

**THE RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE OF 1974:  
IMPACT IN THE EASTERN AND NORTH EAST  
FRONTIER RAILWAY ZONES**

**Thesis Submitted to the University of North Bengal  
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**Doctor of Philosophy  
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**by  
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March, 2019**

## Declaration

I declare that the thesis entitled **THE RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE OF 1974 : IMPACT IN EASTERN AND NORTH EAST FRONTIER RAILWAY ZONES** has been prepared by me under the guidance of **Dr. Arun Kanti Jana**, Professor of Political Science, University of North Bengal. No part of this thesis has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellowship previously.

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This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**THE RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE OF 1974 : IMPACT IN THE EASTERN AND NORTH EAST FRONTIER RAILWAY ZONES**” by **Sanghamitra Choudhury** under my supervision is an original piece of research work which is being submitted to the University of North Bengal for the award of the Doctor of Philosophy. To the best of my knowledge the thesis has not been submitted by the candidate anywhere else for the award of any other degree. The thesis may kindly be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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# **THE RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE OF 1974: IMPACT IN THE EASTERN AND NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY ZONES**

**Sanghamitra Choudhury**

**Abstract of the PhD Thesis Submitted to the University of North Bengal,  
2019**

Indian Railways started its journey in 1853. It is the single largest state owned and state operated system in Asia. It has contributed enormously in the making of modern India. The railways employed a large number of worker's and worked at its maximum capacities after independence. Enormous traffic volumes both passengers and goods traffic compelled the workers to work without limiting the time, which exhausted them largely. It was really inhuman to work for 16-18 hours per day continuously. The Central Government employees abide by the recommendations of the Central Pay Commissions. During 1960s to 1970s Indian economy was worst hit by the inflationary crisis, price rise of essential commodities which led to fall in real wages. Hence sporadic labour unrests became common in different parts of the country.

1960, 1968 and 1974 were the years of major struggles launched by the Central Government employees and especially by the railway workers and amongst these three the most violent and strong was the strike of 1974 led by the railwaymen. This strike lasted for three weeks. The railway workers asserted their power and strength over authoritarianism and had emerged as a symbol of solidarity and unity of the entire working class of the country. It began on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 with a Charter of Demands which incorporated demands like wage parity with the workers of other public sector undertakings, need based minimum wage, revision of D.A. formula, bonus, working hours and some other issues. The government had brutally suppressed the railway workers' struggle by dismissing or removing them from services, arresting the workers even before the strike began, unleashing immense torture and harassment on the employees and their families.

## **The Research Questions**

Considering that the strike was the most important one in the country in our study we seek to answer some important questions related to the strike.

What were the grievances of the railway workers?

How did the railwaymen and their trade unions in the Eastern and N.F Railways prepare for an indefinite strike?

What was the situation that prevailed in the Eastern and N.F Railways during the strike days?

What were the impact of the May 1974 strike in the Eastern and N.F Railways?

How did the State react towards the working class struggle in India?

## **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to find out the reasons behind the strike of the Railway men in 1974 and certain other related questions. We intend to find out the grievances of the Railway men particularly in the two zones Eastern Railways and in the N.F Railways which led to the extreme decision to go for an indefinite general strike. The study also looks at the impact of the strike particularly in these two zones. We try to find out whether all the shades of opinion in the railway trade unions and the category unions had participated in the strike or not. It looks at the preparations of the trade unions for launching such an indefinite general strike throughout the country. It attempts to explain the nature of the 1974 railway strike. It looks at the situation that prevailed in the Eastern Railways and NF Railways during the strike days of May 1974. The present study also intends to measure the velocity of the strike action led by the Indian Railway men especially in these two zones. Another objective of this study is to demonstrate and analyse the reaction of the union government towards the movement or how the State had responded to the Railway men's demands and the strike which they have resorted to. It looks at the consequences of the Railway general strike in Eastern and N.F Railways.

## **Research Methodology and Data Collection**

The study required both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data are of different types. This study required oral information or oral history that we considered as the most significant resource for this research. We therefore, interacted with the participants in the strike. The opinions of the permanent and casual workers and union leaders of the Northeast Frontier Railways and Eastern Railways are the most valuable resource. Documentary sources were also used. The documents collected and used were government file, administrative reports, reports of governmental committees, peoples' accounts, reports of the public accounts, trade union publications, union records and pamphlets and other daily reports etc.

Apart from Primary data, this study required Secondary Data too. Although sources were limited, few books and articles were available on the railwaymen's struggle of 1974 such as, the articles of Biren Roy, Nabojyoti Chowdhury etc. And few articles written by Ranabir Samaddar, Krishna Ananth, Gopalakrishna etc. are really helpful in understanding the relevance of the strike. Stephen Sherlock's two works, one book and one article remain's the most important of all the works. Books and journals are available in the field of labour movement in general in India but not many researchers and historian's shade any light on the trade union movement in the railway industry. Few articles journals and magazines exists. Magazines provide valuable information in this field of study. Newspapers reports and periodicals during the period from August 1973 to June 1974 were another significant source of secondary data. These data such as books, journals, newspaper reports were collected from National Library, Kolkata, Jawaharlal Nehru University library, New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Mueseum and Library, New Delhi, Library of University North Bengal.

## **The Chapters**

The study has been arranged into six main chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion which are also chapters. The first chapter proper describes the industrialisation process in India and the emergence of industrial working class in the

colonial period since independence till 1974. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the establishment and growth of railway industry and the emergence of industrial workers in colonial India. The Second section of the chapter describes the process of industrialisation specifically the process of the development of railway industry since independence till 1974. The third section of the study attempts to look at the process of development and consolidation of the railway workers as an industrial working class. This chapter provides a brief history of the railway workers' oppression in the colonial period.

Chapter two explains the emergence and nature of workers' resistances in the Indian Railways since its inception up to 1974. This chapter enquires the reasons behind the workers' grievances and their discontentment in the railway industry till 1974. It is divided into two sections. The first section analyses the growth of labour unrests in Indian Railways in the colonial era till independence. The second section of this chapter observed the nature and development of trade union movement in the Indian Railways from 1947 to 1974. This section has also attempted to find out the reasons of workers' resentments which compelled them to form category wise unions based on craft sentiments. This chapter looks at the causes of workers' resistances in the railway industry since the beginning of the industry up to 1973.

The third chapter is divided into two sections. The first section has focused its attention on the grievances of the railway workers which forced them to revolt against their authority. It also discusses on how the railwaymen had prepared themselves to launch an indefinite and general strike throughout the country. The second section has tried to observe the situation that persisted in the different zones of the railways all over the country during the strike days in May 1974. Chapter three tries to give the answer to the question i.e., 'the reasons behind the grievances of the railwaymen' raised by this study, the grievances that compelled them to go for an indefinite strike.

The fourth chapter deals with the May 1974 strike in Eastern Railways. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to discuss the discontentment and grievances of the workers in the Eastern Railways. It also intends to elucidate the process of the preparations of the various trade unions in the Eastern Railways for launching a general and indefinite strike throughout the country. The

second section has dealt with the situation during the twenty days of strike in this zone. In the third section we analyse the impact of this struggle on the economic, political and social spheres of the country. Chapter four addresses the answer to the questions of strike preparations in E.R by the railwaymen and it gives an account of the situation that prevailed during the strike days and also the impact of the movement in this zone.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Railway Workers' Strike of May 1974 in the Northeastern Frontier Railways (N.F Railways). It is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the grievances of the railwaymen in N.F Railways. It also tries to describe the preparation of the railway workers of this zone before the strike began and how the workers of N.F Railways along with the other zones had prepared themselves for the general strike. The second section of this study intended to discuss the strike situation throughout the N.F. Railways during the long twenty days of the strike. The third section we mainly dealt with the impact of the strike in the N.F. Railways. In this section we analyse the consequences and effects of these long days of workers' movement in the entire N.F. Railways. Chapter five attempt to give answers to the questions regarding the preparations and situations of the railwaymen's struggle in N. F Railways. It also answers the question of impact of the strike in this Zone.

Chapter six deals with the response and reactions of the Railway Board in particular and the Indian State in general towards the strike of May 1974. This chapter has two sections. The first section examines the reasons behind the attitude of the Railway Board towards the railway workers' resistances in this industry and other industrial sectors since independence till 1974. The second section of this study is an attempt to unfold the responses and reactions of the government as well as the Railway Board towards the railwaymen's struggle in May 1974. It also has tried to find out the causes behind the anti labour attitude of the government of India. The question 'what was the attitude of the State towards the railwaymen's strike?' raised by this study has been answered in this chapter. After having done all that we have attempted a summary and conclusion at the end of the study.

## **Researcher's Acknowledgements**

This thesis is on the strike by the Railwaymen which took place in 1974. This is rightly considered as the most heroic battle that was fought by the railway workers after independence. In conducting this study I have received assistance from many. I would be failing in my responsibility if I do not acknowledge the assistance of others in conduction this piece of research. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the UGC, Regional Office, Kolkata for granting me the Teacher's Fellowship so that I can complete my thesis.

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*Sanghamitra Choudhury*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>01.</b> List of Tables and Appendices	: i
<b>02.</b> Abbreviation	: v
<b>03.</b> Chapter I : Introduction	: 01
<b>04.</b> Chapter II : Industrialization in India: The Development of the Indian Railways till 1974	: 41
<b>05.</b> Chapter III : Workers' Resistances in the Indian Railways: 1845 to 1973	: 93
<b>06.</b> Chapter IV : Workers' Resistance in the Indian Railways: The All India General Strike of May 1974	: 141
<b>07.</b> Chapter V : The Railwaymen's Strike of 1974: Impact on Eastern Railways	: 183
<b>08.</b> Chapter VI : The Strike and its Impact in the Northeast Frontier Railways	: 227
<b>09.</b> Chapter VII : The State and the Railway Strike of May 1974	: 285
<b>10.</b> Chapter VII : Summary and Conclusion	: 322
Bibliography	: 351

## List of Tables

	<b>Page No.</b>
01. Capital expenditure on Indian Railways, 1849-50 to 1877-78 (Pound)	: 45
02. Railway Systems in India 1914-18	: 46
03. Workshop employment other than at Lahore, North Western Railway, 1925	: 50
04. Real Wages (1890-95 = 100)	: 53
05. Railroad Workforce on December 31, 1890 by Category and Percentage	: 54
06. Fate of Strikes, 1921-46	: 55
07. Rolling Stock Requirement for Renewals 1951-56	: 59
08. Estimated outlay during First Five Year Plan	: 61
09. Programmes of Expenditure on the Railways Plan	: 62
10. Additional Originating Traffic	: 64
11. Distribution of allotment under Second Five Year Plan	65
12. Railway Development Programme under Third Five Year Plan	67
13. Growth of Freight Traffic on the Railways since 1960-61	68
14. Outlay for Railways	69
15. Additions and Replacements in Rolling Stock Programme	70
16. Growth rates in Industry and Agriculture	71
17. Selected Economic Indicators	72
18. Industrial disputes in India from 1951-62	77
19. Real Earnings	79
20. Class wise Distribution of Railway Employees (QOS)	80
21. Department-wise Employment in Indian Railways as on March 31, 1973	81
22. Annual Earnings of Indian Railways for 1971-72	83

	<b>Page No.</b>
23. Rate of Dearness Allowance (D.A.) paid to Central Government Employees	84
24. Annual Earnings per Employees in Government Railways	85
25. Minimum Monthly Wages in Comparable Public Sector Industries	86
26. Percentages of Total Staff cost to Working Expenses, Gross Traffic Receipts and Net Revenue Receipts	87
27. Index Number of Money Wages, Real Wages and Labour Productivity	88
28. Comparative study of Average Wages in Railways with other manufacturing Industries in U.S.A, U.K. and Japan	89
29. Employment in the Railway Workshops of Lahore, 1870 – 1960	102
30. Labour Disputes 1931-1936	102
31. The membership of the railway unions	103
32. Mobilisation of Employment during 1936 to 1944	104
33. Movement of Prices during 1914-1918	106
34. Growth of membership of the Unions in different Industries	108
35. No. of Industrial Disputes during 1962-1972.	112
36. Number of Disputes during the period 1961 to 1972	113
37. Percentage Distribution of Disputes by Causes	114
38. Union membership, 1947-1970	115
39. Numbers of Registered Trade Unions during the Years 1951-52, 1956-57 to 1970	118
40. Number of Workers Involved per Dispute from 1961 - 1975	120
41. Industrial conflicts in the year 1947 to 1949	121
42. Affiliation fees of Railway Unions	126
43. Categorisation of the workers in the Railway Industry	127
44. Features of IF and IR Unions in Southern Railway, 1975	130
45. Department-wise Employment in Indian Railways	132

	<b>Page No.</b>
46. Number of Staff Councils in the Railway Industry	134
47. Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers	145
48. Real Earnings (Base: 1961=100)	146
49. Industrial Injuries (1961 to 1975)	147
50. Man days lost during 1970 – 1974	158
51. Tonnes originating in 1973-74 (in millions)	212
52. Selected Rail Road Statistics, 1950-51 to 2004-2005	233

## **List of Appendices**

- Appendix A: Interviews Photos with the Participants of the 1974 Strike
- Appendix B: Letters From NCCRS Convenor to the Prime Minister (May, 1974)
- Appendix C: Letter From Asst. General Secretary of AIRF to the Director, Establishment of the Railway Board (March, 1974)
- Appendix D: Letter From General Secretary of AIRF to the Minister of Railways ( March, 1974)
- Appendix E: Order of the Railway Minister to the Chief Ministers (All State Governments May, 1974)
- Appendix F: Resolution of Withdrawal of May 1974 Strike by the NCCRS (May, 1974)
- Appendix G: Revocation of removal Order (June, 1974) by the N.F Railways to the Employees of Alipurduar junction
- Appendix H: Arrest Order by the District Magistrate of Dibrugargh to a N.F Railway Employee (1975, under MISA )

# Abbreviations

AIDEF = All India Defence Employees Federation

AILRSA = All India Loco Running Staff Association

AIR = All India Radio

AIRF = All India Railwaymen's Federation

AITUC = All India Trade Union Congress

AIREC = All India Railway Employees Federation

BNR = Bengal Nagpur Railway

BMS = Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha

BRI = Bridge Route Inspector

BSF = Border Security Force

CGEC = Central Government Employees' Confederation

CEG = Corporate Enterprise Group

CID = Crime Investigation Department

CITU = Centre for Indian Trade Union

CLW = Chittaranjan Locomotive Works

CRPF = Central Reserve Police Force

CPI = Communist Party of India

CPI(M) = Communist Party of India (Marxist)

DA = Dearness Allowance

DHR = Darjeeling Himalayan Railways

DIR = Defence of India Rule

DLW = Diesel Locomotive Work

DREU = Dakshin Railway Employees' Union

EIREU = East Indians Railway Employees' Union  
EIR = East India Railways  
ER = Eastern Railways  
ESMA = Essential Services Maintenance Act  
FB = Forward Block  
GIPR = Great Indian Peninsular Railways  
GRP = Government Railway Police  
HMS= Hind Mazdoor Sabha  
IC = Industrial Categorical  
ICF = Integral Coach Factory  
IF = Industrial Federal  
INTUC = Indian National Trade Union Congress  
INRWF = Indian National Railway Workers' Federation  
IR = Indian Railways  
IR = Industrial Regional  
JAC = Joint Action Committee  
JCA = Joint Committee of Action  
JCM = Joint Consultative Machinery  
JS = Jana Sangh  
LIC = Life Insurance Corporation  
M and SMREU = Madras and Southern Marhatta Railway Employees' Union  
MISA = Maintenance of Internet Security Act  
NCCRS = National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle  
NFIR = National Federation of Indian Railwaymen  
NFR = Northeast Frontier Railways  
NFPTE = National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees

NJP = New Jalpaiguri  
PWI = Permanent Way Inspector  
PNM = Permanent Negotiating Machinery  
PSU = Public Sector Undertaking  
RAW = Research and Analytical Wing  
RPF = Railway Police Force  
RSP = Revolutionary Socialist Party  
SER = South Eastern Railways  
SI = Signalling Inspector  
SIR = Southern Indian Railway  
SP = Socialist Party  
SR = Southern Railways  
TA = Territorial Army  
UCR = United Committee for Railwaymen  
UTUC = United Trade Union Congress  
WREU = Western Railway Employees Union

# Chapter I

## Introduction

Indian Railways started its journey in 1853. It is the single largest state owned and state operated system in Asia. It has contributed enormously in the making of modern India. It had tied the vast population of the country into a single thread. The Indian Railways is also the heart and life blood of the country which has contributed in the growth of the industrial sector and the country's economy. The Indian Railways however was not able to bring any change or develop the livelihood of the working people. The Indian Railways, even after the transfer of power had followed the same pattern of structural and financial policies which the British administrators had adopted to manage the industry in the country. After independence the policy makers of the country realised that for rapid economic development, the transportation industry, especially the railways had to play a very significant role. For transporting goods especially raw materials from agricultural belt to the factories or up to the production units, the railways were much needed. The railways always transported finished products to the markets.

The railways worked at its maximum capacities after independence. Enormous traffic volumes both passengers and goods traffic compelled the workers to work without limiting the time, which exhausted them largely and especially working in the coastal and mountain areas where weather conditions fluctuate very frequently and during the rainy season of heavy rainfall. It was really inhuman to work for 16-18 hours per day continuously. The Central Government employees abide by the recommendations of the Central Pay Commissions. During 1960s to 1970s Indian economy was worst hit by the inflationary crisis, price rise of essential commodities which led to fall in real wages. Hence sporadic labour unrests became common in different parts of the country.

1960, 1968 and 1974 were the years of major struggles launched by the Central Government employees and especially by the railway workers and amongst these three the most violent and strong was the strike of 1974 led by the railwaymen. This strike lasted for three weeks. The railway workers asserted their power and strength over authoritarianism

and had emerged as a symbol of solidarity and unity of the entire working class of the country. It began on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 with a Charter of Demands which incorporated demands like wage parity with the workers of other public sector undertakings, need based minimum wage, revision of D.A. formula, bonus, working hours and some other issues. The government had brutally suppressed the railway workers' struggle by dismissing or removing them from services, arresting the workers even before the strike began, unleashing immense torture and harassment on the employees and their families.

But the railwaymen had considered this strike as a successful struggle of the trade unions because it exhibited spontaneous participation of the rank and file workers, ranging from skilled to unskilled, educated to illiterate, lower to higher income workers and revealed the authoritarian nature of administration of the Indian democratic government. It also showed the efforts of organisation, power of cooperation and coordination which were achieved all over the country and touched the vast population of the subcontinent without limiting the geographical boundary of the nation. The twenty days long strike had totally halted the economic and political pace of the country. Railways had suffered a loss of one hundred and fifty crores, people faced huge inconveniences, prices of essential commodities had soared like anything, normal, daily life of the Indians was disrupted, as power stations were not able to provide required amount of electricity to the local areas due to the immobility of the railway traffic.

After independence in India the working class movement had been led by four different centres of the trade unions; All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and the Centre for Trade Unions (CITU). The AITUC was the oldest national trade union formed in October 1920 but it faced several splits. CITU was the result of this split in 1970. In the railway industry the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) was the first organised union founded in 1925 and it was affiliated to the AITUC but it left the affiliation in 1929. AIRF was mainly dominated by the socialists. There was another prominent trade union which was active in the railway front e.g., National Federation for Indian Railwaymen (NFIR) controlled by the Congress. Indian Railways were divided into nine zones. The railway trade unions were not independent but were guided and directed by their political parties.

They never opposed the decisions of the authority for their own interest to remain in their position. Interestingly the state had provided the trade unions a legal platform to voice the workers' demands. The state perceived that the trade unions must act at the medium between the management and the workers to maintain industrial peace and healthy relation. The trade unions were supposed to satisfy both the authority and the labour to work and co-operate each other for industrial harmony. The trade unions in this country had the immense pressure from both the parties – e.g., to maintain its support base it needed the workers' assistance and to sustain in its legitimate position, they required to negotiate with the management.

After independence the most important shift which took place in the railway industry, was in the locomotives. Powerful diesel and electric locomotives were introduced and steam engines were replaced and this process was almost complete by the end of the 1970s. Introduction of diesel locomotives not only replaced the system but also curtailed the scope of job opportunity. These issues influenced to a great extent and were responsible for the emergence and growth of craft sentiment or categorical councils or craft based associations in the railway industry. There were a number of such craft based unions that existed in the railways. e.g., All India Station Masters' Association, The Guards' Council, Indian Railways Signal and Telecommunication Staff Associations etc., but the most important of these, was the All India Loco Running Staff Association (AILRSA) which was the amalgamation of these craft unions of the loco staff in the Railways. AILRSA had launched various movements which included strikes, go slows, mass sick leave, work to rule and the most significant of them was the strikes of 1973 August and December.

The diverse type of works generated diverse types of discontentment's which were mainly economic in character and the others type of discontentment were the unfavourable working and living conditions, working hours etc. The workers had huge grievances regarding the wage structure, bonus, working hours and several other local issues. And these gave rise to craft based category wise unions which launched a series of agitations and some of which got success too. In this situation the crisis in working class unity was noticed. The situation was that the railway workers while getting disenchanted with the reformist leadership of the AIRF were in the danger of falling under the influence of the category-wise Associations. Meantime, some changes in the AIRF leadership had been brought forward

and in its annual conference, George Fernandez was elected as the President of the union. In 1972-73, the entire period experienced a number of struggles and movements in the different sectors of Indian economy.

To identify the discontentment by the management was actually a very difficult task because railways involved multiple grades, occupations, hierarchical positions and the complex institutional structure spreading over the country – Zonal, Divisional and Local levels although joint consultative machineries were set up to settle the grievances of the workers. Trade unions must be the device of ventilating the workers' disappointments and voice the demands. But in the Indian Railways the trade union leaders always preferred to deal directly with the authority, not to move collectively. These kinds of responses from the recognised unions had increased the trouble among the rank and file workers. It led to frequent wildcat strikes that started to take place locally all over the country in all the railway zones on local primary issues and incidents, but sometimes they reflected excessive variety of resentments. Kerr finds that a strike in Bihar began on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971 when station masters, cabin men (signal cabins) and switchmen spontaneously quit work after the wife of a cabin man was assaulted by a member of the Railway Protection Force (RPF). In this incident nearly 20,000 employees of E.R had agitated and traffic services throughout the Eastern region was seriously disrupted. This agitation ended on 10th February when the management promised to take measures against the offending RPF personnel and no disciplinary action had been initiated against the strikers (Kerr, 2012; p.174).

According to labour historians the most significant and prominent among all strike actions that had ever taken place in the Indian Railways was the Railwaymen's Strike of May 1974. As Sherlock had put it "the 1974 general strike in the Indian Railways has entered the history and folklore of the greatest mobilisations in the history of organised labour movement in India (Sherlock, 2001; p.3). Some historians criticised the strike as a move of opportunism and petty game of money and power politics for those who treated these types of agitations as nothing but a source of prospect in political life and capturing power. It was held that in the grim of deep economic crisis of the country such agitations were nothing but the steps to dislocate the smooth functioning of the country's political process and the workers fell prey to the encouragement of the opportunistic revolutionary leadership of the trade unions. They used the semi-starving working class to a large extent to

serve the purposes of both the political parties – opposition and ruling party who had let the strike take place and created such an atmosphere that the strike became inevitable. Between the two recognised unions, NFIR had never played any optimistic role to project the resentments and demands of the workers or to fight against the authority. They never afforded to build any relation on the basis of consensus and as a result the railwaymen always confronted with the obstacles of loyalty and lack of class consciousness as a whole. AIRF also did not dare to go against the authorities in the fear of losing the recognition and tried to strike a balance between the two which annoyed the railwaymen and they became impatient due to the inactiveness of the trade unions.

