts in LICs and prepared a more tough labour policy to deal with the new trade union regime in the country and growing discontentment’s among the industrial workers. As Peoples’ Democracy noted on 5<sup>th</sup> May that Union Home Minister Uma Shankar Dikshit told the Lok Sabha on April 29<sup>th</sup> that the government was determined to maintain

essential traffic in the event of the railway strike and any attempt to interfere with such movement would be firmly put down. Apart from deploying Territorial Army to run the rail services and keeping the Army, CRPF, BSF etc. ready to be used against the railway workers. In Kanpur alone a thousand Territorial Army had been stationed, in Howrah huge number of bogies had been reserved to accommodate the police forces, in Kharagpur tarpaulin and other staff had been brought to set up tents for the armed forces, the government had made an elaborate plan for mass arrests especially under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act to which Union Home Minister referred to during his statement in the Lok Sabha. It was revealed from the following circular that the Government had a plan to suppress the agitation by using brute force, hence a “secret-most-immediate” circular by the government no. 8.12. 1974, Poll,(I), (D-I) dated April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1974 from C.V. Narasimhan, Joint Secretary to the government of India, to the Chief Secretaries of those State Governments and Union Territory Administrations where the railways operate with copies to Inspector General’s of Police of the states and territories and the circular said that “one of the important ingredients of effective action would be the arrest and removal from the scene of their activities of persons who otherwise would either contribute to the success of the strike or create serious law and order problems” (Peoples’ Democracy, 5.5. 1974; p. 1). Prithwish Sarkar<sup>61</sup>, fireman, posted in Lumding since the year 1971, a member of AILRSA informed that Intelligence Bureau and State CIF kept regular watch over the main centres of railways including the railway junctions, Divisional Offices, Head Quarter and the railway colonies in N.F. Railways. They not only visited these places, the CIDs interrogated the railwaymen even before the strike started, they were well prepared and made a list of railway trade union leaders, general workers militant trade unionists in the railways front. In all the states secret circulars were sent to the police and CIDs which contained directions especially for the CIDs to follow and keep vigilance on the railwaymen. They kept continuous vigilance on the activities of the railwaymen and their organisations. When the strike began the CID along with the police frequently visited the railway colonies and enquired about the striking workers to the family members. Sarkar was of the opinion that to disrupt, the United Action of the railwaymen the government initiated to mobilise the

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Sri Prithwish Sarkar on 09.01. 17 at Pensioners’ Association, N.F. Railways Unit at NJP Branch, Gate Bazar, Siliguri at 1-30 p.m.

masses against the trade union movement in the country. Government utilised media randomly to influence the striking workers and at the same time the people of the country. AIR became the lying organ, broadcasted only false news all over the country and it announced that all the actions which the authority took were only against the acts of violence and intimidations of the striking workers. According to him there were unparalleled cases of public repression and brutalities that took place in this zone. On the contrary, the erosion in the mass support was observed and growing discontentment amongst the industrial workers had developed towards the government especially due to its reactions towards the railwaymen's struggle.

In the railway industry, the most important component was its loco running staff. They were much required at least to run the trains, hence they were more brutally forced and insisted to join their duties. Inhuman atmosphere and a reign of terror persisted in almost all the railway zones. When the strike began, the government declared the activities of all the striking trade unions as illegal and issued arrest warrant against thousands of leaders and the active members who were still outside jail. All meetings, processions and demonstrations were prohibited during this period and in some places of N.F. Railways, curfew and Article 144 were promulgated to restrict the activities of the railway workers. In many railway colonies as the days passed during the strike, the repression became higher. Anti-social activities in the railway colonies such as in Sealdah, Naihati, Burdwan, Asansol etc. were witnessed physical and mental assault on the railwaymen and their families were unprecedented. At Howrah Hema Prova Nag, an old and sickly lady, employed in Howrah Division became the victim of torture, her arms and other parts of the body were burnt with cigarette when she denied to join her duty. Several instances of harassments were seen, e.g., at Burdwan, CRPF kicked on the womb of a pregnant wife of one striking worker resultantly the baby could not survive and ultimately led to abortion of the foetus (The Railway Worker, 1999; p. 37).