At this juncture the leadership of the AIRF decided to form a common platform of the railwaymen of all political colours and had to bring them under one umbrella. National Coordination Committee of Railwaymen's Struggles (NCCRS) was formed to launch a mass movement for raising the demands of the railwaymen. It called a convention to unite all the railway unions – regional, zonal, local and categorical. For conducting day to day works, a smaller committee known as Action Committee was set up at all the levels of Zonal, Divisional and Local levels. The united platforms of railway trade unions, i.e., NCCRS gave an ultimatum to settle the demands or it would have gone for major nation-wide general strike for indefinite period from the first week of May. It urged the railwaymen to unite and bring absolute solidarity so that they could compel the railway management to discuss and accept their demands. But the government did not show any willingness to settle the issue. Rather it had started preparing itself and planned the strategies to combat the strike.

Some critics said that the government led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi had, to some extent let the strike happen. As Link stated that “the large number of steps announced by the Railway Minister”, L. N. Mishra to “meet the strike situation, make it evident that this was biggest strike action in the history of the Indian Railways since its inception” (Link, 12.5.1974; p.8). The government had raised questions regarding the position of the railway unions and the reasonableness of the workers' demands and thus in this situation the Railway strike became inevitable. The most peculiar and unethical step that the government had taken was the arrest of the President of NCCRS. George Fernandez on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1974. This attitude of the government was extremely contradictory and in contrast to their willingness of settling the issues with the railway trade unions in the negotiating table.

Indian Railways is known as the life line of the country. Hence the May 1974 general strike of twenty days had really halted the economic, social and political pace of the country. It might be the biggest struggle of the Indian working class involving nearly twenty lakh railwaymen. On the first day of the strike, it was found that no train had moved both from Howrah and Sealdah stations, the strike was complete. Sherlock had described that “throughout the Southern Railway, especially in Madras, workers left their posts and paralysed train services; ten thousand workers from the Integral Coach Factory at Perambur marched in procession to demonstrate outside the Southern Railway’s General Manager’s office, stopping only because they were obstructed by police; the press reported various kinds of actions at many different centres, including to name just a few, Lucknow, Amritsar, Kanpur, Jhansi, Ahmedabad, Izatnagar, Katihar, Ajmer and Jamalpur, the Coordinating Committee at Gorakhpur wrote that the “workers in the railway workshops at Jamalpur downed tools on 6<sup>th</sup> May when they heard their pay from the previous month was to be withheld” and there was a total strike in the case of N.F Railways from 7<sup>th</sup> May” (Sherlock, 2001; pp.363-64).

The impact of the strike was manifold and far reaching. It was estimated that the Railways had to bear the loss of one hundred and fifty crores. But although the railwaymen’s strike was of great importance and occupied a significant position in the entire history of labour movement of the country, still there is not much work in this area. The struggle was considered as a major industrial dispute of India and this would be understood by the way that as soon as it was called off the Political Affairs Committee of the Cabinet held a meeting and a threadbare discussion took place on the question of revision of wage structure of the railwaymen and the income of the industrial workers in general and central government employees under public sector undertakings. The Government gave its attention on the long ignored grievances and demands of the railwaymen.

Various incidents took place during the 1974 strike which should be brought into light. This study is on the railway workers movement of May 1974. Several general questions arise on the strike of 1974. The general questions which arise are: What were the reasons behind the railwaymen’s strike of May 1974? How did the railway workers and their trade unions prepare for launching an indefinite strike? How did the workers respond towards the strike call? How did the unrecognised unions reciprocate with the strike call of

recognised trade unions? How did the new generation of railway workforce respond to the strike call? How did the unorganised sector of railway industry get involved in this struggle? How did the workers of Eastern and Northeast Frontier Railways prepare themselves for a general strike? What was the situation in Eastern and N.F Railways during the strike period? What was the reaction of the State towards the strike? How did the Management of the Eastern and N.F Railways respond to the striking railway workers? What was impact of the strike in these two Zones? What was the political and economic background of the country at that point of time? What were the tasks of the trade unions after the withdrawal of the strike? Was the strike of 1974 a conscious effort of the working class in India? Though the above are the general questions which arise but the questions which have been taken up in this study are:

1. What were the grievances of the railway workers?
2. How did the railwaymen and their trade unions in the Eastern and N.F Railways prepare for an indefinite strike?
3. What was the situation that prevailed in the Eastern and N.F Railways during the strike days?
4. What were the impact of the May 1974 strike in the Eastern and N.F Railways?
5. How did the State react towards the working class struggle in India?

## **Literature Review**

Surprisingly answer to these questions or adequate answers to these questions are not found in the literature that is available on the strike of the railway men. There are plenty of works on the labour movement in India, but surprisingly there are only very few studies available on the Indian Railway strike of 1974. It seems that it had not attracted the attention of labour historians. There are very few books and articles on the subject, in this study we review few works written on the Railwaymen's struggle of May 1974 and few which are indirectly related to the subject. We review the books first and then the articles. The review is being

attempted to ascertain whether the questions which we have raised in the subject have been adequately answered or not.

Even after more than 35 years of the strike the book “The Indian Railways Strike of 1974: A Study of Power and Organised Labour” written by Stephen Sherlock remains the most significant one. It was published in 2001. Sherlock’s book is divided into three parts. The first part is entitled as “Coercion, Co-option and Revolt” and it contains four chapters—the first chapter introduces the entire work. In the second chapter Sherlock deals with the railway workers’ unions and management from 1925 to 1970. The chapter analyses three areas; e.g. (i) the railway men (ii) their unions and (iii) the railway management. Sherlock points out that railways was the first industry established in India by the colonial rulers in 1853. The work force after independence till 1975 consisted of nearly 15 lakhs regular and 2.8 lakhs casual workers. But strangely enough there were only two recognised unions that existed in the railway front to represent this huge number of workers. These two unions were All India Railway men’s Federation (AIRF) and the National Federation of Indian Railway men (NFIR). The central theme of this chapter is that as the Indian Railways were a public sector undertaking with a separate ministry, the management enjoyed more autonomy than any other sectors. The Railway Board took up the policy of inclusion of the railway unions into their management so that there should not arise any question of discontentment among the workers. But in the later part of the 1960s labour unrests in the railways increased like anything due to the irresponsible policies of the authority and inactiveness of the railway union.

In the third chapter Sherlock describes the emergence of category wise unions working in the railways during the period of 1970-72. The most important category union was the Loco Running Staff Association. Their association conducted several strike action mainly for the reduction of working hours as the loco staff were described as “continuous workers” of the railways. AIRLSA confronted with the police force and with the authority in many cases. During the period of 1970-72, Sherlock has shown that AIRLSA was successful in establishing itself throughout the country—central, zonal and local levels. The fourth chapter deals with different craft unionism that existed in the Indian Railways. The craft unions like station Master Association, or Indian Railways Signal and Telecommunication Staff etc. were actively operating in the railway front. They organised several actions during

the 1960s to 1970s. According to Sherlock the existence of craft unions meant that trade union movement in India was in its premature stage which must have a negative impact on the larger trade union or labour movement in the country.

The second part of the book – “Leadership and control” contains three chapters. First chapter discusses the responses of the trade union towards the workers grievances. Several category wise or craft unions played an effective role in building membership base throughout the country. NFIR never supported any strike struggle throughout the years of late 1960s for early 1970s. The leaders of NFIR were criticised for its inactiveness to meet the workers demands and also for its loyalty to the Management. The workers symbolised the NFIR as the powerless unit. In this chapter Sherlock also discusses the position of the AIRF. AIRF was also not able to build broad support base because from the very beginning it tried to keep personal relationship with the individual workers. But it also tried to change its attitude after observing the success of category unions. Sherlock examined how AIRF had prepared itself for a bigger action and tried to claim its class identity.

In the second chapter Sherlock tries to locate the position of the management and the workers offensive of 1973-74. The most import offensive of the workers was the existence of clear discrimination between the common workforce and the supervisory level though we know that the Indian Railways were a state owned concern. Worker skilled or semiskilled or unskilled did never get promotion at the managerial or supervisory level. Railway Board recruited the high officials from outside. Parallel discontentment also grew among the officials due to the unwanted interference of the politicians in the railway policy making process and administration.

The Third chapter explains the Herculean tasks of uniting 15 lakhs permanent and 2.8 lakhs casual workers by the recognised unions. It was really a difficult job to bring all these workers into a common platform for launching any major movement. Therefore they had engaged themselves in motivating the workers by bringing several issues like deteriorating economic conditions of the country in 1973-74. AIRF decided to launch a general strike in 1974. Thus, the AIRF took a resolution for strengthening its organisational structure and to unite all the unions existed in the railways - craft, category – central, zonal, local. AIRF wanted to bring all the category unions into its purview due to their recent

success in 1973. Sherlock showed that the unity ultimately was achieved in the early months of 1974.

The third part of the book entitled “Workers, Unions and The State” consists of three chapters. The first one deals with the nature of the struggle launched by the workers during 8<sup>th</sup> May to 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974. It describes the nature and extent of the repression unleashed by the Government. Sherlock stated that National Coordination committee for Railwaymen’s struggle was formed on 27<sup>th</sup> February to unite all the trade unions and their members for the preparations of a general strike. And Sherlock had shown that NCCRS was successful and over it lakh of workers engaged in public utility department united together to launch a joint action against the authority. Sherlock pictures the scene of different railway stations, workshops, movement of trains, attendance of the workers etc. He analysed how this strike struggle of the Indian railway men halted the heart beat and life blood of the national economy. The Government implemented Maintenance of Internal Security or MISA and Defence of India Rule (DIR) to turn the strike. Heavy security force like BSF, CRPF etc. were employed to compel the workers for joining their duties. Sherlock also pointed out how the other industries had suffered due to the total disruption of train services. The industries which were mostly affected were steel, Agriculture, coal etc. However, the Government ultimately got victory over the railway workers.

In the second chapter Sherlock examined the impact of the 20 days long strike. He described that from the very beginning of the strike, the Government treated the strike as a challenge to its authority and wanted to show its ability to handle the strike. Sherlock in this chapter portrays the uncomfortable condition of different trade unions belonging to different ideological base during the entire course of the strike. The NFIR was directly Congress controlled railway trade union. AITUC was CPI’s trade union wing and it was in a very unpleasant situation because the CPI supported the congress parliamentary party from outside to from the government. For the CPI (M) this strike was an opportunity to show its strength in certain parts of the country. But the CPI (M) was not in favour of launching such a big strike; because first of all, all the credit of leading such a struggle was taken away by George Fernandes. According to the trade union leaders the strike was not a political fight but a fight to keep the economic rights of the workers. Sherlock called the strike as the “Politics of class”. Sherlock’s book is no doubt a scholarly work on the railway strike of

1974. After 25 years of the strike Sherlock made an effort to picture the real conditions of the workers and the position of the Government.

The book “Trade Union Movement in Indian Railways” written by Mahesh Kumar Mast published in 1969 by Meenakshi Publication is a valuable work for understanding the origin, growth and characteristics of trade unions in the Indian Railways. It is a good book to understand the course of labour movement in the Indian Railways in the pre and post independent era. It attempts to locate the performance of the railway trade unions in respects of achieving broad based unity to shape bigger trade union movement in the country. This book furnishes information regarding the types of early phase of labour resistances, their causes of disappointments and trade union movements during the colonial period.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter “The Movement: Genesis and Growth” describes the origin of the industrial working class with the advent of the railway industry. According to Mast, railways created huge employment opportunity in the industrial sector in the colonial era which was a substitute to the agricultural economy. The author here discusses the characteristics of labour force in the railway industry before 1947. Difference in behaviour created racialism and communalism which led to frequent incidents of workers’ resistances. But interestingly different categories of workers reacted against the authority but it was not collective and united. This decision brought fragmentation in the workers’ agitations which ultimately weakened the power and strength of the working class to the author.

In the second chapter Mast had tried to analyse the history of labour movement in Indian Railways and how qualitative changes had occurred in this course. This chapter had mainly explained how employment increased with the expansion of the railway system in colonial India. He explained how the number of unions started growing e.g., the Bombay, Baroda and Central Indian Railway Employees’ Association, Eastern Bengal Railway Employees’ Association, the Madrass and Southern Maratha Railway Employees’ Union etc. In chapter three the author talks about the various types and categories of trade unions formed and functioned in the railways since the colonial period. Different categories of the workers formed their own organisation to get their demands fulfilled. In the 1950s the communists faced a considerable obstruction when in 1953 the National Federation of

Indian Railwaymen's Federation got its recognition from the Railway Board as an affiliated trade union of INTUC. The main challenge before the trade union leaders was to launch a major movement on the basis of broad based unity and solidarity of the workers.

In chapter five he highlighted management-labour relations in the railway industry. During the years 1949-50 the Railway Ministry stressed upon the importance of the working class and argued that a cordial relationship between the management and the workers must exist to increase the efficiency of the industry, production and growth of the public utility sector. Railway Board emphasised on formation of several negotiating machineries to find out the issues of disagreements between the two. Chapter six is divided into two sections. First section since Independence I (INRWF) and the second section Labour Movement since Independence II (NFIR) focused on the rise of the trade unions, their activities and movements. The author had pointed out that a large section of the railway workers had joined INRWF but initially it faced lot of challenges to exist and remain active in the railway industry. It got its recognition in November, 1949. In the second section – Labour Movement since Independence – II (NFIR) focused its attention on the nature, activities and role of NFIR since its inception in the course of trade union movement in the country. In chapter seven, which is a conclusion he mentions the importance of the trade unions which had been an integral part of any industrial system. He concludes by referring to the concept of responsibility to pursue the “welfare economy and socialist pattern of society” as the objective of the democratic country.

“The book Great Railway Strike and After” is a book written by Nrisingha Chakraborty, published in 1975 by CITU Publication. The author was a member of the Action Committee of NCCRS. This book is full of information regarding the May 1974 general strike of the Indian Railwaymen. In this book the author compiled the developments and incidents that led the railway workers to go a strike against their authority. It is a brief study of the nature of the trade union activities in the railway industry. It also examine workers resistance in the Indian Railways. Chakraborty have narrated the brutalities of the railway authority and the force which they utilised against the workers during the twenty days long strike in May 1974. He describes the hardships of the railwaymen after the withdrawal of the strike and the victimisation by the railway administration. He discusses the role and the responsibilities of the trade unions after the withdrawal of the strike. This

book had sketched the attitude of the state towards the working class of the country. This book is a unique document in respect of the Railwaymen's strike.

The author, in this book comments also on the issue of solidarity of the railway workers which was to him historical and unprecedented. All the rank and file workers of railway industry agreed to participate in this strike even those who were not directly involved they had sympathy and support towards the strikes. All the Central Government Employees' Associations had shown their solidarity towards this struggle. This book is a beneficial document for understanding the 1974 railwaymen's strike, for those who want to enquire about the preparation of the strike by the trade unions and the attitude and reactions of the government towards the working class agitation in India.

The book "The Railway Strike of 1974 and the Railway Men's Movement" written by George Fernandez is an insightful and informative work which helps to reveal many unknown aspects of trade union movement of Indian Railways. It also unfolds many incidents of May 1974 all India general strike of the railwaymen. This book was published in 1984 by Sindhu Publication. It was actually a lecture on the theme "Leadership and Organisation" delivered by George Fernandez in a seminar organised by the Institute of Social Studies, Hague, Netherlands held on 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> September 1977. This work is considerably relevant from the perspective of the labour movement of the country. In this study Fernandez said that the basic question of workers' discontentment and their consciousness remained same as it was in the early period of the emergence of the trade unions in India. He agreed on the point that this strike was an exhibition of labour power or the power of the downtrodden who have the capacity to challenge the authority and the might of the state.

In this book the author tried to sketch a brief history of trade unionism in the railway industry, the reasons of workers' immense discontentment towards the trade unions and the authority. He raised those issues which compelled the trade union leaders in the railway industry to take the decision of all India general and indefinite strike in May 1974. He discusses the nature and course of the strike. This book is divided into four sections with one appendix. The first section "A Short History of the Railway Workers' Movement" had discussed about the railway network of the country and how it was important for the Indian

economy. In this chapter the author traced the origin of the trade unions in the railway industry. Many unions were formed in 1920-21 in the railway front e.g., North Western Railways Unions, East Bengal Railway Indian Employees Association, Great Indian Peninsula Railway Staff Union – all of these unions organised a number of agitations for various reasons. These had showed a well knit power of working class of the Indian Railways and interestingly the railways were keen to participate in the mainstream political movement.

Meanwhile in 1925 All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) was formed and almost all the existing unions got affiliated under this union. Here Fernandez sketched a detail picture of the strikes that happened under the aegis of the AIRF leadership throughout the country. In the post war period Jayprakash Narayan became the President of AIRF and hence it became the most dominant union playing a crucial role in the entire history of the labour movement of the country. The author mentioned here that NFIR came into existence in April 1953 which marked a clear division in workers' solidarity. It was formed by the INTUC. In the meantime the recommendation of the Second Pay Commission aggravated the resentments of the railway workers. Thus the Central Government employees including the railwaymen went on an All India General strike from 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 which lasted for five days as the Nehru Government resorted to heavy repression and treated the strike as "anti-national". Again in 1968 there was a 'one day token strike' by the Central Government employees took place. Fernandez pointed out that the disaster of 1968 provided the necessary encouragement to the fragmentation of the workers' union in the railway industry and mushrooming of category wise associations started. In the meantime the AIRF had changed its leadership and George Fernandez became the President of AIRF and it wanted to go on a broad based nationwide movement. Therefore, National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle (NCCRS) was formed to launch a bigger movement.

In Section two "The Railway Strike 1974" is divided into six parts. The first part "The historical background" describes the origin and nature of the AIRF and NFIR. In part two, "Towards the confrontations" Fernandez shared his experience as a trade union leader when launching an indefinite strike in the railway industry. In part three "The Attempt at Negotiation" explain his initiative towards solidarity and also the process of negotiations that took place between the NCCRS and the railway management. The fourth part

“Establishment repression and workers response” discusses the heavy repressive measures that the government resorted to, to meet the railway workers struggle. In the fifth part of this study “An Analysis of the Strike”, the author tried to analyse the entire strike situations in all over the country, problems and difficulties and located the weaknesses of the trade union leadership. The sixth part “The realised potential of the railway workers” informed that the railwaymen had huge potential and occupied the most pivotal position in the history of working class struggle in India. The third section of this book includes certain documents e.g., two letters from the Prime Minister, a letter to Railway Minister, the copy of Frankfurt Speech and declaration, photo state of Frankfurt declaration. The Joint Declaration, AIRF Resolution on the Joint declaration, Deb Kumar Ganguli’s letter and a reply to Deb Kumar Ganguli and a Resolution at the National Convention. Section four of this book contains “A Speech on Some Issues of Railwaymen’s Movement”. It also has an appendix on why Rail Mazdoor Union? Nevertheless, this book is really a huge source of information regarding the 1974 strike by the Indian railwaymen. It shades light on the internal facts and issues of the trade union of the country in general and railway industry in particular. But this book has failed to examine the limitations of the trade unions mainly organised and controlled by the left ideology. It did not unfold the factors which were responsible for the failure of this strike. This work remains sketchy while analysing the characteristic features of the railway trade unions during the strike days. It also lacks academic resourcefulness and excellence.

The book “History of Railway Trade Union Movement: A Study” written by Nrisingha Chakraborty published in 1987 by CITU Publication is an important source for an understanding of a history of Indian railway workers’ movement and also a valuable account of the May 1974 strike of the Indian Railwaymen. This book shades light on the unknown facts regarding the railway trade unions and their role and functions. It also points out the shortcomings and the limitations of the trade union movement of the country during the post-independent period in the railway industry. The author analyses various aspects of trade unions which were affecting the mass movement and their relationship with the employers or the authority. To the author fragmentation of the working class had a harmful impact on the broader perspective of the trade union movement of the country. Chakraborty points out that the historic importance of the struggle of AILRSA in 1974 which increased and built the confidence and strength of the entire segment of the railway workers. The author talks about

the preparation of the railway workers for launching an indefinite strike throughout the country. The measures that were taken by the trade unions were described here in details and the process of solidarity and consolidation of the workers led to the formation of the NCCRS. On 8<sup>th</sup> May at 6:00 a.m. the strike started and the wheels of the nation had halted completely. He narrated the consequences and the aftermath of the strike of 1974. How huge number of workers permanent or casual were removed from services, suspended, faced break-in-service and arrested under MISA and DIR were described here. He also refers to the strike of 1980 in the railway industry.

There are other books if not directly on the subject but indirectly on the subject. The book “Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1990” by Sukomal Sen, published in 1997 is a valuable source of knowledge regarding the development of capitalism and history of the formation of working class in India. This book is divided into several chapters. Among them few chapters are relevant for the purpose of our study. In the sixth chapter ‘Beginning of Working Class Movement 1850-1900’ he deals with large scale working class protests in this period in India which provided a necessary impetus for the birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885. In Bengal, Maharashtra, Malabar Coast and in several other places riots and revolts started taking place. But most of them were unorganised, scattered and sporadic. Sen in this chapter had noticed that the first strike of industrial workers took place in the railway industry at Howrah Station in 1862. 1200 labourers struck on the demand of 8 hours work a day. Sen referred to several other unrests in this period. In the seventh chapter the author attempted to describe the preparatory phase for organised trade union movement in 1900-1914. National Movement for freedom and different political developments throughout the country played a favourable role for Indian working class. The strike of the workers in Bengal Section of the East Indian Railway in July 1906 was perhaps the biggest organised workers’ agitation during the imperialist rule.

In chapter twenty one he first contends that the working class struggles confronted unprecedented repression from the state in 1971. According to Sen in West Bengal, workers’ unrests became a regular phenomenon and at the same time the government took all repressive measures to break the agitation. Here he analyses the railwaymen’s struggle of 1974. He tried to locate the activities and real intention of the railway trade unions such as

AIRF, NFIR, All India Railway Employees' Confederation, different category-wise unions etc. Railway trade unions of different shades announced a joint convention for realisation of certain common demands and formed NCCRS which decided to call for a united movement. And when the authority refused to negotiate with them, NCCRS launched an indefinite strike from 8<sup>th</sup> May 1974. The strike was called off after twenty days and it left a far reaching impact on political and economic policies and processes of the government. This strike raised certain vital questions that whether the Indira Gandhi government represented a semi-fascist, authoritarian rule with twenty years of independence. At the end, Sen tried to focus his attention on the government's attempts to control industrial relation and he also raised the question of achieving the trade unions unity for protecting the interest of the industrial workforce of the country.

Ian J. Kerr "Building the Railways of the Raj: 1850-1900" is a very captivating work. It gives an understanding of the history of railway establishment in British India. This book, published in 1997 is an attempt to trace the emergence and growth of working class in the country and the development of industrial capitalism during the early phase of colonial rule. The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the entire study. Chapter two – "Getting Started and Subsequent progress" has dealt with the early phase of the railway establishment in the colonial period. It tried to identify the role of the British Government of India in exercising its supervision and direction relating to building the railways in the country. Chapter three "Contractors, Engineers and Petty Contractors: The Varieties and Problems of Management" concentrates on the process and direction of railway construction in the country and the processes of mobilisation of the workforce and their engagement in various and complex type of works.

In the fourth chapter "Obtaining Labour", Kerr focused mainly on the origin of the railway workforce who built the railways in this early period. The major portion of the unskilled railway workers came from the landless agricultural population and poor artisan class residing in the villages. Skilled workers were needed for constructing bridges, stations, tunnel sites and other sophisticated works. Kerr here observed that during the sowing and harvesting seasons, the railway construction works had faced acute labour crisis especially the crisis of unskilled labourers. The Indian labour which emerged with the advent of railway industry, demonstrated a kind of flexibility of advance capitalism. Chapter V

entitled “Work and Working Conditions” attempted to describe the construction of tunnels, stations, embankments etc. British engineers executed an incredible work by preparing the route map of the Indian sub continent. ‘Shifting duties’ was introduced by this time in India to continue the construction work for round the clock. Kerr also mentioned that the labourers lived in an unhealthy and nasty environment. Not only the living conditions but the Indian workers faced tremendous oppression and immense exploitation during these days.

In chapter six “Workers Resistance” the author sketched the situation in which the workers expressed their agony and protested against their employers. These resistances were not conscious efforts but many times they were only situational and subjective to the particular work site or group of workers concerned. Gradually collective actions started taking place in the railway construction worksites. Since the late 1860s in the Eastern Bengal Railways and in the Southern Railways the incidents of workers’ unrests became frequent. The seventh chapter of this book has concluded the entire study by summarising the findings and issues that Kerr had tried to deal with.

The book ‘Themes in Indian History: Railways in Modern India’ edited by Ian J. Kerr is an extra ordinary source of information on railway history in India. It was published in 2001 by Oxford Publication. To Kerr the railway workers in the British period were well known for their collective action and protest against their colonial employers. Railway workers had resisted their employers against racial policies and causes of the British people.

This book has fourteen chapters. The seventh chapter of this book “Railways in Modern India” by John Hurd demonstrates the role of the railways during 1900s in emerging the market of food grains in the country. The article examines the economic consequences of the railway development in India. Hurd mentioned that the railways opened the opportunity of trading in the foreign markets. Railways immensely expanded the scope of export of several commodities, such as jute, leather, cotton etc. whose growth was really noteworthy. Imports of goods at the same time increased. This article showed how commercialisation had brought many changes in rural areas, life of the village dwellers and economy as well. It had increased the scope of employment opportunity in the country.

The eighth chapter of the book “Economic Change and the Railways in North India, 1860-1914” written by I.D. Derbyshire analysed the effects of railways on the economy of

United Provinces in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author argues that three aspects contributed towards flourishing of commerce in this region during this period and they were: the transformation from weak to strong administration, secondly, increase in export of agricultural raw materials to Europe after the opening of Suez Canal and thirdly, different infrastructural changes in the sub-continent. Establishment of railways and canal irrigation in North India had improved the nature of agricultural production and exposed the economy to the outside world and also impacted on the population diversities.

Chapter nine by John Harrison is an extremely valuable source for understanding the railway records maintained mainly in North East India and the consequences – economic, physical and social of the railway operations in this region. Railways to him had changed the pattern of existing economic and social system of these regions by expanding the market of crops and other commodities. Harrison looked at how political considerations obstructed the expansion and spread of rail links in this region. Railways to him also effected the labour migration of the northern part of Assam and Far East for establishing plantation industries.

The article on the Indian Railways written by G.S. Khosla had focused its attention on the measures taken by the railway authority towards the regrouping or reorganisation of the Indian Railways after independence. Here, the author concentrated on the organisational steps and methods by the Government of India to increase the efficiency of the railways. Khosla discusses in every details the redistribution and reorganisation of railways especially the management of the railways. It gave emphasis on the policy of decentralisation to deal with the question of corruption. In 1967 the Government of India appointed Administrative Reform Commission which was followed by Railway Reforms Committee to enquire the activities of the railways and recommended for its management. Railway Board remained responsible for control co-ordination, operation and future planning and up gradation of the railways. The Committee advocated for the re-organisation at the divisional level, remodelling of construction units and rolling stock, modernisation of workshops, reshape of financial administration etc. In the conclusion the author referred to the various types of railway funds and the system of railway budget. The articles of the book “Railways in Modern India” edited by Ian. J. Kerr attempted to examine vividly the establishment of Indian Railways from a historical perspective. But it does not look at the working class in

the railway industry. The articles do not concentrate on the issue of economic deprivation and exploitation of the working class in this industry.

The book 'Crowing Glory' written by Nabajyoti Chowdhury, a trade unionist, member of Mazdoor Union of Siliguri Junction Branch, published by Nabajanma Prakashan in February 2004 is an important document to understand the establishment of the Railways in the North Bengal areas and in the Darjeeling hills. It is also a good account of the origin and growth of trade unions and their activities in the railway industry in this region. The author describes how the rural economy of North Bengal got connected with the commercial world through the railways and how the transformation of economy had brought changes to the life of the local people.

This book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter described the construction of Darjeeling Himalayan Railways (DHR) which began its journey from 8<sup>th</sup> April 1879. The total length of the railway lines from Siliguri to Darjeeling was 88.48 k.m. with the extension of 7.4 k.m. to New Jalpaiguri. The DHR was taken over by the Government of India on 20.10.1948. The author discussed about the building of railways in Teesta Valley, establishment of Assam Rail Line Project, North Eastern Railway and Northeastern Frontier Railways etc. Sri Chowdhuri had illustrated the living conditions of the railway working class living in their entire hilly areas and in the planes of North Bengal.

The second chapter focused on the inevitability of the growth of trade unions in the railway industry in this region. In the pre and post independent era the railway authority resorted to rigorous repressive measures against the railwaymen to handle any kind of workers' agitations. He discusses the aims and objectives of the N. F. Railways Mazdoor Union affiliated to AIRF. They fought for "Terai Allowances" which was much needed for the workers to cope up the extra burden of medical expenditures. In 1960, 1968 and 1973 strikes were successful here. This chapter elucidated the preparation and nature of the May 1974 strike in Siliguri. He discusses the police torture, government's reaction and impact of the strike.

The third chapter "Problems facing in the trade union attempted solution and some notable achievements" tried to analysed the problems of trade unions in railway front, e.g., organisation, functional, procedural, financial problems etc. The author traced the

achievements of trade unions in the Siliguri and also in Kisanganj including the hill sections, e.g., Terai allowances, opening up of a health unit in Siliguri Junction, flood advance in later 1950s and late 1960s, railwaymen's cooperative store etc.

In the fourth chapter, he discusses the brief history of NFRMU of Siliguri branch. Since its inception how it worked and tried to be connected with other zones, how it furnished the demands of the railwaymen and fixed the procedures to bargain with the authority to accomplish them. Sri Chowdhury talked about the preparations of the union during the strikes of 1960, 1968 and 1974. He sketched a short biography of some trade union leaders such as Priya Gupta, Bidhu Sekhar Sen, Rakhal Dasgupta etc. This study was concluded with the information about the Bengal Assam Railway System. This book is a valuable book though it lacks scholarly excellence since the author is a trade union leader.

There are a good number of works on social movements in India. Ghanshyam Shah's (2004) book on 'Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature' is a remarkable one. This was published in 2004. In the introduction Shah has discussed the lack of academic interests in studying political masses, their demands, desires, aspirations, problems, grievances etc. This study refers to the social movements as a deliberative collective action to promote change in any direction – may be illegal or violent. Shah tried to focus on the activities of the mass against the authority or against dominant culture, caste, class etc. The purpose of the movements to him is to transform the society and to attain justice. At the end of this chapter Shah tried to sketch the typologies of the social movements.

The Seventh chapter of the book entitled 'Industrial Working Class Movement' is relevant for the present study. The author describes here that industrialisation process started with the establishment of railway industry in the colonial period and then gradually expanded with jute, cotton, tea or indigo i.e., plantation industry, iron-steel industries in different parts of the country. A large number of workforces mainly non-agricultural were employed in the different industries. To him labour was not only an economic entity but also a social and cultural entity. Trade unions in their early stage were mostly unorganised. Therefore, the movements were sporadic, unorganised and spontaneous. Shah here attempts to address various causes of strikes in India e.g., wage, bonus, leave, retrenchments, recognition of trade unions, inter union disputes, holidays, less working hour, better

infrastructural facilities etc. The author concentrates his attention on the trade union activities and their relationship with the political parties. He also studies the working class leaders and their leaderships of some trade unions like AITUC, INTUC, HMS, CITU etc. Shah concludes this chapter by raising some valuable questions such as whether the working class has the potential to sustain their agitation; whether these movements have developed or stimulated any political consciousness of the workers; or whether the working class is really leading towards economic and social transformation.

The book “Our Indian Railway: Themes in Indian’s Railway History” edited by Roopa Srinivasan, Manish Tiwary and Sandeep Silas published in 2006 is a collection of articles. The articles in this book, mainly examines the reasons behind the need for the first railway construction in India by the colonial rulers. This book is divided into twelve chapters. The relevant chapters for this study are:

Chapter Five “Economic Nationalism and the Railway Debate, Circa 1880-1905” written by Bipan Chandra, deals with the question of how the railway establishment had impacted on the economic, political and cultural aspects of the country during the colonial period. He had analysed the entire theme of the study through the lens of the nationalist discourse. He had sketched a brief history of the past of the Indian railways.

Chapter Seven of this book “Indian Nationalism and Railways” by Vishalakshi Menon and Sucheta Mahajan is an interesting article. This article analyses the relationship between the labour movements in the Indian Railways and the Nationalist movement. The nationalist leaders all along supported the cause of the railway working class and their agitations and it became an integral part of struggle for independence and was considered as political movement. During the Quit India Movement, railway network facilitated the activists to move more quickly from distant places also became a means of publicity.”The Railway in Colonial India: Between Ideas and Impacts” written by Iftekar Iqbal is the Eighth Chapter of this book. This article focussed its attention on the impact of the railways on the Indian society and its environment. He notes that that the railway systems had a great impact on the entire ecological environment of the country. It also affected the traditional society of India which was agrarian.

Chapter Nine of this book “The Dark Side of the Force: Mistakes, Mismanagement and Malfeasance in the Early Railways of the British Indian Empire” written by Ian J. Kerr which provides a fascinating story regarding the different incidents of corruptions, scandals, dishonest expenditure and mismanagement in the railway industry during the early period of its establishment. The article “A View of the History of Indian Railways” written by Mark Tully, is the eleventh chapter of this edited volume. This article portray’s the early history of railway establishment in India. The articles in this book provide an analytical overview of the early stage of railway establishment in the colonial India.

The book “27 Down: New Departure in Indian Railways Studies” edited by Ian J. Kerr Published in 2007 by Orient Longman is a collection of articles which increases the knowledge of the readers in the direction of the impact of the Indian Railways in the colonial and post-colonial era. Indian Railways had been functioning since 150 years but still many aspects of the Indian Railways remains undiscovered or rather unnoticed. Kerr here had tried to incorporate those essays which can shade light on the new areas of research. This book contains certain essays which explore the developments of the initial stage of railway constructions, its stretch of lines, route miles etc in the colonial era and after independence how the partition had affected the industry and its impact on the production and partition had imbalanced the existing system to some extent. They also focus on the technical and problem oriented aspects of the railways in the pre and post colonial period. The authors here discuss the economic, political and military developments that took place due to the establishment of the railways in the country and prepared the path to modernisation. To them railways have played a significant role in the country’s developmental programmes. This book which is divided into eight chapters is practically an immense source of information for carrying out further researches to a new direction.

Out of all the chapters the Sixth Chapter is very interesting. “The Railway Workshops and Their Labour: Entering the Black Hole” by I. J. Kerr is a valuable source of understanding about the constituents and characteristics of the railway workforce in the pre-independent India. Kerr divided the workers into several groups based on the language, locality, gender, community, occupation etc. Railways employed varied types of workers such as casual, permanent, skilled, unskilled, low paid-highly paid etc. Here Kerr details the nature of the workers who were engaged in the railway workshops. ‘Race’ was a dominant

feature of the railway construction industry which remained in India throughout the colonial period. This study focussed its attention on the railway workshops and their locations and impact of these on the social composition of the region. Kerr mentioned that Lahore workshop was the focal point of the emergence of industrial working class and introduction of capitalist development of colonial regime. In the opinion of the author it led to the formation of industrial working class in India.

A very fascinating work is by Ian J. Kerr on the establishment and development of the railway system in India. “Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India” by Ian J. Kerr is a study which provides detailed information regarding the railroad system in India from the colonial period up to 2010. This book was published in 2012 in India. The eighth chapter is entitled “To Serve the Nation: Railroads Independent India – 1947-2010” which is very interesting. The author finally had summed up the entire study by remarking on the development and functioning of railroads in post-independent era and the policies behind it. Kerr has pointed out the grievances of the workers and the relationship between management and employees in the post independent era. Recognised and unrecognised railway unions (NFIR and AIRF) and their affiliated units act as the platform of ventilating discontentment’s become involved in much wider actions. The strike of May 1974 was such an action which shook the might of the state. The book however could have explored in more details the complexities of railway’s past of the country. It does not provide a clear picture about the struggles, hardships and sufferings of the workers’ daily life who actually built the railroads and the sacrifices that only brought changes in the political, economic, cultural and spatial dimensions of India and Indian life. In spite of these shortcomings this work is very fascinating and delightful.

Apart from books there are several articles available on this subject. The article “Railway workers Begin to Organise Themselves” written by D. N. published in ‘Economic and Political Weekly’ on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1973 is a valuable work on the activities of the trade unions in the Indian Railways. It discusses the various movements led by the category unions throughout the year 1972 and also in 1973. It also noticed that the risks taken by the railway workers, e.g. firemen, lever man etc. were so high and the working hour of these workers was too long that had aggravated the grievances. The workers had resorted to “gheraos”, “mass absenteeism” or strikes. This led to the formation of different types of

category wise unions in the railways. It also revealed the face of the government and its unhealthy ties with the industrial capitalist class to protect their own interest.

The article “Railway strike in Retrospect” published in EPW Vol.-10 No.-3 on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1975 described the huge strength of the Indian working class during the strike days of 1974. It discussed how the recognised unions’ unhealthy ties with the management caused damage to the working and living conditions of the workers. A peculiar feature in the railway front was observed that there was a mushroom growth of category unions. But the election of George Fernandes as the President of the AIRF in November 1973 marked a significant change in the railway workers’ movement. NCCRS was formed to bring the unions into a common platform to launch a general strike throughout the country. The Government took the threat of strike action as a political challenge and utilised every possible means to turn down the morality and confidence of the railway workers and to break the strike. It showed that the entire working class of India stood beside the railway workers against the entire state. This article unmasked the face of Indian democracy and showed the united strength of the toiling mass of the country.

The article “Railway workers and their Unions: Origin of 1974 Indian Railways Strike” published in Economic and Political Weekly on 14 October 1989 by Stephen Sherlock is a scholarly work. In this article Sherlock stated that Indian railways were the lifeline of the country’s economy and peculiarly the highly unionised workforce of the railways encompassed the major portion of Indian working class. The all India general strike of 1974 that lasted for 20 long days, successfully united all the workers of the Indian Railways. The author described that this was an outburst of long term deprivation and grievances of the workers. In the first section i.e. “workers Grievances” Sherlock describes how the relative decline in income of the railway workers for more than two decades caused the event like a general strike of 1974. In the second section “Recognised Unions” Sherlock discusses the role of the railway trade unions, as we know that railway workers were mostly unionised. At the all India level there were two recognised unions in the railway front – one was the AIRF dominated by the socialists and the other was the NFIR dominated by the Congress.

In the third section “Challenge of Category Unions” Sherlock discussed the attitude of various categories of railway workers belonging to the various unions. In August 1970 various categories of organisations united and co-ordinated into All India Loco-running Staff Association. From 1970-73 AIRSA launched several actions and in some cases they were successful in getting concessions from the authority. In the fourth section “Recognised Unions’ Response” Sherlock described how the success of category unions forced the recognised unions to become active in the railway front. In the fifth section, “Towards A General Strike” Sherlock gave a detail description of the preparation of the Railway General Strike of 1974. He described how and why George Fernandes was selected and elected as the President of AIRF in September 1973. National Convention of Railwaymen had adopted a charter of demands which the Union Government refused to accept not only that, it even refused to negotiate with the railway unions. This made the situation to launch a combined action of the workers of all colours. In the last section of the article “Railway Strike and Trade Union Movement in India” Stephen Sherlock discussed the nature of the strike, the role played by the recognised unions and government reactions to it. He states that there was a general feeling in support of the railway strike amongst almost all the working people of the country.

“The Historic Railway Strike of 1974” written by B.T. Ranadive published in the Journal “The Railway Workers”, Vol. VI., No. 3, May-June, 1999 provides a brief analysis of the contribution of the railway industry to the country’s economy during the early decades of 1970s and the resistances of railwaymen against the authority. It also describes the responses of the railway administration and their attitude to the working class. It details the inhuman attack by the government on the railway workers when they struck against the authority in May, 1974. It raised the question how could it spend crores of rupees on the atomic explosion and a huge tax relief to the capitalists and the landlords. It examined the industry-wise system of productions, its outcome and benefits to get the complete picture of the economic status of the country. To him the railway workers contribute hugely to the national purse or keep the country’s wheel moving, thus they had the right to have a share from it.

“The Historic Railway Strike of 1974: A Great Lesion” written by Samar Mukherjee published in the same journal. He examined the strike preparation, background of the strike

and the performance of the trade unions after the strike. He tried to locate the position of this struggle in the labour history of the country. Mukherjee attempted to find out the reasons behind the weakness of the railway workers' movement. He told that the government had compelled the railwaymen to go on strike, it created such an atmosphere that the railway trade unions had to launch an indefinite strike in May, 1974. According to Mukherjee the government did not have any intention to negotiate with the railwaymen or to accept their demands. In the concluding part, he made some suggestions for future trade union movement in the country especially, if it had to combat with the undemocratic government like this.

“Silver Jubilee of May 1974 Twenty Days Heroic Strike of Railwaymen – A Tribute to Martyrs” written by J. P. Chaubey published in 1999 is a valuable document about the all India general strike of the Indian railwaymen in May, 1974. Chaubey focus his attention on the preparation of the strike by the railway trade unions, process of negotiation with the government; government's reactions towards the workers' resistances, overall impact of the strike. He felt that broad based unity of the workforce is needed and also their leaders should be united, all kinds of rivalry must be set aside if they have desires to continue their struggle in future and launch bigger movements. Chaubey described the government's plan of action during the strike days which led the workers to suffer immensely. In the conclusion the author offered his gratitude to those workers who had sacrificed their lives for the greater cause of the working class of the country and set an example for future course of action.

“Railwaymen's Strike of 1974: An Unprecedented Event of Indian Trade Union Movement” written by N.S. Bhangoo, a trade union leader of the railways, published in 1999 is an examination of the role and place of the trade union in the railway industry before the strike of 1974. The two recognised unions of the railway workers – AIRF and NFIR had failed to perform their expected responsibilities and duties to maintain a minimum balance between the employees and employers relationship. Hence, frustrations among the workers had generated and increased enormously. The author here states that the Loco Running Staff Association was formed only out of these frustrations. He analysed the negotiation process that was initiated by the government and the trade unions to settle the issue. Bhangoo ended his article by criticising the policies of the authority – especially the economic and political

policies of the then government. He favoured the policy of bringing the industrial workers in mainstream politics.

The article “25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Great 1974 Railway Strike” by S.K. Dhar, leader of railway trade union is a valuable contribution to the documentation of the labour movement of the railway industry in this country. He begins with the demands of the railwaymen and the reasons for their disappointment. Dhar commented on the dynamic leadership of AILRSA which fulfilled some demands of the Loco Running Staff. Dhar stated that the decision of changing the AIRF leadership was the most crucial decision at that point of time. According to Dhar the preparation for the indefinite strike was not adequate but all the organisations and the trade unions exhibited solidarity with this struggle. Dhar explained the reasons behind the withdrawal of the strike. In the conclusion he tries to find the limitations which hindered the railwaymen to reach their goal.

“1974 Railwaymen’s Historic Strike” written by Dilip Mukherjee provides information regarding the preparations of the May 1974 railwaymen’s strike. It also talks about the nature of the struggle in the Eastern Railways. The article also tries to interpret the consequences and outcome of the strike. He concentrates on the developments in the Eastern region. To him though the strike was withdrawn unconditionally, it had long term impact on the railway authority and labour movement of the country. The author ends with the conclusion that the trade unions should have learnt from this experience that the workers should be more united and their organisation must reach solidarity on the basis of collective consensus.

The articles reviewed above were written by the trade union leaders mainly based on their experiences and participation. These articles reflect the ground realities of the strike and what actually had happened in the different railway zones during and before the struggle. Though they are good articles on the strike but they suffered from biasness since they described the incidents from the leftist standpoint. These essays are not even scholarly. Despite of this they are really useful articles on the subject.

The article ‘Forty Years After The Great Indian Railway Strike of 1974’ written by Ranabir Samaddar, is a good source of information about the nature and the consequences of the railway workers’ struggle in May 1974. It was published in Economic and Political

Weekly, Volume 1 No. 4 on 24th January 2015. He analysed the different contentious issues behind the strike, for example long working hour of the railwaymen, salary and wage structure, D.A question and also the bonus issue. He analyses the role of the major trade unions e.g. NFIR and AIRF in consolidation of railway working class in the early period of independence. Railway management established the conciliation machinery like Railway Board and Corporate Enterprise Group of Management to ventilate their grievances and suggest measures for improving the situation and reinstate industrial peace.

The author here writes several stories on the basis of the experiences of the administrative officers that how they handled the situation during the strike days in May 1974 and how they managed to run the trains and tried to keep normalcy in the stations. The legendary unity that this movement had achieved during this period had never been seen before and after the strike. This paper had attempted to point out the causes of the failure of the strike. It highlights how the Indian government repressed brutally the striking workers and compelled them to join their duties. The author concluded his study by raising some questions regarding whether the railway workers again could be able to regain their lost glory and attain the consciousness of the working class, whether a tradition of militancy and heroic struggle could bridge solidarity of the working class.

The article “Remembering May 1974: The Historic Railway Workers’ Strike” written by Krishna Ananth published in Economic and Political Weekly, May, 2016, Vol. L 22 is an important source of information about the Railway workers’ strike of 1974. The author gives a general overview of the reasons, nature and the consequences of the railway workers strike of May 1974. He talked about the railway trade unions in detail, e.g., existence of different types and categories of unions in various railway zones. He tried to find out the economic reasons which actually instigated the workers to raise their voice against the authority. Ananth had discussed how George Fernandez stepped in the leadership of the railway trade unions and led the agitation, how the NCCRS was formed and how it attempted to co-ordinate with the railway trade unions. This study had analysed the activities and responses of the railway management during the strike days in the month of May 1974. Railway authority claimed that normalcy remained in almost all the zones except some sporadic incidents which were reported in few places. Railway Board, from the very first day resorted to repressive tactics to crush the movement and tried to localise the agitation

through the means of brute force and strength. He concluded his discussion by mentioning the various activities of the trade unions who actually supported the railwaymen's causes of the struggle and also referred to those who in fact betrayed the striking workers.

The article "The pattern of Railway Development in India" by Daniel Thorner (1955) provides valuable information regarding the history of railway development in British India up to independence. What surprises Thorner, is that undivided India which is un-industrialised has a great railway network in comparison with other countries like USA, Russia or Germany. India was under British colonial rule, but the term 'Colonial' did not suit here because India was seen much too large, populous and diverse to be a colony. Thus, establishment of railways in India was decided in London with the intention to intermingle the economies of the two countries. The promotion of railways in India had brought greater overseas market and better sources of raw materials for the British merchants. It also could serve the administrative and military purposes.