In West Bengal the torture on the railway working class was tremendous. The attack on the railwaymen was accompanied and identified with the attack on the Naxalite activists. Thus, a fascist attitude of the West Bengal Government led by Siddhartha Sankar Ray was witnessed and the aggression which was shown against the workers was so organised and skilful that it was almost a murderous attempt. The state government after consultation with

the Central Congress leadership had asked the Research Analytical Wing (RAW) to get involved in the state affairs to control the situation more efficiently and more rapidly and to carry on the search programme. RAW became so active during this period that no gathering, campaign or discussion about the railway strike could take place and the mobility of the workers became difficult and these led to arrest and harassment of the railwaymen. Arun Kanti Bhattacharjee<sup>62</sup>, a guard in Eastern Railway, working in Sealdah since 1957 said that in this area it was really impossible to meet the striking workers or with the trade union leaders because the entire area was under the surveillance of CID and RAW and the situation was same in Howrah too. Sri Bhattacharjee fled away from the colony one day before the strike began and secretly attended the meetings which used to take place near the carriage shed at night in disguise. Because if the CID identified him or any of the striking railwaymen they would obviously arrest them or compel them to join their duties or physical torture and also were very common weapons. He expressed his anger while talking about Congress hooligans who acted as the agent of official strike breaking unit. These hooligans were so enthusiastic that they went a step forward and behaved like the gangsters and assisted the authority with their full capacity to force the railway workers to bow down.

Harsharam Singh documented his conversation with a BSF Officer on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1976 while he was returning from Amritsar to Ludhiana. The officer narrated his experience to crush the railway strike in Mughalsarai. He had been entrusted with the duty of starting trains movement with the liberty of adopting any means and take any action he thought suitable. The Government had given him a cheque to start train services. To implement the orders, he told that he let loose different repressive measures and reign of terror in the railway colony in Mughalsarai (MGS). Colonies were cordoned, everyone was dragged out from their quarters in open place. Children, family's old parents and even the school teachers were mercilessly beaten, suspended, head down round the trees, some had their limbs fractured but he could not move trains for a number of days even the residents were kept standing in scorching Sun for hours together without food and water (Singh,1999; p. 41). Three to four thousand armed troops were deployed in this place, all the connections with outer world were cut off; telephone lines were kept out of function and set up their

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Sri Arun Kanti Bhattacharjee on 20.10. 18 at the office of the Pensioners' Association, Eastern Railways in Barasat at 6.00 p.m.

camps in some significant areas of town in order to create an environment of tension and resultantly people became frightened. Water and electricity supplies to many railway quarters were cut. Similar kind of incidents had also happened in the Katihar Division under N.F. Railways. Miss. Kabita Mukherjee<sup>63</sup>, a college student in 1974, residing in Katihar recollected her memories of those struggle days. She shared her experiences of what happened during the days of the 1974 strike. All the male members of her family except her father who was a management staff, fled away from the colony two days before the strike began and took shelter in the nearby jungle and river bank. The young boys especially the children were sent at night to provide food to these striking workers. She remembered that an atmosphere of suspicion and fear existed in the entire area. Armed forces visited the colony day and night, insulted the railway workers' family members, did not even spare the small children, and used abusive languages frequently. The jawans had tied the little girls and boys together with rope and molested them in front of their mother and grandmother. Miss. Mukherjee told that the government had given to the armed forces free licence of torture over the railway workers in Katihar. No words were enough to explain the hardships, sufferings and distress of the families of the striking workers that faced during the strike period. Police came twice or thrice in a week to their quarter but they did not harass them much because her father was a non-participant in the strike and a management employee.

In most parts of the Northern, Central and Southern Railways, the authorities resorted to the technique of dividing the workers and then utilised them against the others. And the instruments of torture and harassment were applied against all of them in a same manner in case of even little opposition. Physical, financial, mental pressurisations were combinedly employed against the railway men. Interestingly, Times of India reported that a few senior students of the Indian Institute of Technology at Pawai were being trained by the Central Railways as motormen, the students had volunteered their services. On the other, the railway authorities in various zones had been continuously warned the absentees that any disruption of railway services would not be accepted and lead to removal from service, resultantly 60 employees were sacked from their jobs (Times of India, 11.5.1974; p.1). Mrs.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Miss. Kabita Mukherjee who is a retired railway employee and a member of Mazdoor Union, on 10.01.17 at Pensioners' Association, N.F. Railways, NJP Unit, Gatebazar, Siliguri at 1.00 p.m.