The first railway building was undertaken by the East India Railway company (EIR) operating the lines running north from Calcutta. Simultaneously the Great, The Indian Peninsula Railway Company started constructing lines from Bombay to Kalyan. Thorner here, points out to the clash between the Government of India and the railway builders and contractors. After the Great Indian Rebellion in 1857-58 greater emphasis was given upon the speedy growth of railway construction. Thus, the years of 1860s became the boom years for the British engineers and builders and above all huge British capital was flown to India. Thorner said that the governmental policy might have impeded the growth and efficient functioning of the railways. All the expenditure of the railways on repair, renewal, extension and development was placed under the control of Finance department whose primary duty was to balance the Governments' budget. Thus, in this process the appropriation for maintenance and improvement was reduced. Railways had to suffer from severe under capitalisation. In 1924, the Government of India implemented the new phase of railway organisation under complete state ownership and state management. In this system the "Buy British" policy was converted into "Made in India" policy. Thorner pointed out that India's railway development was massive but not proportionate.

The article “Railway workers prepare for Struggle” (1977) tried to analyse the cause of the workers’ demands and reasons of massive rallies of railway worker that had taken place in Delhi. The railways workers felt both cheated and insulted on the question of bonus. After coming to power in 1977 the Janata Government refused to take any decision on the bonus question. The denial of bonus is not only the urgent question but another long standing demand was to give permanent employment to the lakhs of casual workers. The wages of the workers were very low and they demanded security of service that was enjoyed by the permanent workers. The track maintenance, permanent way gangs, transshipment operation, loading coal in engines tender etc all these works were done by the casual workers.

This article focused its attention on the issue of longer hour of work of the railway workers. Though the International Labour Convention had treated the railways as industry, but the Government of India had denied them the status of industrial workers. As a result they were denied full trade union rights, different regulations of working hour etc. During the emergency the railway workers were worst affected. Transfer, suspension etc, were greatly used against them. From this article the author wants to make it clear that the change of Government did not bring any change in the railway front.

The article “The Madras and Southern Marhatta Railway Strike: 1932–33” (1980) by C.S. Krishna provides a detailed account regarding the railway workers movement in pre-independence (1932-33) India. It discusses about the number of employees that southern railway had employed at that point of time – almost 15000 workers who were best organised also. The author in this article analysed the socio-economic conditions of the workers which was far from satisfactory though the railways in this part in a few years had generated huge sum of revenue for the Government. Krishna had focused his attention on the major issues of workers’ discontentment. The most important trade union active in the railway front at that period was AIRF which made strong representation against the policy of forced discharge and on the issue of reinstatement of 93 workers who were already retrenched in 1931.

The author states that the strike action was not a sudden movement. AIRF had circulated notice to the affiliated unions in the month of August. The strike began from 24<sup>th</sup>

October 1932 in the Perambur mechanical workshops and the workers responded spectacularly, eg. only 300 workers attended the work out of 5700, and the clerks also went on strike from 26<sup>th</sup> October. About 3000 men out of 4000 struck work at Hubli. The author here pointed out the attitude of the railway administration which was very stubborn and resorted to pressure tactics.

The article “Growth and structure of unions in Southern Railways’ (1980) by D. Narshima Reddy is a valuable article on the origin, growth, and structure of the trade unions in the Southern Railways from the pre-independence era. This article discusses the brief history of the origin of the trade union movement in the three separate railway zones – i.e, (i) South Indian Railway; (ii) Madras and Southern Marhatta Railway; and (iii) Mysore State Railway in South India which now have become the Southern Railways.

The article, “Plight of Railway Constructions Casual labour” by Timir Basu (1981) tries to analyse the conditions of the casual workers especially construction casual labours in the Indian Railways. AIRF organised one conference in Calcutta in November 1980 to focus on the plight of about one lakh workers engaged in various construction jobs of the railways throughout the country. The Railways followed a dual policy in respect of casual workers. The most hazardous of all works is railway construction because these are done in mostly remote places without basic amenities. Casual workers do not even get medical benefits and are not paid injury benefits. For maternity, absent from work for more than 20 days may bring break in service. The author has noticed that the Railways have rejected the demands of casual workers of absorption in the permanent pay-rolls. The casual construction labour now a -days are trying to gather momentum because decasualization was the major demand during the railway general strike of 1960, 1968 and 1974. Basu in this article opined that so long as the regular permanent railway workers remain passive towards the just demands of casual employees the railway authority will continue the practice.

The article “Working class Protest in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India -Example of Railway Workers” published in EPW Vol-20, No. 4 on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1985 by Ian J. Kerr provides valuable information about the history of labour protest in the Indian Railways. This article describes about the several categories of railway workers and the different protest movements launched by them. To him in almost all the cases the protest was caused due to

the non- payment of wage. At the end of the article Kerr had revealed the fact that railway workers had shown their capacity to treat the colonial ruler and had become conscious enough to protect their interests against colonial exploitation which led to the development of trade unionism in the country at the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

All these studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the strike of 1974. But these are scholarly works. Thus one notes that they do not analyse the nature and impact of the strike in detail. Many of the studies did not raise questions like what were the real reasons behind the strike. Did the workers truly represented the workers? Or it represented the interests of the trade union leaders in particular. Questions like was the strike a conscious effort of the toiling mass of the major part of Indian working class? Moreover several other points were not clearly dealt with by these studies. The editorials were unable to highlight the major problem areas of the strike, eg. the reasons behind the unwillingness of the leftists to support the strike and why they did they use every possible means to turn down the struggle and to break up the psychological strength of the workers and tried to demoralise them? The editorials of the newspapers also did not review the causes of the Government's heavy repression on the railway workers? These studies also did not answer the question did the Railway Board acted in accordance with the dictates of the Union Government or did it enjoy some kind of autonomy? All these points were not examined by the articles and books. Still in the absence of academic works these studies provide valuable information on the strike.

## **Objective of the Study**

Considering the limitations of the studies done on the subject we have spelt out the objectives of the study as to find out the reasons behind the strike of the Railway men in 1974 and certain other related questions. We intend to find out the grievances of the Railway men particularly in the two zones Eastern Railways and in the N.F Railways which led to the extreme decision to go for an indefinite general strike. The study also looks at the impact of the strike particularly in these two zones. We try to find out whether all the shades of opinion in the railway trade unions and the category unions had participated in the strike or not. It looks at the preparations of the trade unions for launching such an indefinite general

strike throughout the country. It attempts to explain the nature of the 1974 railway strike. It looks at the situation that prevailed in the Eastern Railways and NF Railways during the strike days of May 1974. The present study also intends to measure the velocity of the strike action led by the Indian Railway men especially in these two zones. Another objective of this study is to demonstrate and analyse the reaction of the union government towards the movement or how the State had responded to the Railway men's demands and the strike which they have resorted to. It looks at the consequences of the Railway general strike in Eastern and N.F Railways. The study also intends to analyse the political and economic impact of the general strike by the railway workers in 1974.

## **Research Methodology and Data Collection**

For the purpose of conducting a valid piece of research we require data. Research methodology means developing concepts and justifying the technical aspects of any study. It aims at constructing ideas and views regarding the subjects and the issue which are examined as a matter of social research. The purpose of any social research is to build an objective and empirical perspective of the study. The weakness and strength of any research are related with the ability to trace the research problems. Research method keeps the link between technique of discussion and reaching in its conclusion. Research method is an instrument of exploring and analysing the problems.

For answering the research questions, we need to rely on the collected data. This study required both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data are of different types. This study required oral information or oral history that we considered as the most significant resource for this research. It helped us to assess and clarify the demands, aspirations, opinions and the conditions of the railway workers who were directly and indirectly involved with the strike action of May 1974. Interacting with the people corroborates the documentary evidences and helps us know the practical incidents that were experienced by the railway workers. To constitute an argument regarding the trade unions and working class movement in independent India, we need to know our views with the Union leaders and the members who were active when this struggle took place in 1974. Therefore, the railway workers who were participants in the strike were needed to be

interacted. The opinions of the permanent and casual workers and union leaders of the N.F Railways and Eastern Railways are supposed to be the most valuable resource.

To constitute any fundamental argument regarding the chronicle on the workers' resistances and trade union movement in Indian industries particularly in the Indian Railways after independence upto 1975, the views and opinions of the railway men must be examined and analysed. For this purpose we had to conduct interviews. Interview on specific topics attributes a valuable resultant data which formulates dynamism. For this research Semi-structured and Focused or unstructured interview methods were used to collect oral history. In this method the questions are specified to reach a standardisation which seeks both clarification and elaboration. Interviewees were free here to give the answers it was an open ended method. When that respondents could share the references without challenging their preconceptions. The informal method also enabled us to get the reflections on the pattern of the events and incidents that occurred long back. The behaviour and attitude of the interviewees reveal their contributions to their events concerned. Extensive discussion was carried on with the people who were interviewed.

We conducted our interviews in the Railway Headquarters and Trade Union offices in New Delhi; Pandu, Guwahati; Barasat, Kolkata; Alipurduar, Coach Bihar and Siliguri. In few cases interviews were taken at the residences of the union leaders in Kolkata, Kanchrapara, Siliguri, Alipurduar and Coach Bihar also. In these cases the study relied on the qualitative interview method which explored a broad view point on the subjects and the strike event during the 20 days of the struggle. But the knowledge gathered from this method must be guided by the rules of objectivity and comparative analysis of the documents.

Another type of primary data which is an important source for this study are documentary sources. Use of documents in social research is significant for discovering existing questions and then comparing it with the historical evidences. These documents must ensure the progress of the study and utilise the idea for building the relationship between the events and the investigation. These documents are helpful to observe the surroundings and find out the conflict of opinion and ambiguity of the information. Documents may be of various kinds. Usually by documents we understand printed words or

written texts. Resources include government file, administrative reports, reports of governmental committees, peoples' accounts, reports of the public accounts, trade union publications, union records and pamphlets and other daily reports etc. These documents represent the accurate description of what had actually happened during the time of the incident. In order to understand the pattern and meaning of the text, the nature of the documents must be well analysed and compared with other resources.

For addressing the research questions we concentrated on the documents. This research depends on the sources like government's records, administrative reports, governmental publications etc. It also requires trade union publications, the writings of the union leaders etc. In order to answer the research questions this study required information from different government sources, for example, reports of different ministries such as Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Railways, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Home. Government documents are very helpful in explaining the attitude of the authority and the administration towards the railway workers struggle the working class movement.

These governmental documents were collected from National Archives, New Delhi and National Library Kolkata, the Headquarters of Northern Railways - Baroda House, New Delhi and N.F Railways - Maligaon, Guwahati. For union sources the data were gathered from different trade union office mainly the Head Offices of the NFIR and AIRF situated in State Entry Road, New Delhi. Apart from this, we visited the offices of the Mazdoor Union in different places like, Barasat Kolkata, Pandu Guwahati, Siliguri and the office of AILRSA in Alipurduar. The Pensioners' Associations of Siliguri Junction Branch, NJP Branch, Coachbehar Branch under NF Railways and Kanchrapara Branch, Barasat Branch, Sealdah Branch under Eastern Railways had also been visited. The unions, participated in this strike had a number of publications, writings of trade union leaders, pamphlets and daily reports regarding the strike developments that had taken place in Eastern Railways and Northeast Frontier Railways.

This study is heavily depended on the documents that provide information related to Government and trade union activities. From the National Archives, New Delhi and National Library, Kolkata we collected different directives of the Various Ministers, In-Charge of Ministries to the State Governments and Head of the Police and armed forces.

This study required the reports of different Ministries of the Government of India, regarding the strike situations and their plan of actions to handle the railway workers, published during the strike days. These documents were collected from National Archives and few from GSM Library of Northern Railways Head Quarters, Baroda House, New Delhi and N.F Railways Head Quarters, Maligaon. From the trade union offices especially the AIRF Central Office, State Entry Road, New Delhi we found several important documents relating to the May Strike of 1974. It included the AIRF Weekly Journal on Railwaymen, their proceedings, reports on strike preparations, situations and the consequences of this strike in various railway zones, publications of trade union leaders like George Fernandes, B. T Ranadive, Priya Gupta, Nrisingha Chakroborty etc. From Kolkata Eastern Railway Pensioners' Association we got the books written by Sankar Prosad Chatterjee, S.K Brahma etc. From Pandu trade union office we found the book written by Samar Sengupta which discussed the experiences of the author on different strike struggle's specially the strike of May 1974. The AILRSA Office of Alipurduar provided the special issue of the Journal "Railway Worker" which focused on May 1974 strike. From Siliguri Junction Branch the book by Sri. Nabojyoti Choudhury was collected.

Apart from Primary data, this study required Secondary Data too. Secondary data was needed for understanding the developments and impact of the struggle of 1974 in the Eastern and N.F. Railways. Books on strike by the railwaymen are very scanty. Although sources were limited, few books and articles were available on the railwaymen's struggle of 1974 such as, the articles of Biren Roy, Nabojyoti Chowdhury etc. And few articles written by Ranabir Samaddar, Krishna Ananth, Gopalakrishna etc. are really helpful in understanding the relevance of the strike. Stephen Sherlock's two works, one book and an article remains the most important of all the works. Books and journals are available in the field of labour movement in general in India but not many researchers and historian's shade any light on the trade union movement in the railway industry. Few articles in journals and magazines exist. Magazines provide valuable information in this field of study. Newspapers reports and periodicals during the period from August 1973 to June 1974 were another significant source of secondary data. These data such as books, journals, newspaper reports were collected from National Library, Kolkata, Jawaharlal Nehru University library, New

Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Library of University North Bengal.

## **The Chapters**

The study has been divided into six main chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion which are also chapters. The first chapter proper describes the industrialisation process in India and the emergence of industrial working class in the colonial period since independence till 1974. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the establishment and growth of railway industry and the emergence of industrial workers in colonial India. The Second section of the chapter describes the process of industrialisation specifically the process of the development of railway industry since independence till 1974. The third section of the study attempts to look at the process of development and consolidation of the railway workers as an industrial working class. This chapter provides a brief history of the railway workers' oppression in the colonial period.

Chapter two explains the emergence and nature of workers' resistances in the Indian Railways since its inception up to 1974. This chapter enquires the reasons behind the workers' grievances and their discontentment in the railway industry till 1974. It is divided into two sections. The first section analyses the growth of labour unrests in Indian Railways in the colonial era till independence. The second section of this chapter observed the nature and development of trade union movement in the Indian Railways from 1947 to 1974. This section has also attempted to find out the reasons of workers' resentments which compelled them to form category wise unions based on craft sentiments. This chapter looks at the causes of workers' resistances in the railway industry since the beginning of the industry up to 1973.

The third chapter is divided into two sections. The first section has focussed its attention on the grievances of the railway workers which forced them to revolt against their authority. It also discusses how the railwaymen had prepared themselves to launch an indefinite and general strike throughout the country. The second section has tried to observe the situation that persisted in the different zones of the railways all over the country during

the strike days in May 1974. Chapter three tries to give the answer to the question i.e., ‘the reasons behind the grievances of the railwaymen’ raised by this study, the grievances that compelled them to go for an indefinite strike.

The fourth chapter deals with the May 1974 strike in Eastern Railways. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to discuss the discontentment and grievances of the workers in the Eastern Railways. It also intends to elucidate the process of the preparations of the various trade unions in the E.R for launching a general and indefinite strike throughout the country. The second section has dealt with the situation during the twenty days of strike in this zone. In the third section we analyse the impact of this struggle on the economic, political and social spheres of the country. Chapter four addresses the answer to the questions of strike preparations in E.R by the railwaymen and it gives an account of the situation that prevailed during the strike days and also the impact of the movement in this zone.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Railway Workers’ Strike of May 1974 in the Northeastern Frontier Railways (N.F Railways). It is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the grievances of the railwaymen in N.F Railways. It also tries to describe the preparation of the railway workers of this zone before the strike began and how the workers of N.F Railways along with the other zones had prepared themselves for the general strike. The second section of this study intended to discuss the strike situation throughout the N.F. Railways during the long twenty days of the strike. The third section we mainly dealt with the impact of the strike in the N.F. Railways. In this section we analyse the consequences and effects of these long days of workers’ movement in the entire N.F. Railways. Chapter five attempts to give answers to the questions regarding the preparations and situations of the railwaymen’s struggle in N. F Railways. It also answers the question of impact of the strike in this Zone.

Chapter six deals with the responses and reactions of the Railway Board in particular and the Indian State in general towards the strike of May 1974. This chapter has two sections. The first section examines the reasons behind the attitude of the Railway Board towards the railway workers’ resistances in this industry and other industrial sectors since independence till 1974. The second section of this study is an attempt to unfold the

responses and reactions of the government as well as the Railway Board towards the railwaymen's struggle in May 1974. It also has tried to find out the causes behind the anti labour attitude of the government of India. The question 'what was the attitude of the State towards the railwaymen's strike?' raised by this study has been answered in this chapter. After having done all that we have attempted a summary and conclusion at the end of the study.

## **Chapter II**

### **Industrialization in India: The Development of the Indian Railways till 1974**

In this chapter we discuss the establishment and growth of the railway industry and the emergence of the industrial working class in colonial India from the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century till independence. The chapter also discusses the growth and development of the Railway industry in the post independent period till 1974. In this chapter we focus on the nature of the railway workers in India since independent up to 1974. This chapter is divided into three sections. In section I we look at the construction of the railway industry during the colonial era and the emergence of the industrial working class with the establishment of the railway industry. The second section deals with the development of the railway industry in the post independent period till 1974. In the third section the nature of the railway working class since independence up to 1974 has been looked at.

#### **I**

##### **Establishment and Development of the Railway Industry and the Emergence of the Railway Working Class**

Industrialisation in India started with the advent of the railway industry from the 1850s. This section of the chapter looks at the reasons behind the establishment of the railway industry in India in the colonial era. It has dealt with the emergence of the industrial working class in India and the nature of the railway workers in the colonial period from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century till independence. According to historians, the entire period of British economic domination over India can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase started from 1757, i.e., after the Battle of Plassy the East India Company monopolised the Indian market till the early 1850s. The second phase began from 1858 after the Sepoy Mutiny. This period saw the culmination of highest rate of exploitation (exploitation by industrial capital) and

finally the period of 1914-47 had noticed the end of colonial exploitation by the British and the beginning of neo-colonial exploitation of the Indians by advanced exploitations in general (Bagchi, 1982; p. 79).

The first phase did not notice any industrial development in the country because the East India Company was mainly a trader. By the late 1830s, the British enterprise and capital had already expanded to the sugar manufacture, rice and flour mills, plantation industries like, indigo and tea, shipyards, mining, foreign trade and even they invested in the banking and insurance sectors (Bhagwati & Desai, 1970; p.20). The growth however was very slow. Lord Dalhousie, a technological moderniser introduced the railways as a tool of social, cultural, political and religious change during the colonial domination of the country. Therefore, the process of railway construction in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century had opened up the path for the development of modern industries. Railroads for India were first initiated in the mid 1830s. In this connection I. J. Kerr had mentioned that fifteen years of promotion and debate had reached the key decision in favour of the Great Peninsula Railway (GIPR) and the East India Railway (EIR) that were made in March 1849, hence finally rail board building in British imperial possession began in 1850 (Kerr, 2012; p.17). Surprisingly the surplus of British capital had to be merged and integrated with the world economy for its own growth. In the context of invention and utilisation of steam-power in industrial production of railways and shipping, British industrial capital was remained unaware regarding the value of the commodities it produced (Bailey and McGuire, 2007; p.105). During the period of 1920s and 1930s British industrial capital was in search of new investment opportunities to increase its profit margins. However, British capitalists initially were not willing to invest in the Indian railway constructions. But two companies i.e., GIPR and EIR agreed to build railway lines with a five percent guaranteed return on their investment, assurance of which was given by the Government of India. The total investment in establishing the railway industry was initiated from the Britain but the risk was completely carried on by the Indians who liquidated their pockets to pay the taxes. It ultimately paid the five percent guarantee to the railway companies which were associated with the establishment of the railways in the early period of the colonial rule and it was also used as a rate of profit for the guaranteed companies which confirmed their earnings throughout the nineteenth century. Within a few years, it became exorbitantly expensive for

the country, which caused a significant burden and drain of the government revenues but still it continued the process for several years.

**Capital expenditure on Indian Railways, 1849-50 to 1877-78 (Pound)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Guaranteed Railways</b>	<b>Government Railways</b>	<b>Total</b>
1849-50	75,893	-	75,893
1850-51	99,263	-	99,263
1850-52	351,323	-	351,323
1852-53	427,560	-	427,560
1853-54	670,649	-	670,649
1854-55	1,730,156	-	1,730,156
1855-56	3,366,411	-	3,366,411
1856-57	3,515,109	-	3,515,109
1857-58	3,423,068	-	3,423,068
1858-59	5,492,108	-	5,492,108
1859-60	7,171,464	-	7,171,464
1860-61	7,578,715	-	7,578,715
1861-62	6,602,212	-	6,602,212
1862-63	5,863,000	-	5,863,000
1863-64	4,755,653	-	4,755,653
1864-65	4,122,240	-	4,122,240
1865-66	5,636,866	-	5,636,866
1866-67	7,297,763	-	7,297,763
1867-68	7,120,081	794	7,120,875
1868-69	3,867,927	552,398	4,420,325
1869-70	4,742,851	190,890	4,933,741
1870-71	3,776,270	449,372	4,225,642

1871-72	2,496,728	644,620	3,141,348
1872-73	477,245	1,413,579	1,890,894
1873-74	693,053	2,354,025	3,047,078
1874-75	1,087,911	3,014,180	4,102,091
1875-76	953,806	3,165,184	4,115,990
1876-77	715,468	2,865,861	3,581,329
1877-78	1,312,250	3,984,968	5,297,218
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,420,043</b>	<b>18,635,871</b>	<b>11,4055,984</b>

**Source: Report from the Select Committee on East India (Public Works), vol. IX, 312, 1878-79, v See: (Bailey & McGuire, 2007; p.131).**

The cost of the railway establishment had started reducing from mid 1880s. Kerr informed that on the basis of management criteria, railways in India were divided into ten categories : (1) State owned lines worked by private companies; (2) State owned and State worked lines; (3) Lines owned and worked by private companies guaranteed under old contracts; (4) Lines owned and worked by private companies under new contracts; (5) District Board Lines (short, local lines within a district and paid for by local cesses); (6) Assisted Companies' Lines (Government Assistance of various sorts but no guarantee); (7) Princely State Lines worked by private companies but owned by the Princely States; (8) Princely State Lines worked by State Railway Agency i.e., as part of the state system owned by the Princely States; (9) Lines owned and worked by Princely States; (10) Lines in foreign territory (e.g. in French or Portuguese India) (Kerr, 1997; p.20).

Finally on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1953, the railroad was inaugurated officially from Bombay to Thane and the Railways exposed the people of rural India and traditional societies to the world. Innumerable advantages emanated from the establishment of railways in the country. Commercial, social, political, administrative and ecological benefits were associated with the building of the railways which provided the path to modern India. But Gandhi always held that railroad contributed to the British domination over India. Railways however increased immensely the trade between India and Britain, raw materials especially cotton

were transported more easily to Britain and manufactured British goods that were sold in the Indian markets were transported. Innumerable opportunities would emanate to the British administration which was composed of a very few of colonial administrators and soldiers spread over the subcontinent. In order to establish the railroads in India British required to bring its military strength to move upon any given point of time for as many days as it needed several months now (Kerr, 2012; p. 18). Thus, Lord Dalhousie was ultimately successful in approving the famous 'Railway Minute' 1853 by the authority in England.

On the other hand railways had minimised the transport cost and also became reliable. Commodity movement became much easier with the spread of railway track throughout the country especially in the remote places and the port towns. As per John Hurd's opinion when the civil war occurred in America, the international value of cotton triggered the export of Indian cotton in spite of the risk of damage and the high cost of transport (Hurd, 2001; p. 148). Thus, due to the decrease of transport cost agricultural markets in India were connected with the international market and Indian agriculture was transformed into a commercial market, prices affected not by the local fluctuations. Railway routes facilitated the export of the textile and agricultural productions. It immensely impacted on the movement of the rice and grains in the country as well. Commercialisation was associated with many more changes in the rural life of India, such as increase in land value, rent, sales of land, flow of income etc. Apart from these railways were successfully carrying finished goods into local markets. In doing so it radically changed the very concept of spacial and temporal co-ordinates which effectively reconstructed the earlier ideas of space and time and in this process, it amalgamated the country to an exceptional degree.

Railways moreover, helped to connect the remotest villages and places with the port towns i.e., with the outer world. It united the people. They could travel distant places quickly in search of jobs. But it was successful at the same time in destroying the Indian traditional cottage industries, handicrafts and handlooms by introducing cheaper rates of products of British machine made industries. Agricultural economy had turned into industrial economy.

### Railway Systems in India 1914-18

1.	Total mileage of railway open for traffic	34,656
2.	Total mileage of state lines worked by company	18,680
3.	Total mileage of state lines worked by State	7,231; 25,911
4.	Total mileage of state lines worked by the State and Companies	3,396 (total state owned)

Small private companies held the rest (Gadgil, 1971; p. 130).

Railways brought enormous changes in the agricultural areas. It provided the scope of trading of agricultural products from one corner to another with minimum possibilities of spoilage. Now the farmers began their productions commercially. On the other hand, due to the Industrial Revolution in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> century a large number of industries and factories were established in Britain and the finished goods of these machine based factories and industries did not get the required market. The English industrialists were needed to dispose the products of newly expanding industries and had to ensure uninterrupted flow of raw materials for these industries from India and other parts of the world (Desai, 1976; p. 127). In spite of all these, the basic structure of the Indian economy remained the same, ironically based by the guaranteed return on the investment in the Indian railways, the entire financial capital came from Britain, not only that all other ancillary equipments, even the skilled workers of railways were imported from Britain.

Indian railways were the best markets for the British made items and all other machinery, sleeper, fishplates etc. also were borrowed from outside. Railway constructions in India brought a good fortune for the British ship owners simultaneously because from England all the manufactured materials e.g., large amount of iron and steel were required in the early stage for rail road, bridges, inclines, tunnel etc. which were transported. The Government of India took little initiations to develop the ancillary industry in the country. No expansions of heavy industries like coal, steel etc. took place in India. Moreover, the transport rates on small indigenous industries especially those situated in the distant places

from the ports posed impediments towards the growth of these sectors. In spite of all, railways played a major role towards making modern India. Railway did, however, commit dramatically to intrude in the stability and balance in north Indian agriculture production by opening up new avenues and prospects of marketing facilities hence exposed the economy to outside economic premises in the country and outside India (Derbyshire, 2001; p. 177). Railways always contributed towards expansion of more strong military administration, improving the law and order situation, enhancing the commerce and interregional transaction, encouraging rural agricultural enlargement.

The construction and establishment of railways had a great and colossal influence on the life of the Indian people and prepared the way to capitalist development of the country. At the same time it widened the drain of expenditure in terms of some fallacious reasons e.g. pioneering nature of works, lack of skilled labour, ignorance of local conditions, lack of experience, choice of broad gauge, high but unnecessary double tracking etc. In this background the historians argued that the main factor responsible for the high cost of railway building was the system of excessive guarantees which left no interest to the companies to reduce the cost of construction or operations. Surprisingly it was noticed that during the closing decades railways were constructed at a fast pace with the difficulties of great famines and epidemic of plague. While 17,308 miles of railways were constructed from 1850 to 1891, nearly 10, 746 miles of railways were constructed during more shorter period of time, i.e. only within thirteen years, from 1892 to 1905 (Chandra, 2006; p.82). It is true that railways played a major role in controlling the great famines and eradicating poverty. But to fight against famine it was more necessary and would be effective if the irrigation system of the country would be developed and upgraded rather to invest more on railways. Therefore, the interests of the Indian people were sacrificed in order to serve the British traders and investors. Above all, extreme drainage of economy decreased all the benefits that were brought by the railways. It gave huge job opportunities to the Englishmen for whom all the higher positions were reserved and the Indians were engaged mainly with the unskilled constructional works. No doubt, railways provided huge opportunities of industrial employment in colonial India and workshops contributed enormously towards this end. Indian railways in the early years proved to be the example of mismanagement and many errors. The European officials kept on misusing their authorities, dishonest activities,

continuous misdeeds etc. Financial irregularities became very common phenomenon during the early days of construction works. But peculiarly no steps and measures were taken against those activities and there was no legal system of prevention to reduce various types of disputes, abuses and irregular disbursements. Therefore malfunctions and corruptions in the early period of railway building had increased the interference of the government in the ownership and management of the Railway industry. It led to the employment of more strong and competent techno-bureaucrats in the later years.

Railways had a long term impact on the socio-cultural life of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indian industrialisation and urbanisation were supplementary to each other. Therefore, a new class had emerged and many changes were noticed, different aspects of agricultural people were also effected e.g. redistribution of population, higher income etc. were some of the major changes which the railway industry introduced in the country. It also turned the agricultural farmer into an industrial worker. It brought mobility in Indian population. Improved transport system began to revolutionise the economic and social life specially the system of untouchability was abolished, railways provided the scope of intermingling of people from various parts of the country, irrespective of their caste, creed, religions, race, linguistic differences etc.

From the above discussion it has become clear that the British colonial rulers had successfully destroyed the traditional economy of the colony and did not even supplement it with the equipments of modern capitalist economy. So, it can be said that the growth of capitalist economy proceeded towards a different path with strange conflicts, obstructions and immeasurable sufferings for the Indian people (Sen, 1977; p.21). This development of capitalist economy gave birth to the Indian industrial working class in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Establishment of railway industry in the 1850s in India provided the process of generating a labour force throughout the country. Interestingly, the romantic tales of pioneering heroism and exciting fulfilment had also a darker side characterised by incapacity, serious, errors, miscalculations and ignorance of the Indian and Indian conditions. Kerr said that it was also identified with prejudice at the less thoughtful end of the spectrum to intentional and blatant speculations, peculation, mismanagement and malfeasance at the other end (Kerr, 2006; p. 189).

Labour was the most deprived and unfortunate class in almost all the industrial countries in its inception and India was also not an exception. But Indian working class had a quite different historical background. In western countries the industrial workers were drawn mainly from cities. But in India most of the industrial workers belonged to their traditional village societies and in search of good living and in order to face themselves from the bondage of debt, these village dwellers were compelled to join the British industries. During the harvesting season they all returned back to their homelands. Another interesting feature was that only the poor landless agricultural labourer and marginalised peasants has participated in the industrial activities purely on temporary basis. Thus, these agricultural labourers could not become complete industrial workers and could not even get rid of casteism, racialism, superstition and harmful religious beliefs of middle ages. As a result of which it took more than three decades for the Indian workers to emerge and consolidate themselves as a separate class and establish their own distinct position and identity in the social and economic system.

Thousands of men, women and children were employed in the building of railways. Railway construction works required a good number of workers who were divided into various categories such as age, gender, culture, language, religion, skilled, unskilled etc. The railway workers had to work in the worksites where rail roads, bridges, tunnels, incline were constructed. The wages were too meagre hence the entire family had to work together for the survival.

The early history of modern India consisted of many black holes. Building the Indian's Railroad system was of immense importance, it paved the way to the making of not only modern India but modern South Asia as well and these holes had fabricated the historical understanding of the railways of India. Therefore, the labour history of India's railway past represented the biggest black holes. Perhaps railway workers had good deal with the constructions of industrial working class of the country. Railway workshops also engaged a good number of workers but the types of work were different. I. J Kerr had calculated that in the year 1961-62 in India 125 workshops employed 1,77,208 people (an increase from the 103 workshops with 1,12,000 employees in 1951) [Kerr, 2006; p. 243].

### **Workshop employment other than at Lahore, North Western Railway, 1925**

<b>Location and type of shop</b>	<b>Numbers employed</b>
Sukkur Locomotive and Carriage	1854
Karachi Wagon	788
Jhelum Bridge	698
Dhilwon, Creosoting Sleeper Depot.	199
Kalka, Locomotive and Carriage	146
Sukkur, Bridge	119
Quetta Locomotive Shed Workshop	78
Karachi, Gas Factory	76

**Source: Royal Commission on Labour, Railways: Written Evidence, vol. 8, pt. 1, 6.  
Kerr, 2006; p. 244.**

Railway workers were bound to be mobile. They had to move from one work site to another. There were a vast variations observed amongst the railway workers. Firstly, the difference was found between the men with that of the women and children on the basis of physical strength. Secondly, there were different types of unskilled works e.g. those who were engaged in digging of earth and rock, called excavators and those who carried these earth, rock and brick to the worksites were known as labourers. Coolies used to carry heavy burden in the construction sites of bridge and tunnel and excavators were mainly the children and women. Thirdly, another type of distinction was noticed between those who were effectively efficient at earth work and those who were less effective. The former were more experts in earth works or had more physical strength to finish more rock and earth works per day than the other. These skilled workers were termed as floating groups and these workers were viewed as more reliable as they came from distant places. Thus they did not have the tendency of going back to their villages for agricultural occupations. The existing artisan class carpenters, blacksmiths, masons etc. were engaged in railway constructions works in the various parts of the country. These skilled and trained workers were much needed for bridge and tunnel buildings. Interestingly, it can be said in the

background of the railway establishment during the colonial era a change in social structure was observed in the traditional Indian society. Railway industry consisted of the labourers from different places, different language groups, practicing different social customs, eating different food but staying together, unifying themselves to resist the European supervisors, thus serious changes had been noticed in the social landscapes. But these skilled labourers comprised only 20-25 percent of total railway construction workers.

Many difficulties and hardships had to be overcome, many lessons, some involving considerable human or financial cost had to be learned, triumphs more or less and individual loss occurred often. In the early days when large bridges were constructed out of which some got demolished as a result several construction workers were killed due to these accidents. Apart from this, as and when the epidemic diseases broke out in the work sites the entire assembled work force passed away. Young labouring children infant of their parents died due to the accidents. Not only them the engineers, contractors, colonial officials, skilled workers also passed away during this phase. In large number of worksites, sudden breakouts of epidemic diseases like cholera, kala jar, typhoid, small pox etc. killed huge number of workers. Among all these diseases malaria was the most deadly one. The reason behind the spread was mainly due to the unhealthy living conditions of the workers in the construction sites, a large number of masses stayed together without a proper sanitary system and in an atmosphere where there was no room for fresh air to breathe. During the hot summer days there was no water to drink and their endeavour to reservoir to meet the water crisis was frequently destroyed by strong winds, rains or storms. They lived particularly “nasty, short and brutish life.” The environment at the railway worksites was really dangerous as the living conditions were so explosive that it was associated with repeated outbreaks of cholera, malaria and pneumonia. All these diseases killed many railway construction workers and many other who came into contact with them. Life at railway worksite was depressive, deadly, harsh and primitive for the people who had been suffering from poverty and malnutrition. The people who suffered a lot and sacrificed their lives in making modern India, still remained in dark and stories of immense misery were left untold. Construction of Bhore Ghat inclines was the most toughest amongst the all, it took almost eight years of continuous effort which faced a lot of obstacles, huge loss of lives were associated with it. Weather and other threats like accidents etc. also existed. The workers did not have any

limitation on working hour, sometimes; they worked for twenty hours long at a stretch. In the later decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century the system of shifting duties was introduced in the worksites and the electrification system made it possible to continue the work without any break. Toiling men worked like devils. They had to work under glaring sun, flood waters, rains, chilling winters, sand, flames, noise etc. As the construction works had been continued to develop, the workforces became more easily managed and provided better sanitation, housing and medical facilities. The early days of the railway establishment were really strenuous, fatiguing and adverse for the life of the Indian workers. Throughout the early period of railway construction works the engineering community was mainly from England. The racial consideration played a major role in this regard. Ian Derbyshire had rightly coined that the growths in the size, stability and experience of this India-based expatriate community was accompanied from later 1880s by gradual change in outlook involving the emergence of a technologically syncretise indeed quasi-national Indian approach to civil and railway construction engineering (Derbyshire, 2001; p. 276).

The system of payment in the railway industry was quite amazing. Exploitation and deprivation were common and widespread. John Hurd observed that when productions were becoming more labour intensive, productivity of labour had invariably increased therefore, the combination of the change in management practices and labour's learning by doing must overcome the growing troubles in the industrial productions and technology must improve the negative effects on the number of workers (Hurd, 2007; p.339). But unfortunately, wages remained always low for those who worked hard. Therefore, the earth work done by an unskilled worker was Rs. 2-8 per one thousand cubic feet. The wages of masons and other skilled workers were little higher. The following table indicates the real picture of the wage system in the industries including the railways.

**Real Wages (1890-95 = 100)\***

Class of Labour	Average of Year			Year	
	1895+0	1900+0	1905+0	1910	1912
	1899	1904	1909		
<b>*Rural</b>					
Agricultural Labour	103	120	123	134	138
Village Artisans	105	122	124	135	138
<b>Urban</b>					
Skilled Labourer	104	119	120	132	134
Unskilled Labourer	106	122	126	135	145
Domestic Servants	100	111	108	117	116
<b>Cities</b>					
Skilled Labourer	105	118	120	131	130
Unskilled Labourer	104	117	120	131	132
Domestic Servants	102	113	111	118	115
<b>Industries</b>					
Jute	105	113	105	109	106
Cotton	101	106	100	106	106
Tea	101	96	90	98	95
Mining	105	129	128	148	137
Railways	97	99	97	108	101

**Enquiry into the Rise of Prices in India by K.L. Dutta, M.A.I., pp. 169-170; (Buchanan, 1966; p. 357)**

Industrialisation had not brought about much change in the economic life of the colonial people. Over the period, the British entrepreneur had developed the cheapest and most reliable method of carrying on the construction works, might be dangerous because it involved the direct supervision of the private railway companies and after 1870s, by the state itself. Payment structure was different between the Indian and the Europeans. Indians were

less paid for the same work than the Europeans or the Anglo Indians. According to historians Indian employees got slower promotion and less amenities including housing and medical relief and allowances for children's' educations (Menon & Mahajan, 2006; p.158). The whole process of employee recruitment including higher and mid-level officers, locomotive drivers, station masters, guards etc. was done by the British personnel.

**Railroad Workforce on December 31, 1890 by Category and Percentage**

General Administration		Traffic and Telegraph	Engineering	Locomotive and Carriage Shops	Total
European	373	1,514	491	2,229	4,607
Anglo European	485	2,121	505	2,562	5,673
Indian	13,785	53,101	119,017	66,507	252,413
Total	14,646	56,736	120,013	71,298	262,693

**Source: Parliamentary Papers, 1890 to 91, pp. 130-31, (Kerr, 2012; p. 88).**

By 1905 more than 25000 route mile were built and operated by different organisation much as private companies, state owned or managed by princely states. Railway workshops also employed a good number of workers and people started moving across the length and breath of the subcontinent. Interestingly, a bulk of railway workers were semi-proletariat because construction work was not the only way to their livelihood, they took it as temporary jobs and were more involved in village economy. But in early period there was an enormous crisis of labour faced by the contractors. These workers understood and realised their demands and effectiveness. In the early 1860s, several incidents of workers' resistances took place in different railway worksites, e.g. coolies in Trichinopoly district of Madrass or the workers of the Eastern Bengal Railway were able to convince their employers to sufficiently rise the rates of the earth work. Railway

construction workers proved to be of the most militant nature. Most important of all was the eruption in Bhore Ghat in 1859 where the working and living condition were always very harsh, unhealthy and dangerous as well. Above all the rate of payment was low and many times the payments were made late and less than what they were promised, therefore, they became furious and the coolies attacked the Europeans, the main reason of resentment was wage. Violence and lawlessness existed in almost all the construction worksites. Europeans supervisors were usually in habit of abusing the native workers physically. Not only the native railway workers but also Indian passengers travelling by trains were extremely ill-treated and humiliated by the Europeans even by the lower level European rail employees. Workers resistance and protests came in this regard as they faced the suppression and exploitations. Strikes and other modes of violent resistance were very common in the pre-independent era throughout the country. A few trains were bombed or otherwise disrupted. Railroad workers took up the nationalist cause with enthusiasm and labour grievances were intermingled with patriotic feeling and as a result of which a series of strikes by railroad workers had occurred in the railway industry. In the early twentieth century the nationalist movement also provided the necessary impetus to the railway workers movement. All India Railwaymen's Federation, the trade unions for the railway workers had the objective to support the freedom struggle of the country. In 1927, 2500 workers went on strike at Kharagpur supported by the workers at Liluah and led by the communists. A report stated that the six months strike was bloody but united, the twenties saw widespread strike not so the thirties (Menon and Mahajan, 2006; p. 161).

#### **Fate of Strikes, 1921-46**

<b>Demand wise</b>	<b>Compromised arrived</b>	<b>Enquiry promised</b>	<b>Position explained to the satisfaction of workers</b>	<b>Strikers yielded</b>
23	14	6	15	14

**Source: Menon & Mahajan, 2006; p.161.**

Railroad was the device of change towards social, cultural, moral, religious and political conditions of the millions and conceived it as a vehicle of modern India. Mark Tully regretted that though, the days of the Raj were now long gone, but the colonial legacy still survived. The Indian railways were considered as symbols of authority, so whenever there were strikes or disturbances in the country the railways became always the first and the soft target of the protestor's (Tully, 2006; p. 240).

## II

### **Development of the Railway Industry in Post Independent India till 1974**

In the previous section we have seen the process of the establishment of the railway industry during the British rule till 1947. In this section we have tried to analyse the initiatives taken by the Government of India for the development of the railway industry immediately after independence in the background of the overall development of the industrial sectors in the country. This section is an examination of the nature and growth of the Indian Railways till the period of 1974 under the Five Years Plans.

Before going on to discuss the days in the post colonial period in India, we must focus our attention on the years preceding independence i.e., up to 1947. The years from 1905 to 1947 were the years of difficulties, turbulent and confrontation in colonial India – indeed in the entire world. The aggressive and obliterated incidents of World War I and II, had significant impact on the Indian mass. In the thirties the railways faced severe world-wide economic depression and in India their earnings were insufficient to provide the guaranteed returns which became liabilities to the general revenues. Maintenance works were poor; renewals and replacements were also limited. And when it started recovering from the purge of economic depression, Second World War broke out in 1939. Second World War mainly had impacted on the process of industrialisation in India, it almost halted the growth in almost all the sectors specially the growth of railway industry. As under colonial rule, India automatically got involved in the World War II. The resources and

productive forces of India were supplied to the British War efforts. Thousands of Indians became soldiers and were sent to the countries of Middle East and Europe. During the war years Indian economy suffered a sharp decline in respect of industrial development and its structural growth. British colonial policy for Indian industries actually led to the stagnation of the entire process of economic development.

The period immediately after independence was very crucial for the Indian economy, as it was a period of transition in all respects, transition from two hundred years of colonial bondage to independent and sovereign country i.e., political transition, transition from agrarian economy to industrial economy, transition from rural agrarian society to urban industrial society, social transition though the process had already been started during the British rule. In the month of February, 1947 the decision of transfer of power was declared and ultimately the process ended up with a line of division in South-East Asia which partitioned the Indian subcontinent into two sovereign countries i.e., India and Pakistan. The nationalists won the battle into an immense tragedy, massive violence among the Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs who killed each other throughout the country which affected mostly the railway industry. After independence the Government of India had stressed on the development of heavy and key industries for developing the infrastructure of the country. The progress of economy in one country was very much dependent on the provision of adequate and well developed transport facilities (Mullick, 1954; p.1189). Industrialisation in India was needed not only for the growth of income of the people and simultaneously for the government but for enhancing the scope for modernisation of the agricultural sector.

It was an instrument of eradicating the imbalances from the field of social and regional sectors and to create employment opportunity for the vast Indian population. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India desired to follow the line of socialistic pattern of economic development which must be encompassed with the 'Planning', the overall planning of agriculture and industrial sectors. Nehru was of the opinion that as an underdeveloped country, without strategic plan and modernising approach India could not develop and growth could not be achieved. When India achieved its independence, the low level of capitalist development of the country was reflected in its existing industrial structure.

India in the year 1950, decided to launch Five Year Plans for its compound growth and whose benefits must reach to every sections of the society. Indian planners including Nehru were of the opinion that the state had to play a major role in controlling the economic process of the country for rapid all round transformation of the country which had been suffering from extreme colonial exploitation and drainage of economy. Therefore, the public sector occupied a dominant role in the process of planned economic development of the country in the early years of the plan process. During the period 1950 to 1974 there were four Five Year Plans completed and in the year 1974 April the Fifth Five Year Plan had started. In these entire periods of National Planning importance and emphasis had been given on the growth and expansion of heavy industries. The principle objective of planned development of India in the context of Socialist pattern of society was:

- a) A considerable increase in national income so as to raise the level of living in the country;
- b) Rapid industrialization with broad emphasis on the development of basic and heavy industries;
- c) A large expansion of employment opportunities; and
- d) Reduction of inequalities in income and wealth and a more even distribution of economic power (Patel, 1980; p. 43).

In this background the major problem arose with transport facilities. The existing pattern of India's transport system must bring substantial changes for the successful implementation of the first Five Year Plan. Industrial growth required some basic infrastructure facilities like transport, communication, power, projects designs and techniques skilled technical and managerial personnel and political stability in the sense that external factors should not obstruct or interrupt industrial progress (Kabra, 1974; p.107). Main difficulty of the railway transportation was the problem of rehabilitation. Kerr had rightly pointed out that partition provided a significant limit to the integrative consequences of transportation and communication technologies; the railroad of colonial India facilitated the interconnections that slowly knit the economy and polity of the country. The railroad did help to unite India and Indians (Kerr, 2012; p. 141). A large portion of railroad was divided and got incorporated in Pakistan. The worst affected of all the railways was the North

Western Railway, which was the largest among all the railways during colonial rule but after independence it had only one sixth of the total e.g., from 6,887 miles remained only 18.55 miles and the same happened with Bengal Assam Railways which had 3666 miles but partition left only 1942 miles in India.

In the first phase of war, the Indian railways, despite the shortage, had to release wagons, locomotives and track material for the Middle East. Over eight percent of metre gauge locomotives, fifteen percent of metre gauge wagons, four thousand miles of track and four million sleepers were released for use of the overseas and in India on military projects. Twenty six branch lines were dismantled. Railway workshops were also diverted for producing items required for war. Then due to partition, loss of Karachi port again caused the diversion of traffic to Bombay which created too much of burden here. Tracks were also in bad conditions.