Gandhi had stated that the government had suggested the railway trade union leaders to accept the “three point” formula but they rejected it. These trade union leaders were only interested in releasing the arrested leaders including Fernandes and not to settle the issue. To her the Government had tried utmost to avoid the strike but the trade unions did not make any proper and constructive suggestions to be accepted by the authority rather they compelled the government to take a harsh step and it did not have any intention to confront with the working people. She regretted that the country’s bad economic condition was not realised by the workers and they well understood that their agitations had pushed up the prices of all the essential commodities and directly affected the countrymen’s livelihood in near future. But the Prime Minister assured that the existing wage-structure would be revised and the Government would try to reconsider rationally the entire matter. She regretted that it was the tactics of the opposition to diminish the impression of the ruling government. Therefore, the State was bound to intervene into the struggle and could not afford to agree with the demands of the workers because it would endanger the position of the national economic situation of the country.

The Times of India noted that the Bombay Police in the early hours of 13<sup>th</sup> May arrested one hundred and sixteen of the Western Railways staff of 165 motormen from public hall - Goregaon for refusing to return to work; they also arrested the “guards, two assistant station masters and a ticket collector” who were remained to jail custody when they denied to resume to work. Only five of the Western Railways motormen had reported for work; on the Central Railways too five of the two hundred and twenty motormen were working (Times of India, 13.5. 1974; p.1). The Government had all along insisted the railway trade union leaders to withdraw the strike and then the talks or negotiations on the issues raised by the workers would be discussed and it would try to resolve the problem. On the other hand, the government was definitely worried and anxious about the railway strike and wanted to prevent it in one way or the other. The authority was more interested in continuing the essential services of the railways because it involves huge financial loss otherwise the national economy would suffer a massive loss. Thus, the government also became disappointed with the attitude of the trade union leaders who wanted to disrupt industrial peace. The Parliamentary Affairs Committee from the very beginning had decided its strategy and finalised its possible steps to meet the strike and their main purpose was to

confine the struggle in small area or only localise the struggle, so that it should not have any impact or affect the country's broader interests. The Hindu examined that "the threat of Railway Strike" had focused both 'national and international attention on the paralysing effects of the present inflationary situation on the Indian economy and the widespread political discontent that was being created by the growing shortages and spiralling prices'. This incident was definitely going to affect the flow of foreign aid to strengthen the economy (The Hindu, 5.5.1974; p.1). The government had the hope that the political parties especially the left parties would be able to influence the leaders to avert the strike, at least should show their strong disapproval to the militant approach of the workers' struggle. And the failure of which led to the announcement of different legal actions such as break in services, postponement of the date of increment and forfeiture of all earned leave, suspension, removal from services etc. and above all they declared the strike as 'illegal'. Saktimoy Kanjilal<sup>64</sup>, Chief Coordinator of Data Processing Department, posted in Maligaon Head Quarter was served the notice of removal from the service for participation in the illegal strike of the railway trade unions. He was the General Secretary of UCR in Maligaon Branch. He informed that the N.F Railway management released a removal notice which stated that the staff, convicted for violence and intimidation were liable to dismissal from railway services. He pointed out that N.F. Railways made several false statements against the railwaymen, regarding the cases of sabotages or incidents of violence which in actual practice did not even occur. The main intention behind this attitude was to project how the railwaymen had been destroying the national property and to mislead the public. Kanjilal mentioned in this connection that huge number of Territorial Army was deployed and the personnel took the charge of running trains and tried to maintain other railway activities of this area. Railway management kept continuous vigil on the railway tracks and a plenty of Home Guards were mobilised for this purpose. CRPF was the main driving force to control the unpleasant environment and keep the country's wheel move. The presence of CRPF was felt everywhere from Maligon Zonal Head Quarter, Guwahati Railway Station, different offices and not the least in the railway colonies of the entire North Eastern Hill regions especially in the state of Assam. The Hindu reported that on 9.5. 1974 in a message to the

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Sri Saktimoy Kanjilal on 31.8. 18 at the office of the Pensioners' Association, Maligaon Branch, N.F. Railways at Pandu, Guwahati at 10:30 a.m.