#### **Rolling Stock Requirement for Renewals 1951-56**

<b>Locomotive</b>	<b>Coaching Vehicles</b>	<b>Goods Wagons</b>
Number on line on Class I 8,209 Railways on March 31, 1952	19,193	199,094
Estimated Average Annual 190 Renewals	650	5,000
Number requiring 1,050 replacement on March 31, 1952 being over 40 years of economic life in the case of locomotives and wagons and 30 years in the case of coaching vehicles	5,514	21,418
Stock over aged and 1,604 replaced but retained in service on 31 March, 1951	1,381	25,838
Number expected to 1,042 become over age between March 31, 1951 and March 31, 1956	3,021	26,115

**Source: Report of First Five Year Plan by Planning Commission of India, 1956; p. 2.**

Surprisingly there were increasing demands for railroad transportation specially the passenger traffic, e.g. the passengers traffic had increased from 17,780 millions in 1938-39 to 39,720 millions in 1950-51 and freight carriage from 21,786 to 26,581 million tons. The

rehabilitation programme of the railways had thus to take into account the two separate problems of deteriorated assets and the needs of the increased traffic. In this situation the Government of India had allotted three crores each year for the entire plan period for improving the passenger amenities. The volume of goods traffic was massively increasing every year which on the other hand reflected the progress of industries and development of different projects of the country. For rehabilitations and maintenance programme railways as public utility sector was allocated an average expenditure of not less than 80 crores per year or 400 crores in aggregate. But 320 crores had to be raised by the railways from its own resources. According to the Report of the Planning Commission, the First Five Year Plan had devoted to rehabilitation and modernization of rolling stock and fixed assets. Provide better amenities for the travelling public and better housing and welfare for the staff, improve capacity and slum of the railways and daily loading. Against the original allotment of Rs. 400 crores including Rs, 150 crores on account of current depreciation, the total depreciation and the total expenditure on the railway programme in the five years of the Plan was expected to be the order of Rs. 432 crores.

Details of the estimated outlay under different heads during First Five Year Plan are set out below:

<b>Rehabilitation and Additions</b>	<b>Allocation envisaged in the Plan (Rs. In Crores)</b>	<b>Total Outlay (Rs. In Crores)</b>
Rolling stock, plant and machinery	207.96	253.44
Track and bridges	70.47	64.41
Other structural and engineering works including Integral Coach Factory, Chittaranjan Locomotive Works and Ganga Bridge Project, Collieries and Ports	45.90	49.96
Restoration of dismantled lines, new lines 34,18 and electrification	34.18	33.20
Passenger amenities	15.00	13.29
Staff quarters and staff welfare works	24.09	20.52
Miscellaneous items	2.40	2.75*
<b>Total</b>	<b>400.00</b>	<b>432.07</b>

\*The reduction is on account of the items in stores balances and credit taken for released materials and other recoveries.

**Source: Report of Second Five Year Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1961; p. 3.**

In spite of all these, the progress was not at all satisfactory, it had not achieved all its targets e.g., out of 727 locomotives it produced only 510, progress in doubling tracks, restoration of dismantled lines, construction of new lines, marshalling yards, remodelling of stations, workshops, employees' quarters etc. all were very slow or not achieved the desired goal (Mullick, 1954; p.1200).

**Programmes of Expenditure on the Railways Plan**  
(in Crores of Rupees)

Categories of Expenditure	Total Provision for Five Years	1951-52	1952-53	1953-54	Total
Rolling Stock and Machinery	207.96	36.36	33.23	42.19	109.78 (52.8)*
Track	64.87	9.72	13.46	9.56	32.74 (50.0)
Bridges	5.60	1.00	0.50	0.45	1.95 (34.8)
Other Structural and Engineering Works	43.41	6.68	7.24	9.25	23.17 (52.4)
Collieries and Ports	2.49	0.16	0.10	0.16	0.42 (16.9)
Labour Welfare, Staff quarters and other Welfare works	24.09	3.74	3.14	4.61	11.49 (47.7)
Restoration of dismantled lines	56.60	0.50	3.71	4.18	8.39 (44.3)
New lines including electrification of track and major bridges	28.52	6.76	-	-	6.76
Passenger amenities	15.00	2.45	2.34	2.59	7.88 (49.2)
Miscellaneous items	2.40	5.49	-3.54	-3.73	-1.78
Total	400.00	70.86	60.18	69.26	200.30 (50.00)

\*Figures within brackets indicate percentages of the total provision under each head.

**Source: Reba Mullick, 1954; p.1189.**

The Second Five Year Plan was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1956 covering the period upto 31 March, 1961. It mainly emphasised on the development of heavy and basic large-scale industries. For accelerating economic growth, rapid industrialisation was must and this was focussed. India during Second Plan period decided to undertake an industrialisation programme which must strengthen the capital base, enhance productive capacity and efficiency and accelerate the flow of new investment (Ghosh, 1981; p.101). Surprisingly, it

did not provide any new assurance and allocation for the transport industry. Unless and until the transportation system of any country was developed, nothing could produce any benefit. Ghosh raised some important questions: a) volume of transport needed to implement the production targets of the plan; and b) capital investment necessary for this purpose (Ghosh, 1956; p. 797). Rehabilitation was the principal task for the rapid development of the communication and transport industry under the Second Five Year Plan. It emphasised on the development of the well-knit railway system throughout the country. The entire modes of transport systems of the country including road and water ways had to be combined with the major industries like coal, steel etc. Second Plan apprehended to enable proper and effective co-operation among all means of transport services. By this time Indian Railways represented a total of Rs.974 crores of investment and became the largest national undertaking. During the Second Plan Indian Railways had taken up many new initiatives to improve its infra-structure facilities and thus, diesel and electric motive power, improved wagons and coaches, signalling systems etc. were introduced. Indian Railways was expected to ensure safe and secure railway operations along with securing economy and efficiency. At the same time it aimed at reaching increased the capacity of rolling stock. In the light of the production targets of the Second Plan, the additional goods traffic requiring to be handled has been assessed as follows:

**Additional Originating Traffic**  
(million Tons)

Coal	20.0
Steel and raw materials	18.0 (increase in pig iron and for steel plants steel production equals 5 million tons)
Cement	5.0*
Total for specific increases	43.0
Increase in miscellaneous traffic at the rate of 5 percent per annum i.e., 25 percent during the Plan	17.8

\*The target for increase in productions of cement has since been revised upwards. In deciding the location of new factories the impact on rail transport in each case will have to be examined. It may be possible to direct some of the additional production to movement of coastal shipping or by road.

**Source: Report of Second Five Year Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1961;**  
**p. 4.**

Railways were expected to increase in carrying traffic from 115 million tons to 120 million tons and total traffic handled might be 180 million tons. It allotted 900 crores with 225 crores as depreciation costs for railway development. Suitable adjustments had been made in the programme for augmenting the capacity of the railways to handle increased traffic so as to economise capital investment to the extent possible. The following statement provided by the Second Plan was the estimated distribution of total amount of Rs. 1125 crores over the years.

		<b>Provision (Rs. In Crores)</b>
1.	Rolling Stock	380
2.	Workshops, Plant and Machinery	65
3.	Track Renewals	100
4.	Bridge Works	33
	New Bridges	18
	Ganga Bridge	09
	New Bridges	06
5.	Line Capacity Works including Expansion of Good Sheds	186
6.	Signalling and Safety Works	25
7.	Electrifications	80
8.	New Constructions	66
9.	Staff Welfare and Staff Quarters	50
10.	Stores Departments	07
11.	Training Schools	03
12.	Railway Users' Amenities	15
13.	Other Projects including Vizagapatnair Port	115
14.	Railways' Share in Road Transport Undertakings	10
15.	Stores Suspense	50
16.	Extra for Imported Steel*	40
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,125</b>

\*To be obtained by the Railways from outside the Equalisation Pool.

**Source: Report of Second Five Year Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1961;**

**p. 6.**

Second Five Year Plan also emphasised on the welfare of their employees, housing and other amenities, medical facilities etc. were also highlighted. Nevertheless Indian Railways had not achieved the wartime efficiency in its operations or productions. In this economic situation and financial background Railways had taken some decisions to

reorganise its administrative system. It integrated the princely states in the year 1948-49 and started the process of regrouping in order to improve its operations and pave out any kind of disturbance, it also had brought major changes in the overall management, financial integrity, maintenance work.

In 1967, the Government of India appointed the Administrative Reforms Commission to investigate the different areas and activities of the Government. G. S Khosla had pointed out that the Commission highlighted that the Railways owned by the nation or its largest public sector industry should be permitted to function on sound business principles within the framework of the policy laid down by the Parliament (Khosla, 2001; p. 229). Railways were regrouped under six zones of administrations e.g., Southern Railway, Northern Railway, South Eastern Railway, Eastern Railway, North Eastern Frontier Railway, Central Railway. According to the Third Five Year Plan the Railway Development Programme had been formulated as the basis of the originating traffic reaching a figure of about 245 million tons in 1965-66 i.e., in the last year of the Plan. The estimated traffic of general goods and iron ore by railways showed some improvements. Suburban passenger traffic also increased by three percent per annum. Total estimated cost Rs. 1325 crores was decided as following Railway Development Programme in the Third Plan.

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Programme</b>	<b>Estimated Cost (Rs. In Crore)</b>
1.	Rolling Stock	510
2.	Workshops, Machinery and Plant	62
3.	Track Renewal	170
4.	New Lines	147
5.	Electrification	70
6.	Signalling and Safety Works	25
7.	Traffic Facilities (Lines Capacity Works)	183
8.	Bridge Works	25
9.	Other Electrical Works	8
10.	Other Structural Works	15
11.	Staff Quarters and Staff Welfare	50
12.	Users' Amenities	15
13.	Road Services	10
14.	Stores Suspense	35
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,325</b>

**Source: Report of Third Five Years Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1966; p. 3.**

The Third Five Years Plan had targeted to achieve increased productivity and to connect the basic industries like coal, cement, iron and steel etc. It also aspired to reach its estimated traffic movements including goods and the passengers. During the Third Plan period import and export business were enhanced, thus the speedy transportation of the commodities like cotton, textile, jute, salt, paper, sugar etc. were needed. Consequently a proper and compact railway transport system must be required. Therefore, the developmental programmes in the different segments of the railway industry were incorporated e.g. increase the number of workshops, improved line capacity, electrification, upgradation of signalling system, construction of lines, bridge works, employees' welfare and for meeting all these objectives 50 crores were allocated. In spite of all these initiatives significant growth in performance was not noticed in the industrial sector including the

railways and surprisingly not even in agriculture. Critics of India's political economy observed that the relative stagnancy was accompanied by rapid increase in prices across the various sectors of the Indian economy, with 1961-62 as the base, the all commodity wholesale price index moved from 94.3 in 1951-52 to 122.3 in 1964-65 while between 1964-65 to 1974-75 it increased from mere 2.55 percent per annum to 8.87 percent per annum (Kerr, 1997; p. 2134). According to the Planners, transport had a crucial role in economic development. Fourth Five Years Plan envisaged for modernisation of equipments, increased in freight and passenger traffic, improve the efficiency of the entire system and reduce the cost. It also emphasised on the conversion work of the lines, i.e., from the metre gauge to broad gauge. The following table showed the increasing trend in freight traffic from 1960-61 to 1968-69.

**Growth of Freight Traffic on the Railways since 1960-61  
(Million Tonnes)**

Sl. No.	Item	1960-61	1965-66	1968-69
(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1.	Steel and raw materials	14.3	23.7	25.1
2.	Coal	50.4	66.7	68.6
3.	Iron ore for export	2.6	5.2	8.0
4.	Cement	6.5	8.6	9.4
5.	Petroleum products	4.7	7.5	7.9
6.	Food grains	12.7	14.5	15.9
7.	Fertilizers	1.4	2.5	5.0
8.	Other general goods	46.6	53.6	48.7
9.	Railway materials	17.0	20.7	15.4
10.	Total	156.2	203.0	204.0

**Source: Report of Fourth Five Years Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1974; p. 6).**

The Fourth Five Years Plan had incorporated two broad trends in the growth of passenger traffic in the past. First, the increase of non-suburban passenger traffic in terms of passenger kilometres has been greater than in terms of passengers originating showing an increase in the lead of traffic. Secondly, the increase in suburban traffic has been much faster than in non-suburban traffic (Report of the Fourth Five Years Plan, Planning Commission of India, 1974; p. 6). Fourth Five Years Plan provided an increase of twenty percent in passenger vehicle because during the Third Five Years Plan it only achieved seventeen percent. Four Five Years Plan allotted 1000 crores of rupees for Railway Development Programme and 50 crores of rupees were allocated for metropolitan transport. The main components of the outlay are:

### Outlay for Railways

(Rs. In Crores)

Sl. No.	Item	Plan Outlay	From depreciation reserve fund	Total
0	1	2	3	4
1.	Rolling Stock	397	223	620
2.	Workshops	28	2	30
3.	Machinery and Plant	7	8	15
4.	Track renewal	-	200	200
5.	Track renewal	8	20	28
6.	Bridge works	275	40	315
7.	Signalling and safety	27	13	40
8.	Electrification	81	1	82
9.	Other electrical works	4	8	12
10.	New lines	83	-	83
11.	Staff welfare	13	2	15
12.	Staff quarters	27	3	30
13.	Users' amenities	20	-	20
14.	Other specified works	5	5	10

(Rs. In Crores)

Sl. No.	Item	Plan Outlay	From depreciation reserve fund	Total
15.	Road services	10	-	10
16.	Inventories	15	-	15
17.	Total	1000	525	1525
18.	Metropolitan transport	50	-	50
19.	Grand Total	1050	525	1575

Source: Report of Fourth Five Years Plan, Planning Commission, 1974; pp.7-8.

#### Additions and Replacements in Rolling Stock Programme

Sl. No.	Item	Rolling Stock on line at the end of 1968-69	Programme for the Fourth Plan Additions Replacements Total		
			(3)	(4)	(5)
1.	Locomotives	11555	652	607	1259
2.	Steam	10046	-	161	161
3.	Diesel	996	369	389	758
4.	Electric	513	283	57	340
5.	Wagons (in terms of 4 wheelers), Coaching Stock	484985	76192	25340	101532
6.	Coaches	327	3250	31	6418
7.	Rain cars	29	50	68	50
8.	Electric multiple units	1562	596	172	768

Source: Report of Fourth Five Years Plan, Planning Commission, 1974; p.8.

The production of wagons, diesel automotive, shunter was raised. It gave thrust on electric locomotive production i.e., it highlighted on the manufacturing of equipments and economic operations of Indian Railways, doubling of tracks as much as possible and within

1973-74 capacity of railway productions must be steer up. But in practice, the picture of the industrial growth including railways was somewhat hazy. Industrial sector had not reflected the desired growth, not even achieved the claimed progress. There was a vast difference between the sectoral targets and actual rates of growth. Ironically the performance of public sector undertakings was satisfactory; at least it did not show any declining trend.

### **Growth rates in Industry and Agriculture**

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Plan</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Plan</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Plan</b>	<b>Annual Plans</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Plan</b>	<b>5<sup>th</sup> Plan</b>
Agriculture Production	4.1	4.0	1.4	6.2	2.9	4.2
Industrial Production	7.3	6.6	9.0	2.0	4.7	5.9
Per Capita Consumption	1.7	0.8	0.1	2.0	0.4	2.3

**Source: Alok Ghosh, 1981; p.111.**

Most important concern of the Indian economy during this period was the prevailing atmosphere which was in agricultural sector almost gloomy and the performance of industries was quite unhopeful during the first few years of Planning. But it was a consequence of some other reasons, e.g. typical behaviour of monsoon, different types of labour unrests, basic investment policy and types of investments in public sector had been stepped up in paper but perhaps the actual expenditure was much below than the corresponding provisions (Bhave, 1970; p. 2015). During the years 1972-73, Indian economy had suffered by different constraints; the price index also had shown a general declining trend.

### Selected Economic Indicators

Sl. No.		1968-69	1969-70	1970-71	1971-72	1972-73
		(percentage change over previous years)				
1.	National Income at constant price	0.7	7.3	4.6	1.5 to 2.0+	1.5 to 2.0+
2.	Agriculture production	-1.5	6.7	7.3	-1.7	-
3.	Food grains production	-1.1	5.8	9.0	-3.5	-
4.	Industrial productions	6.9	6.6	2.5	4.5	7.0++
5.	Electricity generated	14.1	14.3	8.6	8.8	10.5++
6.	Wholesale prices	-1.1	3.7	5.5	4.0	8.8***
7.	Money supply	8.1	10.8	11.1	12.9	12.3@
8.	Imports	-4.9	-17.1	3.3	10.9	-7.8*
9.	Exports	13.3	4.1	8.6	4.7**	23.1*
10	Freight carried by Railway	5.3	2.5	-0.7	4.6	5.9*

+ Estimated

\*April-November, 1972 compared to April-November, 1972

\*\*Includes exports to Bangladesh worth Rs. 38 crores

++ April-August, 1972 compared to April-August, 1971

@ 12<sup>th</sup> January, 1973 compared to January 14, 1972

\*\*\*April-December, 1972 compared to April-December, 1971

**(Source: Economic Survey of India, Government of India Press; 1972-73; p. 2).**

The only hope was observed in the increase of employment in the organized industrial sector. Due to rise in world prices of primary commodities, India's export growth was satisfactory during these periods. Alok Ghosh analysed that with the wholesale price

index going up nearly 23 percent during 1973-74 – the last year of Fourth Five Year Plan, the economic situation further deteriorated and the poorer sections together with fixed income groups experience unprecedented hardships (Ghosh, 1981; p. 107).

Surprisingly the Fifth Five Years Plan which was launched in April, 1974 had given much importance to the public sectors, it allotted Rs. 39,303 crores against Rs. 15, 902 crores in the Fourth Five Years Plan. Fifth Plan for the first time presented somewhat mature decision to handle the problem of poverty due to massive under-employment. Thus, it had also impacted the public sector undertakings including the Railways.

### **III**

#### **The Railway Working Class Since independence till 1974**

This section of the chapter examines the nature and development of the industrial working class of India especially, the railway workforce from 1947 till 1974. It discusses the policy making process of the newly independent country. Emphasis had been given on the labour policy of the country in order to bring rapid economic development during the different Plans i.e., from First Five Years to Fourth Five Years Plan. The Indian Railways had become the largest and oldest Public Sector Industries in India and the biggest employer of industrial workers. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the workers perceived that there was a need for collectiveness to improve their wage and working conditions. Interestingly railway workers from the very beginning were militant by nature even during the colonial rule. During the freedom movement these workers were the main recruits to the movement and they also expected the nationalist leaders to support their struggle. Railway industry employed various types of workers who belonged to many occupational segments, such as coolie labour to clerks, drivers, guards, skilled craftsmen, sophisticated engineers, high level managers etc. Ironically the few handfuls of management staff directed the work of tens of thousands of the Indians. Various types of workers had various types of problems and resentments. We however discuss the labour policy and labour condition in the background of the Five Year Plans.

Freedom from two hundred years of colonial bondage roused immense hopes, desires and aspirations among all the sections of people in India. The new era of independent administration by the Indians ushered in new political and economic changes. In 1947 the transfer of power had altered the political scenario in India. The development of modern industries in the second half of the nineteenth century had led to the emergence of a totally new class of the Indian society. This class had suffered from years of deprivations and exploitations. During the colonial rule the workers fought with the imperialists and capitalist powers and after independence the struggle continued. Independence ushered in new political power held by the capitalist and the landlord classes of India, whose economic interests and therefore political interests ran directly counter to those of the working class, it was now a rule of capital and rule of the exploiting minority against exploited majority (Sen, 1997; p. 379). Indian Railways had faced lots of troubles due to the violence and upheavals of the partition transition from colonial to post colonial India. The long awaited demand of Indianisation of the railway employees created a huge vacuum in the Indian Railways after independence. Many upper and middle management staff were from Britain who left their jobs. Apart from staffing problems it had been already suffering from war year crisis, another issue was that a major portion of railway tracks ended up in Pakistan. The problems were vigorous and severe but must be solved quickly and efficiently. But the concept of modern India was associated with the engines of change. Railroads had reshaped and precipitated several variations in the social, cultural and economic life of the Indians in the post independent era. The railway authorities always acknowledged the requirements of the mass of the people as insisted and comprehended by governments, politicians and people of the country. But the wheels of the nation proceeded according to the policies and plans formulated by the British rulers. Government could not set any goal for the progress of the industry, rather it followed the same principles and procedures as existed from 1850s onwards. The Railway Board executed all of its policies and controlled its financial activities through its budget under the Railway Ministry.

Independence was yielded with inflationary crisis and tremendous price rise. For strengthening the capitalist base of the country and rapid economic development, the policy makers entered into the era of planning and progress First Five Year Plan entrusted that economic stability of any country was essentially dependent on the factors related to the

labourers. The workers were the principle instrument towards the achievement of the goals set by the Planning Commission. First Plan provided the provisions to fulfil the basic needs of the workers i.e., food, clothing and shelter. It aimed at removing social and economic constraints towards attaining the educational opportunities, social securities and other amenities, improved health services and remain efficient. It also spoke of the role of the workers' association or trade unions in successful implementations of the plan in every industrial sector. It focussed on the harmonious industrial relations regarding the effective functioning of the P.S.U.s. P.S.U.s gave importance on greater efficiency of working with no private gain or profit. Basically the profits were contributed to the wealth of the nation. First Plan conceived the workers as responsible for the industrial productions on the one hand and better work and greater efficiency for the country on the other. It held that wages in P.S.U.s should not be less favourable than the prevailing in the neighbouring private enterprises; the benefits of all labour laws which are applicable to the workers must be available. Workers must get favourable working conditions and welfare amenities. They must try to maintain peace and did not interrupt the smooth functioning of the industries. First Plan had accepted the fact that the workers of the country were not satisfied with the structure of wages. But the Indian Planners were of the opinion that any upward movement of the wages would hamper the economic stability of the country and the claims of the labourers should be dealt with liberally which might help them to attain living wage standard. In spite of these policies favouring the workers demands, planning's were designed and served in the interests of the capitalist class of the country. First Plan was not able to satisfy the minimum basic needs of the workers and toiling masses of the country. Statistics showed that in the perspective of the rise of price of basic commodities, real wages were fluctuating, never showed any consistency. Labour historians had admitted that the living and working conditions of the factories and the workers were not at all even reasonably moderate.

The Second Five Year Plan was launched in 1956 in the milieu of the emerging importance of the labourers for the steady growth of the country's economic system. It tried to safeguard the worker's financial and social security and abolish the years long neglect and ignorance about the workers' rights. It agreed to bridge the gap between the real earnings of the workers and their wages. Second Plan accepted that suitable alterations of the First Five Years Plan must be made and recognised the necessity of monetary incentives

and other facilities for the workers. I recognised that the P.S.Us must become aware of the interests of labour but indiscipline behaviour of the labour, haulage of production etc. should not impede country's industrial progress and labour policy must furnish this end. According to the Second Five Years Plan, for successful implementation of the Plan increased association of labour with management is necessary. Such measures help in –

- a) Promoting increased productivity for the general benefit of the enterprise, the employees and the community;
- b) Giving employees a better understanding of their role in the working of industry and of the process of productions; and
- c) Satisfying the worker's urge for self-expression thus leading to industrial peace, better relations and increased co-operation (Second Five Years Plan Report, Planning Commission of India, 1961; p.4).

It also envisaged a fare wage policy which aimed at raising the real wage requirements. One surprising feature had been noticed in this regard. It incorporated some disciplinary policies for the workers e.g., the socialistic pattern of society ensured the worker's demand to improve his economic and social conditions but at the same time the workers should also play a responsible and efficient role to achieve the desired goal of the country. It made provisions for penalising illegal strikes, go slow, lockouts etc. and held that increased productivity only led to increased wages. This attitude of the Government towards P.S.Us ultimately paved the way to strong resistance by the workers against the management.

The Third Five Years Plan was no exception. It declared that labour policy in India must be associated with the specific needs of the situation to the industries and working class must accommodate the requirements of planned economy. To deal with the above unrests in various industries the government assumed power to interfere and argued for:

- 1) Inter union rivalry as unfortunate for the development of the industries and unhealthy for its workers;
- 2) Focussed on the resolving any dispute or differences between the workers and the employees;

- 3) Minimum wage guarantee for the economically weaker section and providing protection to them;
- 4) Facilitate welfare of the workers.

The improvement of working conditions can result in greater productive efficiency on the part of the workers (Third Five Year Plan Report, Planning Commission of India, 1961; p. 6). However, these three Planning's were designed to monitor the pace of capitalism within the structure of 'mixed' economy which ultimately strengthened the hands of the capitalists. The working class in the post colonial period too had suffered from several complications and also exploited in other manner. Consequently they resorted to violent means to express their grievances. The following table had shown the picture of industrial disputes in India for twelve years from 1951-62.

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Stoppages</b>	<b>No. of Workers involved</b>	<b>Working days lost</b>
1951	1,071	691,321	3,818,928
1952	963	809,242	3,336,961
1953	772	466,607	3,382,608
1954	840	477,138	3,372,630
1955	11,666	527,767	5,697,848
1956	1,203	715,130	6,992,040
1957	1,630	889,371	6,429,319
1958	1,524	928,560	7,797,585
1959	1,531	693,616	5,633,148
1960	1,538	986,268	6,536,517
1961	1,357	511,860	4,918,755
1962	1,491	705,059	6,120,576

(Source: Sen, 1997; p. 385)

An official review had succinctly put up the trends of wage of factory labour during the first two plans according to which, “Though the average annual money wages per worker show a rise in even prior to the beginning of First Five Year Plan, the real wages of the factory workers reached the pre-war level only in 1953, when the increase in money wages more than compensated for the rise of the cost of living...During the Second Plan period though the money wages level of the factory workers continued to raise...the real wage level showed a fall...It was only in 1961 that the 1956 level of real wages per factory workers was restored” (Sen, 1997; p. 384). The First Central Pay Commission was appointed before independence and it recommended in May 1947. The cost of living index considered by it was 1939=100 and fixed it on the question of dearness allowance believing that price hike had touched the peak in 1947. Government employees were very much unhappy with all its recommendations. Recommendation of the Second Pay Commission made them furious and violent as it completely neglected the principle of minimum need based wage system. The rate of price rise and inflationary spiral could not be managed if the recommendations were implemented exactly as they were determined by the Commission.

### Real Earnings

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

(Source: Pocket Book of Labour Statistics, 1977-78)

The needs of the workers must be met in order to eliminate their discontentment and to improve their productivity and efficiency, the employer must consider the following factors:

- (1) Workers' economic requirements must be fulfilled;
- (2) His need for security remained satisfied;
- (3) Working conditions were healthy;
- (4) His social prerequisites should be accomplished.

In this context of acute inflationary crisis the workers had to manage their livelihood during the period of the 1950s to 1970s.

However, Indian Railways was the most effective organisation and whose networks directly influenced the life of many Indians and indirectly everyone. It was a huge organisation employing fourteen lakh permanent and more than two and half lakh casual workers in the year 1972-74. Each and every sector of economy in India had directly and indirectly depended on the Indian Railways. But the railway workforce continued to be exceptionally complex and segmented by diverse types of ranks and positions. More than eight lakh employees consisting of porters, gang men, cleaners, points men , sweepers, watermen, workshop employees, workers employed in loco sheds, train examiners, depots-ferries labour employed in lines etc. were generally known and called as the working class of the Indian Railways. It was said that one in every four hundred Indians was a railway employee and one family in every hundred was supported by the railways (Rao, 1974; p.182). Indian Railways (I.R.) had several characteristics which had separated railway industry from other P.S.U.s.

**Class wise Distribution of Railway Employees (QOS)**

	<b>1957</b>	<b>1971</b>
Class I	26 (0.3)	37 (0.3)
Class II	8 (0.1)	39 (0.3)
Class III	3,544 (35.5)	5,914 (42.2)
Class IV	6,395 (64.1)	7,997 (57.2)
Total	9,973 (100)	13,986 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

**Source: Government of India, Ministry of Finance, Report of the Third Central Pay Commission, 1973, p. 11.**

(See: Narshima Reddi, 1979; p.1651)

The basic dilemma confronting their employees is the dual positions of the Government of India as the sovereign power and guardian of public interest on the one hand and as an employer on the other (Reddy, 1979; p.1652).

### Department-wise Employment in Indian Railways as on March 31, 1973

Departments	All the Nine Zone Railways	Production Units			Total
		CLW	DLW	ICF	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Administrations	36,284 (2.6)	454	379	429	37,546 (2.7)
Accounts	29,563 (2.2)	499	261	321	30,644 (2.2)
Civil Engineering	2,93,342 (21.4)	498	639	414	2,95,313 (20/9)
Signal and Tele Communication	49,837 (3.6)	44	--	-	49,881 (3.5)
Transport	1,90,088 (13.5)	-	-	-	1,90,088 (13.5)
Commercial	1,10,320 (8.0)	-	-	-	1,10,320 (.8)
Mechanical Engineering	4,29,243 (31.3)	9,074	3,314	9,453	4,51,084 (31.9)
Stores	36,581 (2.7)	806	715	516	38,618 (2.7)
Electrical	92,969 (6.8)	923	622	1,143	95,657 (6.8)
Medical	49,111 (3.6)	604	84	-	49,799 (3.5)
Railway Protection Force	54,826 (4.0)	507	236	469	56,038 (4.0)
Railway Board and other Office	-	-	-	-	8,029
Total	13,72,164 (100)	13,809	6,270	12,745	14,13,017 (100)

Note: CLW: Chittaranjan Locomotive Works , DLW: Diesel Locomotive Works, Varanasi  
ICF : Integral Coach Factory, Madras. Figures in parentheses represent percentages. Data on department-wise distribution of employment in the Railway Board and other offices are not available.

**Source: Ministry of Railways, Supplement to the Indian Railways, Report and Accounts 1972-73, Statistical Statement, Delhi, 1974.**

As an industry, railways and other public sectors enjoy the matters like living and working conditions, payments, industrial and social securities, health and education facilities but all the provisions of Acts like Payment of Wages Act 1839, Factories Act 1948, Trade Union Act 1926 or Industrial Disputes Act 1947 were not applicable to the railway workers. Some Acts which were specifically applicable for the railway employees sometimes contradictory to some parts of Indian Railways Act 1890 or Indian Railway Establishment Code. Some peculiar features had evolved in the Indian Railways over the years. Few disciplinary rules, regulations and measures which were applicable to the Central Government employees were equally applicable to the railway workers. But certain distinct characteristics had predominantly prevailed in the railway industry e.g. wage fixation, right to revolt like strikes, lockouts or mass sick etc. right to trade union activities, measures to settle the industrial disputes etc. Narashima Reddy had mentioned that the organisations of railway employees had been repeatedly demanding though in vein, that railwaymen be treated as industrial employees and their employment conditions be governed by the Statutes that were applicable to other industrial employees (Reddy, 1979; p. 1652).

In the year 1969 the Fourth Five Years Plan was launched and it gave emphasis on the development of transport especially the railway system. According to the Fourth Five Years Plan the main schemes under railways were expected to generate a large volume of employment related to the conversion of metre gauge into broad gauge, doubling of tracks, expansion of suburban traffic, construction of bridges, laying of new lines, building of quarters for staff and provision of mass transit facilities in the metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi (Reports of the Fourth Five Years Plan, 1974; p.7). The Planners expected to increase employment opportunities in the transport sector and I.R. comprised of most reliable and significant transport system of the country. Indian Railway is the world leader in the provision of passenger service. It was reported that Indian Railways had a large number of passenger coaches and innumerable seating capacity. Moreover, during the Fourth Five Years Plan, the transport industries including railways must utilise its full potentialities regarding the employment. It also expected to grow first and must improve the economic and social status of the workers. Another important aspect which was noticed in this period was the increase of women employees in almost all the sectors. But the critics were of the opinion that the entire period of Planning (from the 1952 to 1974) had suffered

from numerous problems and poverty was one of them. It was due to the under utilisation of labour force hence it could not escalate production and generate profit. Another problem that was evident in the transportation industry especially in the railways, was the issue of the casual labourers. The transportation industry mainly the railways had employed quite a large number of casual labourers. These casual workers were not provided any job under the direct pay roll of the government. It indicated that the estimated objectives and purposes of the Plan period were not be achieved.

The term ‘wages’ as defined in the Payment of Wages Acts, 1936 included all remunerations capable of being expressed in terms of money which would be payable on fulfilment of the terms of the contract of employment but did not include the following:

- a) Value of any house accommodation, supply of light, water etc.;
- b) Contribution by the employers to any Pension Fund or Provident Fund;
- c) Travelling allowances or value of any travelling concessions;
- d) Any sum paid to defray special expenses; and
- e) Any quantity payable on discharge, unless payable under any law, contract or instrument which does not provide for the time within which payment is to be made.

**Source: Indian Labour Year Book, 1972; p. 39.**

The following table showed the earnings including pay, allowances, passengers, provident contributions, gratuities, pensionary benefits and grain shop concessions.

Class of Staff	Total Number of Staff		Per Capita Annual Earnings in Rupees	
	1970-71*	1971-72	1970-71	1971-72
Class III	583,187	592,234	4,718.90	50,933.31
Class IV	782,930	790,794	2,211.56	2,338.28
Total	1,366,117	1,383,028	3281.93	3,492.34

**Source: Report of the Railway Board of Indian Railways for 1971-72 Revised\*).**

(See: The Indian Labour Year Book, 1972; p. 40).

The Central Government's Employees who were taking out the salary on authorised scales were entitled to at prescribed rate of dearness allowances as recommended by the Second and Third Pay Commission's Reports.

**Rate of Dearness Allowance (D.A.) paid to Central Government Employees**

Pay Ranges (Rs.)	Rate of D.A. (w.e.f. 1.9.1968) (Rs.)	Part of D.A. merged with basic pay (w.e.f. 1.12. 1968) (Rs.)
1	2	3
Below 110	71	47
110 and above but below 150	98	70
150 and above but below 210	122	90
210 and above but below 400	146	110
400 and above but below 450	160	120
450 and above but below 499	164	120
499 and above but below 543	Amount by which pay fails short of Rs. 663	

NB: There is no change in the existing rates of dearness allowance payable to employees in Higher pay ranges.

**(Source: The Indian Labour Year Book, 1972; p. 44).**

The annual earnings of staff employed in Government Railways as published in the Annual Report of the Railway Board, were given in the following table. It included pay allowances, passages, provident fund benefits and grain shop concessions. It showed that the annual earning had increased by 1.137 (28.2 percent) from 1973-74 to 1974-75. It was the consequence of the implementation of the recommendations of Third Pay Commission.

### Annual Earnings per Employees in Government Railways

	1973-74	1974-75
Total number of Staff ('000)	1,432	1,441
Total Cost (crores of Rs.)	570.7	739.4
Per Capita cost (in Rs.)	4,034	5,171

**Source: Report of the Railway Board of Indian Railways 1974-75.**

(See: Indian Labour Year Book, 1974; p.37).

It was interesting to note that Indian railwaymen were paid much lower wages as compared to other industrial sectors. Railway management was not able to pay a moderately reasonable remuneration to its employees, not even able to generate the revenues properly. The rate of remuneration that an employee was entitled to receive, not only satisfied the physical and basic necessities of the employee, but also fulfilled the psychological needs, and also recognized his social status. Remuneration had impacted on the distribution of savings, consumptions and employment factors as well. Generally a large number of factors influence the wage and salary levels in an origination significant among them are:

- (1) remuneration in comparable industries;
- (2) firm's ability to pay
- (3) productivity; and
- (4) unions pressure and strategies.

### Minimum Monthly Wages in Comparable Public Sector Industries

Sl. No.	Industry/Sector	Minimum Monthly Wages (in Rs.)		
		Basic	D.A.	Total
1.	Central Government (including Indian Railways)	196.00	112.60	308.60
2.	Life Insurance Corporation	125.00	285.00	410.00
3.	General Insurance Corporation	125.00	285.00	410.00
4.	Nationalized Banks	116.00	260.48	380.48
5.	Coal	286.00*	131.30	417.30
6.	Iron and Steel (Hindustan Steel Limited)	300.00	129.60	429.60

\* This includes Rs. 26.00 attendance bonus.

Note: Minimum wages in Industries/Sectors in serial numbers 5 and 6 relate to October 1977 and the rest to January, 1978.

**(Source: Report of the Study Group on Wages, Incomes and Prices, May 1978, Government of India, New Delhi, pp.104-105).**

(See: Rao & Rao, 1982; p.355).

We must take into account one of the most important factors i.e., ability to pay which actually determined the workers' wage level. It ultimately impacted on the efficiency and productivity of the workers. Ability to pay on the other hand depended on the total staff cost to working expenses. It was also related with the increase of given profit and in interim relief an increase in passenger and goods traffic indicated its improvement in ability to pay. Rao and Rao had observed that the percentage of net revenue receipts to capital at charge disclosed the financial capabilities of the railways which showed increased revenue collection from 5.75 in 1950-51 to 6.72 in 1963-64 at a rate higher than that of capital at change (Rao & Rao, 1982; p. 357).

**Percentages of Total Staff cost to Working Expenses, Gross Traffic Receipts and Net Revenue Receipts**

Year	Percentage of total staff cost to working expenses	Percentage of total staff cost to gross traffic receipts	Percentage of net revenue receipts to capital at charge	Staff cost per rupee of new revenue receipts (in rupees)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1950-51	54.38	43.52	5.75	2.41
1955-56	58.51	47.76	5.19	3.00
1960-61	56.17	45.44	5.77	2.38
1961-62	54.15	43.42	5.92	2.19
1962-63	53.51	41.89	6.50	1.93
1963-64	52.00	40.07	6.72	1.75
1964-65	50.86	41.77	4.85	2.34
1965-66	51.83	42.30	5.03	2.30
1966-67	51.78	44.10	4.02	2.97
1967-68	51.84	44.87	3.69	3.34
1968-69	52.01	43.74	4.60	2.38
1969-70	52.19	44.19	4.59	2.87
1970-71	53.34	45.67	4.35	3.18
1971-72	53.37	45.14	4.80	2.93
1972-73	51.90	44.56	4.41	3.15
1973-74	52.71	50.14	1.42	10.30
1974-75	55.16	52.29	1.79	10.50

**Source: Annual Reports by the Railway Board, Vol. II up to 1971-72 and Indian Railways**

**Annual and Statistical Statements for the remaining years**

See: Rao & Rao, 1982; p. 358.

Another important aspect must be studied here; the cost of living had determined the actual economic status and financial condition of the workers. And dearness allowances (D.A.) was the instrument which tried to cope up with the increased cost of living and basic wage earning and salary structure of the employees. Interim Relief utilised this instrument to maintain the purchasing power of the employees. The index number of many wages and labour productivity during the years from 1960-61 to 1975-76 in Indian Railways are shown in the following table:

**Index Number of Money Wages, Real Wages and Labour Productivity**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Money Wages</b>	<b>Cost of Living</b>	<b>Real Wages</b>	<b>Labour Productivity</b>
1	2	3	4	5
1960-61	100	100	100	100
1961-62	103.94	110.71	93.89	103.43
1962-63	109.36	119.38	91.61	108.62
1963-64	112.54	129.84	86.68	109.73
1964-65	117.36	134.31	87.38	107.33
1965-66	129.61	136.23	95.14	112.69
1966-67	141.14	157.81	89.44	113.56
1967-68	153.44	165.72	92.59	116.89
1968-69	166.39	175.47	94.83	121.93
1969-70	175.28	176.46	99.33	129.98
1970-71	189.76	182.33	104.08	125.27
1971-72	201.30	188.33	106.96	130.14
1972-73	207.71	202.92	102.36	132.83
1973-74	227.13	236.90	95.88	122.30
1974-75	291.29	310.75	93.74	126.16
1975-76	344.91	306.83	112.41	141.03

**Source: Annual Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways, Vo. II up to 1972-73; Indian Railway Year Book**

It was seen that the money wage increased by 297.65 percent during 1960-61 to 1979-80 but cost of living had raised up to 360.75 percent from 1960-61 up to 1974-75. Therefore, one could easily judge the situation where the railway workers belonged and Interim Relief were never been able to balance between them. However, if one compared the scale of payments of the employees in manufacturing industries in the countries like U.K., U.S.A. and Japan with that of the railway employees, the latter were for more better in position. But in India the picture was exactly the reverse.

Comparative study of Average Wages in Railways with other manufacturing Industries in U.S.A, U.K. and Japan

Year	U.S.A. (Average hourly earnings (in dollars))		U.K. (Average weekly earnings (in Sterling/Pounds))		Japan (Average monthly earnings in years)	
	Principal Railways	All manufacturing industries	Railways (main)	All manufacturing industries	National Railways	All manufacturing industries
1970	3.89	3.36	29.31	28.91	95.385	71.447
1971	4.36	3.57	31.65	31.37	111.894	81.010
1972	4.89	3.81	36.15	36.20	129.689	93.627
1973	5.40	4.08	39.49	41.52	159.612	116.271
1974	5.68	4.41	53.11	49.12	197.572	146.464
1975	6.05	4.81	65.64	59.74	240.761	163.729

**Source: I.L.O. Year Book of Labour Statistics, 1978, Geneva, p.35.**

See: Rao & Rao, 1982; p. 357.

Indian Railways were highly hierarchical. After independence the racial contradictions of the British rule were gone but the conflicts between labour and their employers had prevailed as earlier period. The permanent employees of the railways get the facilities of quarters, education and health facilities, subsidised canteen, travelling pass, holiday homes etc. still the relationship between the railway management and the workforce was not harmonious in post-colonial era. The pay scale of the railway was not uniform at that point of time, 12.9 lakh employees were employed on railway operations and maintenance; 43 lakh workshops and artisans and lakhs were running staff. As we know that Central Pay Commission standardised the scale of pay of the railway workers considering the length of work, working hours and the qualifications of the workers. But this system immensely dissatisfied the workers. A section of the railway workers known as loco-running staff mainly the drivers, shunters, fire men etc. became highly annoyed with this. In the colonial period they were treated as the most 'elite' people of the railways but Indianisation of the service diminished not only their status but also their salary. During the colonial period these workers were labelled as the intensive staff of the railway who had a limited working hour. Transfer of power and Indianisation of service, authority declared them as a 'continuous' staff, i.e., there should not be any limitations on their working hour. They had to work for long fifteen to sixteen hours per day. Working conditions sometimes threw formidable challenges to the railway workers specially the continuous loco running staff. At that point of time mostly the trains were run by steam power which was really tough to manage because the workers had to work for long hours and the loco staff specially the drivers, foremen, shunters, engine cleaners etc. had to stay in the heat and smoke. The living conditions of the railway workers were also very much unsatisfactory and accommodation was always not available for all. M.A Rao had shown that the railway workers were provided with quarters, in the bigger stations quarters were built on programme basis, to meet the shortage the total number of staff quarters had been increased, thus it was 5,34,192 on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1973, accommodating only 38.1 percent of the total number of employees (Rao, 1974; p. 188). But these were only provided to the Class II and III categories of employees. The Class IV staff lived in the dirty slums called as 'coolie line' which were full of noise, heat and bad smell. They did not have proper system of sanitation and clearance. Rooms were so small with insufficient ventilation. Though the Third Five

Years Plan allotted separate money for the improvement of the quality and quantity of the railway workers. Any industry cannot have efficiency and effectiveness in industrial production unless and until the basic human requirements got fulfilled. The railway group D or Class IV workers lived in rudimentary and unhealthy conditions. The gang men lives in the 'gang huts' near the stations or crossing areas consisted of only one small room and more smaller kitchen and unhygienic bathroom.

The railway management secured medical and health facilities to its workers at lower rate but these health centres of hospitals were not well equipped the modern tools and machineries and not adequate also. All these factors affected the physical and mental conditions of the workers. The railway workers had to tolerate the wrong transfers, demotion, dismissal etc. which damaged the confidence and mental strength of the workers and generated insecurity of employment and life among them. The railway administration was not at all aware of these facts which mainly created trouble for the grass root i.e. Class IV workers. And all these incidents triggered off various major and minor labour unrests in different parts of the country. Primarily these unrests were sporadic not much organised nor even unites.

Another issue that was proliferating in the railway front was the position of the casual workers. Indian Railway engaged almost two lakhs casual workers in the 1973-1974 but they were inadequately paid and were frequently terminated from their jobs. A casual workers serving continuously at least 120 days was granted the temporary status with minimum advantages of wages, leave, health facilities etc. But the railway authority always discontinued their services on the 199<sup>th</sup> day so that the workers would not get temporary status. Casual workers were mostly employed for construction works which were really hazardous and dangerous at the same time. The workers had to stay in remote places where the construction works were going on. The regular construction workers were not allowed any type of allowances, not even provided any place to stay near the worksites. But the regular and casual workers had to work under similar climate and condition. The construction casual employees, throughout the 1970s were paid so less amount of remuneration, only Rs.3.50 a day, though all of them faced the same conditions while on duty. Construction casual workers did not get any medical facilities, accidental or injury benefits, if accidents occurred while working in the worksites. They were not allowed to

take leave for more than twenty consecutive days, even though there was a genuine reason of sickness or otherwise. More than twenty days absence from worksite or duty led to break in service. The worst sufferers were the women workers. They did not get leave for more than twenty days even on the maternity ground and most of the times they faced break in service.

Interestingly there were only two recognised labour unions that existed in the railway front, i.e., National Federation of Indian Railwaymen and All India Railwaymen's Federation. The former was controlled and administered by the Congress and the latter by the Socialists. Surprisingly both the trade unions were not capable to voice the worker's grievances or channelized them properly. Indian Trade union movement since its inception had witnessed several splits which ultimately strengthened the hands of the authority and weakened the process of solidarity and consolidation of the workers as a class. As per M.A Rao's opinion railway workers had to work all the hours of day and night ignoring the harsh climatic conditions which made it possible to run more than eleven thousand trains run everyday throughout the country from one place to another, it included certain amount of risks not only to the life and property of its users but to the men behind the wheels. These risks became significant when the Railway Staff were overworked, unduly tired, insufficiently nourished or clothed, inadequately housed, improperly trained or smarting under a sense of grievances (Rao, 1974; p.182).

## **Chapter III**

### **Workers' Resistances in the Indian Railways: 1845 to 1973**

In this chapter we will look at the nature of workers' resistances in Indian railways since the early phase of the establishment of the railways in colonial India till the strike of May 1974. An attempt has been made to analyse the causes of the grievances of the railway working class in the colonial period and even during the post independence period till early 1974. Workers' grievances were responsible for their resistances against the authority. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section has dealt with the workers' resistances during the colonial period till independence, i.e., from 1845 to 1946. In the second section we focus our attention to the nature and type of the trade union activities in the railway industry since independence till 1974.