RPF members, L.N. Mishra said that certain anti-social and anti-national forces were at work to bring about chaos and the strike at the very roots of the democracy (The Hindu, 9.5. 1974; p.1). As Kanjilal had mentioned about the duties of the Home Guards, Railway authorities had also referred to the movement of the Home Guards in its instructions. “Vide Sl. No. 15, N.F. Railways have sought the Board’s advice whether the cost of the Home Guards deputed for manning the level crossings should also be reimbursed to the State Government. The case may be submitted to the Board for orders in the matter so that the position may be clarified to the N.F. Railways and others” (Branch: (LR) II Nov 776/File No. ELU/74/571/5, 1-27; Ministry of Railways). Another letter was issued by the Ministry of Railways and the Railway Board to the General Managers regarding the financial arrangements between the state governments and the Railways for the expenditure incurred by the latter in connection with the railway strike in May, 1974.

B.C. Mishra, Joint Director, Security released a copy of the secret circular Letter No. 8/12/74 Poll (DI) dated the 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1975 for information and guidance for dealing with claims to be preferred the state governments in connection with the security arrangements made by them during the last railway strike in May 1974 [File No. 72-Sec/CA/123/2; 4.5. 75; Ministry of Railways (Railway Board), Government of India). Apart from these letters issued by the Ministry of Railways, Ministry of Home Affairs too, released letters to the Chief Secretaries of all state government/Union Territory Administration (except Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Andaman & Nicobar, Arunachal Pradesh Lakshadweep and Mizoram). A.C. Sen, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India declared that the state government had to take measures to maintain the law and order situations and ensure minimum rail traffic and movement of essential commodities and adequate protection for vital installation on sensitive areas in the railway network and the government expected that law and order must be maintained by the state governments but the ‘special load of extraordinary responsibilities’ during the railway strike and the very substantial financial obligations incurred by them in connection with the railway strike, the government had decided to take some burden that the expenditure on the special security measures undertaken to protect the railway property and staff, had been shared by the Ministry of Railways (Railway Board) [Secret File No. 8/12/74-Poll (DT) Government of India; Ministry of Home Affairs; New Delhi – 110001, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1975). All these letters had

included that “the expenditure on Central Forces i.e., BSF, CRP and Indo Tibetan Police would be met by the concerned organisations and reimbursement is not to be claimed from the railways. These letters had also highlighted the immense use of armed and reserve forces that had been initiated by the government to meet the railway workers’ struggle in 1974. Large amount of expenditure was incurred for mobilising central forces throughout the country. Huge security measures and safety means especially in the border areas were used to safeguard the railways. Government was of the opinion that it was not against the workers’ struggle, it served a larger interests and purposes.

The Government claimed that it was prepared for negotiated settlement but took all the measures to fight back with the working class of the country. Not only that M.N. Berry expressed his deep gratitude to the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Minister Govind Narain for their help, assistance and support, so very promptly and effectively as extended to the management of Railway Board during the secret crisis of May 1974 strike. (D.O. No 74/E (LU)/ST/1/5, New Delhi; 1.6. 1974), Railway Board had made every possible effort, which could keep the wheels of the transport industry moving. M. N. Berry appreciated all the secretaries, officers, supervisors, men of the departments concerned for their dedicated and strenuous devotion to duty during the railway strike in May 1974. The Rail Board had directed all the Zonal Railways to terminate the casual workers before the strike started. Approximately two lakhs casual workers were involved in the strike. The railway authority had resorted to the weapon of dismissal of the entire casual workers throughout the country. Ajit Kumar Saha, was a casual labour worked in the Katihar Division, since the year 1972 and member of Mazdoor Union he remembered that on 22<sup>nd</sup> April one day before the indefinite strike notice was served by the Action Committee of all the Zonal NCCRS, all the casual workers in Katihar Division were served removal notice and management had asked them to wait for next call. The management clarified their dismissal stating that they had only discharged the surplus workers. According to Saha railway authority became vindictive during this time and this large scale retrenchment or dismissal of casual workers was due to the fear of involving in the course of the movement of the railway working class. Specially the casual workers who had been provided temporary status on working continuously for six

months were charged for violating the Industrial Dispute Act, 1947.<sup>65</sup> Similarly the judgement of Kerala High Court reveal that such cases of removal were common in all the Zonal and Divisional Railways. The temporary and casual – these categories of workers were terminated mainly on the following two grounds:

- i) these employees were removed from service because they were alleged to have participated in an illegal strike. They were, therefore, entitled to the Protection of Article 311(2) of the Constitution;
- ii) the termination are also bad for violation of Section 25F of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 [Branch: E (D and A)/July 83/47; File No. E (D and A) 74 RG6-55, Sl. No. 1-15B (93)].

In West Bengal the Chief Minister Siddhartha Sankar Ray had tightly handled the situation. The Army and CRPF had been stepped in the state to meet any serious disturbances in connection with the railwaymen's strike which assisted to tighten the security of the state. Hindustan Standard reported on May 8<sup>th</sup> that the army had expressed its preferences to “look after the signals and other specific technical jobs rather than policing the railway tracks which should better be left to the police and CRP”. Unprecedented security measures were taken. “Every inch of the railway track” was guarded by the armed ‘patrols moving on foot’ (Hindustan Standard, 8.5.1974; p.1). The repression was extremely brutal, especially in Eastern Railways and in some parts of North Bengal. In West Bengal, the Congress looked upon the campaign as part of its continuing efforts to crush the CPM and the Naxalites, while in Bihar the mass movement against Congress government in the state was gaining momentum; Youth Congress gangs figured prominently in reports of violence against railway workers and their families (Sherlock, 2001; p. 383). Large number of police, Home Guards, CRP, BSF etc. had taken over the charge of the railway colonies and continued their terror attack throughout the strike days. The railway colonies in New Jalpaiguri area the midpoint of Eastern and N.F. Railways where the leaders of trade unions met each other or exchanged their views or strategy of actions. It was hit by repeated attacks by the police and armed forces. Peoples' Democracy recorded that in Tinsukia, Assam not a single striker had

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Sri Ajit Kumar Saha on 4.1. 2017 at the Office of the Mazdoor Union, Siliguri Junction Branch at 7-30 p.m.

been permitted to draw his rations. Even those inside the jails were facing the same horrified behaviour. In NJP jail, for instance, where hundreds of strikers were kept, no food grains had been given even the food brought by their families, were kept by the jail authorities and not given to them. It was nothing but trying literally starve the workers into submission (Peoples' Democracy, 26.5. 1974; p. 6).

Mughalsarai, Jamalpur, Gaya were the worst affected places of brute force and terror attack. Lot of incidents took place during these twenty days of the railway strike, everywhere in the country. The Railway Board at Zonal and Divisional levels had tried their best to move the wheels. Government to a large extent was unnecessarily harsh, brute and rather barbaric while suppressing the railwaymen's struggle. New Age reporters noticed that in Kanchrapara railway colony "even a so called loyal employee could not sure that he was immune from police brutality. Abdul Khair was an old man working as a peon at Yard Masters' Office and did not join the strike but as his son, a points man had joined the strike, the father had fallen in the prey of the police torture. Resultantly when the poor old man heard that the reporters came to visit the colony, he became so tensed and panicked that he escaped his quarter through a broken window (New Age, 26.5.1974; p.6). Large number of workers were removed from the railway services in West Bengal for joining the 'illegal strike'. Kailash Lala, Assistant Station Master in Alipurduar Junction was removed from service for this reason. He was not even entitled to get any pay and allowances for this period (7<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 to 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1974) as he was absent from his duty. The consequences of break in service for participating in the illegal strike had been operated in such cases. He was revoked to his duty on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1974 by the order of S.K. Suden, the Divisional Superintendent, N.F. Railways, Alipurduar Junction (Memo No. E/SEC/Strike/PI/APDJ/74, dated 17.6.1974). Bimalendu Chakraborty too was removed from his office for joining the strike and he was arrested under MISA during the National Emergency in 1975. Chakraborty was of the opinion that it was really shocking that how and when the railwaymen became the enemy and threat to internal security of their own country though they were fighting for their few economic rights to live a healthy life. He exclaimed even after more than forty years of the struggle, that almost all the local leaders of the railway trade unions who were arrested under MISA or DIR during the National Emergency in 1975 could not still find any solid reason behind the reactions of the democratic government like

India. He was also served the circular of detention on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1975 by the District Magistrate of Dibrugarh, B.C. Gogoi, after “considering the relevant records” it was necessary to detain Bimalendu Chakraborty under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act 1971, for dealing effectively with the Emergency (Notice of the District Magistrate...Dibrugarh District, No. D. CM, 56/75/5, dated August 21, 1975).

Apart from this action taken by the government, armed forces including the CRPF immensely were unleashed to terrorise the railway employees and their families in the railway colonies, as Hindustan Standard reported on 12<sup>th</sup> May that many family members of striking workers had been forced to vacate their quarters in the railway colonies in the suburban’s in New Delhi; after visiting the Kishanganj railway colonies, D.L. Sengupta and T.B. Thengadi both MPs said that “CRPF was hunting and chasing the innocent employees throughout the night”, several incidents were reported regarding the serious injuries caused due to the severe beating of employees including their wives and children, ‘water supply’ and ‘electric connections’ to half of the colony had been cut off by the railway administration from 6 a.m. morning on 8th May, 1974 to 8 p.m. night on 9th May, because these were managed and provided by the authority. Peculiarly, electricity was not supplied up to the end of the agitation in the entire colony and it was quite inhuman to stay in such an atmosphere of scorching heat in the summer month of May. Police randomly detained the railway employees but these arrested workers were released at 12-14 k.m. away from their working place at odd hours of night (Hindustan Standard, 12.5. 1974; p.5). In Madhya Pradesh, cases of torture of women and repression were enormous. Termination, removal and brutal torture were the features of every railway offices, junctions and colonies. CRP raided the colonies randomly; entered the quarters of the employees at the mid nights, Section 144 was implemented. Atrocities against the staff occurred in all the divisional offices, junctions, marshalling yards etc. Chief Minister of Haryana, Bansi Lal had said to the Press that they had got the instructions from the Central Government to deal with the railway strike but he believed that they should deal the strike in their own way “and that probably explained why the impact of the railway strike” was minimum here (The Statesman, 20.5.1974; p.4). In Punjab the railway workers were terrified by the brutal actions and forces which the authority had let loose on them. Railwaymen were mercilessly assaulted and beaten and left as they soaked into blood. Not a single railway colony was

spared from torture and became the centres of armed attack and police oppression where the children too became the victim. here. A reign of tyranny had prevailed during the entire period of the strike. In Rajasthan too similar situation persisted. In Kota, the police resorted to lathi charge and tear gassing when the workers gathered at the railway colony to demand that the quarters should not be vacated till the arrested workers were released. The number of arrests had gone upto 1300 (New Age, 26.5.1974; p.7). In support of these reactions, the Central Government had propagated different types of wild stories. It was claimed that the government had evidence of plans of large scale sabotage, passing of money from foreign sources, engaging trained saboteurs etc. It was also claimed that in the face of such incriminating intelligence reports, the Political Affairs Committee of the Cabinet decided to order the arrests of the NCCRS leaders and striking employees of the railway industry (Link, 12.5.1974; p. 10).

The workers demanded that the increased productivity of the industry leading to increased profit must meet the requirement of the railway employees. The Railway Board claimed that “the improved performance had largely made possible by more efficient means of traction, sophisticated operational gear and improved communications and not by better input on the part of the average workers” (Times of India, 28.5.1974; p.6). Authority from the very beginning had tried to show that the workers’ demands were not justified and the government was not able to accomplish them. However, the outcome of the strike was the removal of approximately one lakh railwaymen, fifty percent of which were casual and temporary, almost thirty thousands were suspended and more than nine lakhs faced breaks in service. The relation between the employees and employer became bitter and industrial output marked its stagnation in productivity. Huge victimisation, atrocities, torture, repressive policy of the government during the 1974 railway general strike halted the natural course of industrial harmony.

Apart from all these attacks and counter attacks by the trade unions and the authorities, the strike of May 1974 symbolised the unity and solidarity of the working class of the country on the one hand and on the other, as Samaddar had nicely illustrated that “it was a lesson in how to run the government and manage a crisis, through sincerity and devotion to duty”, “involvement of civil administration even in case of strike, presence of an energetic and supportive higher authority”, “methodical functioning of the executive

magistrate, proper planning to restore services and combat obstacles such as miscreants cutting motor cables”, clarity of the objective that the train services had to be resumed by any means (Samaddar, 2015; p. 42). This strike was a rare event in the Indian political culture because both the workers’ activism and government’s reactions during the strike period had never occurred in contemporary India – widespread participation of the workers, their militant attitude, intensity of the struggle had crossed all boundaries and touched the hearts of the millions not only in the country but all over the world. It was perceived as the revolt of the downtrodden or the working mass against power and authoritarianism. The growing militant approach of the working class was viewed as one of the few reasons for imposition of National Emergency in June, 1975. Transformation in consciousness and post colonial nature of administration had played an important role in this movement.