#### **I**

### **Railway Workers' Resistances in the Colonial Era**

In this section we have tried to find out the reasons behind the grievances of the workers' in the railway industry and analyse whether these resistances were a conscious effort or a spontaneous action against their employers. In India the process of industrialisation began with the establishment of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1853 the first engines of change had moved but the process of building the railways had started in 1845. Most of the studies in this area analyse the workers' movement through the lense of traditional model of trade unions. But one must talk about the various forms of collective actions of the workers for a better understanding of the background of trade union movement in the country. This would lead to a study of the history of trade union movement in the Indian Railways.

Interestingly the mid nineteenth century's workers' resistance was the product of their own time and circumstances. Throughout the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century's organised trade union movement was not noticed. During the period of early industrialisation, workers' resistance was mostly unorganised, unconscious, and sporadic and many a times they were silent efforts of the workers. The establishment of the railway industry in the colonial era gave birth to a new class of proletariat in the country – the railway working class. Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of people of the country into workers. The mass was therefore, obviously a class against the capital, but not yet for itself (Dasgupta, 1996; p.27). In the struggle they became united with some interests, which ultimately turned them into a class interest.

The construction and maintenance program of the railway industry provided larger facilities particularly employment facilities to the skilled and unskilled workers and produced an excellent alternative employment to the agriculturalists in the times of bad harvest (Mast, 1969; p.1). Peculiarly in India the landless labourers, tribals, peasants etc became the industrial workers. The unique feature of the early industrial labourers of India was semi proletariat who were semi agricultural and thus, a bit complex type. Excessive brutal exploitations and deprivation by the colonial rulers created impediments towards the formation and consolidation of industrial workers as a class. Sen had nicely explained the scenario in a manner that in such a vast country like India with enormous diversity of language, culture, religious belief and social custom, the mass migration from one province to another and permanent settlement in an altogether different environment gave rise to certain peculiar problems in the formation of the Indian working class and its movement (Sen, 1997; p.29). Labour historians said that in the Indian scenario the emergence and rise of proletariat class itself could be considered as the first type of workers' resistance. In the mid nineteenth century this new proletarian class had to depend on the sale of their own labour for survival. And they took up permanent, temporary or contract waged labour. The number of these wage labourers had increased tremendously within a few years of industrialisation. And the employee and the employer relationship in Indian industries were never harmonious. The process of labour sold and bought was at the same time obstructive and antagonistic. The tendency of the capitalist process was to maximise the works through tremendous exploitation of labour with minimum wages. Two private British companies

e.g., the East India Railway Company and Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company were formed in England and began the construction of railways in 1845. The Great Revolt or the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 had increased the speed of railway construction works. In the railway front immense exploitation and oppression and deprivation led the workers to resist their counter consciously or unconsciously. From the very beginning of the construction of railways collective actions by the workers started taking place. But one cannot claim that these unrests were the conscious and vigorous attempts of protests by the workers towards the capitalist system or the authority but they were mostly unorganised and sporadic. Unwillingness or reluctance to work was also a kind of protest against the industrialisation process. Many a times it was noticed that a bulk of workers worked in one worksite and during the harvesting season they went to their villages and did not come back again. Sometimes workers refused to work in a particular work field repeatedly and exited the place and joined some other construction sites. Characteristically Indian workers were a nit complex type, because those who had joined and participated in the industries, such as landless agricultural labourers, had strong bondage to their villages and never became full time permanent workers. In the early period of railway building the earth works – digging or rock moving in the railways were mainly done by these types of workers. The village power holders were asked to supply the lower caste and tribal people to perform these works. They agreed to take district wise contract to engage these types of labourers in the construction industries. Resistances emerged in many forms some could almost be termed as complete ‘inaction’ to direct action, sometimes violent actions from crude or indistinct attempt to control a work process. Sometimes the workers showed the grievances vehemently in an immediate forceful response to the brutal supervisors (Kerr, 1997; p. 170). Most of the times it happened that half the amount of the promised wages was disbursed or all the wages became arrears in months. In 1859 at the construction worksite of Bhore Ghat incline, when similar types of situation arose, the angry workers attacked the European contractors and as a result the armed guards arrested the gang leader and repressed the workers heavily. Interestingly one of the European supervisors found dead while he was alone wandering away from the construction site and not escorted by the armed forces. More surprisingly, it was reported that none was found guilty because none of the coolies had admitted the crime and opened their mouth against anyone. Within 1860-79 more than four lakhs workers were employed every year for constructing the railways in colonial period. In early 1860s in Trichinopoly district and in the East Bengal

Railway workers did not work for several days for rising the rates of earth works. Thus it can be said that this section of the railway workforce was the most advanced and progressive form of organised industrial labour of nineteenth century India. The most fascinating feature of the railway workforce was its various types of works involving numerous works – skilled to unskilled. Thus varied forms of protests and resistance had cropped up and the workers were exposed to several types of adversities and stresses of the process of capitalist development and advance industrialisations. The most important causes of workers' resistance were:

- a) Problems relating to payment of wages, and;
- b) Demand for higher wages.

Railway construction workers had to work and stay in a very difficult and highly inconvenient atmosphere. The work sites, especially the construction of bridges, tunnels inclines etc. were very dangerous, risky, disease prone, violent and lawless and thus tough to live in those places. In this environment the workers had suffered from delay or irregular payments and most of the time got lesser wages than what had been promised. Kerr had noticed that the railway workers in the Bengal-Bihar region were more developed and aware of their deprivations. He referred to an incident e.g. the way maintenance gang men in the Calcutta and South Eastern Railways demonstrated and agitated against their employer and went on strike in 1877 because their wages were lower than similar workers than the Eastern Bengal Railways (Kerr, 1985; p. PE 37). In 1890s several incidents took place where the railway workers especially the coolies and earth workers were forced to work in hot days but starved due to non- payment of wages. The European contractors had the tendency of not paying the full amount of promised wages promptly. Another factor which existed in the railway front during the colonial rule was that employment was made purely on the basis of race and community. British Railway Companies never wanted any type of disorder among the construction workers hence they always tried to create a cleavage among them. Therefore, the worst type of division and distinction among the workers persisted in the railway front and this division continued even after independence. They did not emphasise on the performance or functions of the workers but basically employment was made under community consideration. The racial discrimination between the Europeans and Eurasian on

the one hand and the Indians on the other again aggrieved the situation. Kerr calculated that the permanent workforce those employed on continuing basis by the open (operating) lines numbered some 18,000 in 1860, 15,108 in 1880 and 338,041 in 1900 (Kerr, 1985; p. PE 36). The contrasting character of the railway working class generated various problems such as, wage differences, their grading system, different rules and regulation systems etc. Interestingly the British employers consistently encouraged the discrimination among the workers to carry on the construction process smoothly. In this way the railway authority kept on dividing the workers which ultimately affected the growth of collective resistance of the railway workers. It ultimately led to fragmentation and weakening the process of combined and conscious protest of the workers on the one hand and strengthening the hands of the capitalists on the other. Interestingly prior to 1900s most of the united protests came from the European and Eurasian mainly for wage increase. For united action Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants was formed in 1874 in India which provided a platform for voicing the resentments of these railway workers. In the mid 1870s using this platform these European and Eurasian protested against the Great Indian Peninsular Railways for increase of their payments but these communities hardly encouraged the Indians to join with them for collection causes. In the late 1990 guards, signallers, station masters struck against the management but this action was suppressed with heavy hands e.g. the men were dismissed from service; forced to vacate their quarters on disciplinary ground and most of them were not taken back to service again. The reason behind the failure of this struggle was basically the factors relating to the sentiment of caste and communities. This was one of the weapons in the hands of the railway authority to meet any kind of workers' agitations.

Railway working class, from its inception appeared to be militant in character. Some Indian tribes were famous for their rebelliousness and confrontation who used to assault their European supervisors frequently even on petty issues. Moreover, mass departure from worksite, unwillingness to work or refusal or independent working were the various forms of protests provided during the earlier phase of railway building in India specially up to 1900s. Immense labour unrests were proliferating in different shapes and size in this period. In April-May 1862, twelve hundred labourers of Howrah Station took part in the strike on the demand of eight hour works a day. Not only the transport industry, Railways were the first industry in India that were introduced in 1853, thus this strike by a section of the Indian

working class within eight to nine years of the establishment of the industry, was worth-mentioning and had been really a courageous step. (Sen, 1887; p.71). Railway workers had really practical causes for protest, it was hard to bear the harsh working and living conditions; rules and regulations and disciplinary measures were repressive and brutal. Another significant feature was noticed in the nature of railway workers' resistance that the intermingling of swadeshis or nationalists with that the railway workers. In 1905 huge public agitation took place in Bengal Presidency as the Bengalis immensely opposed the decision of 'Partition of Bengal' for administrative reasons and divided it into two units. When the swadeshi movement began against the decision of partition of Bengal, the nationalists attacked the railways as the railways became the symbol of the colonial ruler, thus a few trains were bombed and also the railway network was disturbed, railroad workers were motivated and started ventilating their grievances with great enthusiasm and utilised nationalist sentiment in a series of strikes by railroad workers (Kerr, 2013; p.9). All these incidents of struggle and protest of the workers led to the formation of formal trade unions in the railway front. The nationalist struggle of 1905-08 had extensively provided the necessary impetus to the emergence of the formal railway trade unions. Workers perceived that if they did not get organised, their resentments will remained unheard and unresolved. Several reasons were responsible for the workers' to get organised, e.g. the extremely low wages paid to native workers, racial discrimination and immoderate duty hours and above all the mis-behaviour of the Anglo Indian or European supervisors were another reason which ignited the railway workers immensely, but the root cause of instigation in the movement came from the nationalists freedom fighters which swept the country from 1905-08 (Chakraborty, 1987; p.8).

A prominent railway workers struggle took place in East Indian Railways in 1906 which was reviewed as an action that had taken place due to the political agitation in the country, i.e. wave of the swadeshi movement. Interestingly all the native railway workers had joined the strike and from Howrah to Asansol and Burdwan all the segments of railway industry remained closed for a couple of days. Railway services in this area became standstill. The demands of this strike were (i) higher pay, (ii) improved working conditions, (iii) abolition of racialism and (iv) the workers demanded for replacing the word "native" by "Indians" which they considered as derogatory (Sen, 1997; p.86). This action was highly

organised and united. But the authority was successful in suppressing the strike struggle. This was the first strike that was directly connected with the nationalist movement. Although the strike had failed to secure its success but it led to the formation of the first Indian Trade Union – The East Indians Railway Employees’ Union. A large number of railway workers enrolled themselves as the members of this Union. The primary task of this union was to support the workers’ cause. In 1906 this union had organised a strike in Jamalpur workshop and it impacted the countrywide collective struggle in 1907 onwards. Decline in economic condition, heavy workload etc. compelled the railwaymen to resist their employer from exploiting them. Employees working in the big railway workshops had developed a tendency of hostility against the exploitative attitude of the authority. Sukomal Sen commented that three thousand railway workers engaged in the workshops at Bombay struck work on 1st May 1907, the strike lasted for over a week and the workers had joined their duty after winning some concession (Sen, 1997; p. 91). In Southern Railway several collective action were taken during this period. All were not so organised most of them were sporadic and purely localised. But in Perambur Workshop repeated action by the railway employees from 1911 to 1918 indicated a consistency in labour movement in this region. Though none of the demands got fulfilled but they took brave steps to form a union. In 1919 the Madras and Southern Marhatta Railway Union, Madras was founded (Sen, 1997; p. 139).

The Royal Commission of Labour which was set up in the year 1929, in India reported in 1931 that many railway trade unions were formed between, 1919-21 (Fernandes, 1984; p.19). Bombay-Baroda and Central Indian Railway, Ahmedabad and North Western Railway Union, Great India Peninsular Staff Union, Kanchrapara Workshop Union etc. came into existence during this time. The memberships of the trade unions were mandatory merely in this context we must mention about All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) which was the first national level trade union of the Indian working class which emerged in 1920. The AITUC provided necessary strength to the workers in many segments of the Indian industries to organise themselves in a more stronger way. However, almost two hundred strikes took place within mid 1020s e.g., the Burma Railway Workers strike in February 1921, East Bengal Railway Workers strike in June 1921, five thousand railway workers in Lucknow struck in 1921 for almost three months, In Toondla, Bareilly

Workshop, Rohilkhand etc. struggles were also launched. In 1923-24 workers of Bengal and North Western Railways led a number of strikes. Expressing of discontent and unrest of the workers necessitated more organised, all India basis co-ordinate effort and actions. Therefore, measures were taken to unite all these unions into one platform. And All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) was founded in June, 1925 and its first General Council's meeting was held at Nagpur. All the small railway unions of the country now started getting affiliated to it. Sherlock had noticed that the affiliates to the AIRF were politically diverse including Congressmen (many became Congress Socialists later), followers of M.N. Roy and Communists (Sherlock, 2002, p. 41). It provided a greater feeling of solidarity among the workers. The six major strikes that were reported in 1925 on the Indian Railways resulted in a total loss of 8, 24,032 man days (Fernandes, 1984; p. 21). Therefore these organised struggles got involved and mingled with the nationalist movement of the country. As a result, the Trade Union Act 1926 came into force. In 1927 the most prominent of all the struggles was the strike of Bengal Nagpur Railway Workers in Kharagpur. The reason behind the action was the authorities decision of retrenchment of the workers. Government resorted to terror to crush the strike. Police and armed forces were used to suppress the workers' action, they faced immense torture. But all the wings of trade unions supported the strike action and all sections of people and nationalist also expressed their solidarity. In 1938 at Liluah, East India Railway Workers' struggle and South Indian Railway Workers' strike were also noteworthy. In January 1928 the employees of some departments of East India Railway (EIR) put forward certain demands which were:

1. that the pay of the unskilled workers should be doubled and that their minimum wage should be fixed at Rs. 30/- per month;
2. that the wages of the skilled workers be increased by 25 percent in order to equalise them with the labour and Lucknow State Railway Workshops;
3. that the two men of the 'M' shop dismissed on the 16<sup>th</sup> February reinstated (Karnik, 1967; p. 206).

And when the authority dismissed another four workers on the ground of the disorderly behaviour, all the workers refused to work and went on peaceful Satyagraha. This

movement immediately spread over the entire Howrah region. In 1930 G.I.P. Railway workers struck on the demands of:

1. wage of increase;
2. stopping of dismissal;
3. illegal transfer;
4. victimisation; and
5. Stopping retrenchment (Sen, 1997; p.226).

This strike got widespread response on the one hand and the authority took every step to crush it on the other. In 1932 in Perambur Workshop several workers were retrenched. In this case the AIRF tried to resolve the matter, but the authority decided to go for wage cut of the employees, instead of retrenchment. Workers did not agree with this proposal and went on strike in the month of October 1932 which ended in January 1933. This strike was not an unorganised one, AIRF issued strike notice and estimated that minimum six hundred stations would become the strike centres. They held regular meetings and planned to make the struggle successful. The administration remained stubborn and cautious besides remaining stubborn, the administration also resorted to pressure tactics (Krishna, 1980; p. 17). After the withdrawal of the strike a large number of workers were dismissed. According to Narshima Reddy the ruthless action of the management created a scar among the workers, they were afraid of joining the union and paying the subscription; it was a severe blow to the union movement and the membership of the M and SMREU dropped from 32,000 in 1932 to 800 in 1933 (Reddy, 1980; p. 1622). The history of the working class movement in the railway workshops in India in the early twentieth century was quite interesting because the moderate trade union leadership never utilised the workers' potentialities to bring any social or economic change in their life. They also failed to foster consciousness among the working class or headed any large scale mobilisation of the railway workforce. As an industrial enterprise the railway workshop employees never achieved prestige or obtained any privilege. Therefore, they stood together and emerged as a new type of industrial labour apprehending solidarity in colonial India.

### Employment in the Railway Workshops of Lahore, 1870 – 1960

Approximate date	Approximate numbers of employees
1870	1,000
1880	2,000
1890	2,500
1906	4,500
1911	7,000
1916	10,000
1925	10,600
1929	12,200
1960	18,000

**Source: Kerr, 2007; p. 250.**

During 1930-31 the total number of workers in the railway stood at 781,859 which during the next financial year came down to 730,290, this meant a reduction of 51,569 workers (Sen, 1997; p. 289). This happened because of mass retrenchment of workers by the authority which claimed that economic depression led them to take this decision. Therefore industrial disputes also touched its peak during this time. Labour disputes were observed not only in the railway industry but in almost all the sectors like cotton and textile, jute mills, post and telegraphs etc. The following table has clarified the scenario.

### Labour Disputes 1931-1936

Year	No.of Disputes	No. of Workers	No. of Working days lost
1931	166	203,008	2,408,123
1932	118	128,099	1,922,437
1933	146	164,938	2,168,961
1934	159	220,808	4,775,559
1935	145	114,217	973,457
1936	157	169,029	2,358,662

**Source: Sen, 1997; p. 291**

Sukomal Sen reported that in 1936, a biggest strike of colonial era had taken place in B.N. Railways where twenty-six thousand and five hundred workers had participated in the strike and it started on 13th December and ended on 10th February, lasted for almost two months. As a result of which a huge number of man days were lost in the Indian Railways. Prolonged talks were convened between the railway management and the labour unions but they were unable to yield any fruit for the workers. It resulted into the huge dropout of union membership hence the unions met an unbelievable challenge. Again after 1938, the membership base had increased and an unexpected rise in number was noticed before the Second World War. Years preceding the Second World War saw a huge fall in real earnings, price rise, anti labour policy of the government, imprisonment of most of the nationalist leaders and other economic problems. In this situation World War II broke out in 1939 and the Indian workforce especially the railway workers faced tremendous hardship. The working class of the country became a silent observer. To please the workers, the government started seeking suggestions from the AIRF leadership relating to the matters of railwaymen. A series of strike struggles were launched by the leaders during the war years along with the line of nationalists i.e. Quite India Movement of 1942. These resulted into the consolidation of the railway workers at all levels. The membership of the railway unions which was 2, 44,771 at the beginning of the war in 1939 reached 3, 04,486 in 1945 at the end of the war (Fernandes, 1984; p.23). The number of general trade unions had gradually increased in the Indian scenario along with its membership base. The following table showed this trend:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Trade Unions</b>	<b>Membership</b>
1927-28	29	1,00,619
1935-36	420	3,90,312
1947-48	2,766	16,62,929

**Source: Karnik, 1967; p. 25**

The colonial rulers had formulated their labour policy according to the nature and composition of working class in the country. Railway management in colonial era always emphasised the communal consideration for employing the railway workforce in Indian

industries. This was a great weakness of the labour movement of an underdeveloped country like India and the trend was increasingly high at the closing decades of colonial rule. The following table showed the mobilisation of employment during 1936 to 1944.

<b>Year ending March-April</b>	<b>Europeans</b>	<b>Hindus</b>	<b>Muslims</b>	<b>Anglo-Indians And Domiciled Europeans</b>	<b>Sikhs</b>	<b>Indian Christians</b>	<b>Others</b>
1936	3,219	5,04,977	1,55,439	13,423	8,740	16,824	9,742
1937	3,121	5,04,983	1,54,535	13,416	8,734	17,253	8,838
1938	2,692	4,94,272	1,53,794	12,843	8,114	17,311	1,597
1939	2,505	5,01,243	1,54,837	13,440	7,745	17,702	1,680
1940	2,333	5,06,220	1,57,857	13,099	8,106	18,045	3,362
1941	2,143	5,21,171	1,60,912	13,239	8,503	18,758	3,373
1942	1,918	5,38,840	1,72,685	12,260	8,705	20,039	3,259
1943	1,833	5,87,368	1,90,352	12,271	9,368	20,848	4,006
1944	1,761	6,29,730	2,08,190	12,262	9,397	22,212	4,504

**Source: Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India, Delhi, 1946; p.6.**

(See: Mast, 1969; p.5).

The leadership in the formal trade unions had attempted to voice the demands and resentment of the industrial workers. They also tried to combine all the associations of the workers and took steps for the attainment of solidarity, so that they could challenge and

confront their employers. But in India the history of trade unionism was the history of fragmentation and alienation throughout the early and mid twentieth century. Not only that the trade unions of this country were formed and shaped on communal basis. The trade unions in the Indian Railway industry were of hierarchical character which was supposed to be the most significant weakness of the trade unions' activities. However, in the dawn of the country's independence Jaya Prakash Narayan (J.P.) became the president of AIRF (1947-1953) who was a dominant leader in the labour movement of the country. In the railways the management and workers relationship was of immense importance because Indian railways employed a large number of workers and most importantly the Government itself here was the employer. Thus, the labour policy of the imperialist ruler must be reoriented in order to strike a balance in the industrial front during the post independent period.

The history of labour movement in Indian Railways can be divided into three phases. But one must mention about the preliminary phase of labour resistance in the country during the early decades of industrialisation process, the preliminary phase 1845 -1896. During this phase the railway workers were not so organised and united. All the struggles were spondaic, localised, scattered and short lived. The movements were noteworthy because the nature of the railway working class from the very beginning was militant and confrontational. A wide range of workers' resistances were seen during this decade and they were quite capable of bringing some concessions from the authority. The struggle of Howrah railway workers in 1860 was noteworthy. Terminologically organised trade union movement was not found at this time.

First Phase: 1896-1918: This period had witnessed a rapid development of railway industry throughout the country and at the same time noticed extensive increase in employment. Labour movements also started taking a united shape. Due to the decision of partition of Bengal in 1905 the railway labour resistances began to intermingle with nationalist struggle for independence and took a solid shape. The First World War (1914-1918) caused enormous hardships for the workers in India. The economic condition of the workers deteriorated further due to steady price rise and shortage of basic commodities. It resulted into enormous increase of labour unrests in every corner of the country.

The steep rise in prices during the First World War is evident from the following table

### Movement of Prices during 1914-1918

Year	Index (Base Year 1914=100)
1914	100
1915	112
1916	128
1917	145
1918	176

Source: H.C. Arora and K.R.R. Iyenger,

**Long term Growth of National Income in India, 1901-1956, papers on National Income and social topics, Vol. I, Bombay, 1960, p. 214.**

(See: Mast, 1969; p. 22).

Large number of big and small strikes like G.I.P. Railways strike, Telegraph Worker' strike, the Bombay Postman's strike, the Nagar Traders' Strike, the strike of the Parel G.I.P. Railway Workshop Workers Strike, Strike of the workers of some Bombay Mills, East India Railway Strike had occurred during this period. Several measures had been taken to develop a general consciousness among the workers to achieve its particular goal. For e.g, the industrial workers in India were too religious which hampered the consolidation of the working class. Moreover, they were superstitious, had huge respects for the higher castes and had faith on certain feudal traditions. Nationalists attempted to generate popular working class consciousness among them, at least the sense that they were the source of economic and political strength of the country. The railway workers were militant but collective and believed in combined action. The major weakness behind developing the advanced working class movement in the country was the consciousness of the working class, ironically Indian railway workers had suffered from the lack of class consciousness. The railway working class launched numerous actions – strikes, go slow, mass sick leave etc. but these were localised, occasional and scattered. The absence of national level recognised trade unions had characterised the first phase of working class movement of Indian Railways.

Second Phase (1919-1929): This period had observed the emergence and growth of trade union movements in India including the railways. The Labour Commission reported that most of the railway unions came into existence during 1919-1921, e.g. the Madras and Southern Maratha Railway Employees' Union, the oldest one was founded in 1919, the North Western Railway Union in 1920, The Eastern Bengal Railway and G.I.P Railways Staff Union in 1921. On the economic perspective, the unstable financial conditions and the rising level of price in India during the World War I and aftermath brought considerable threat to the economic structure of the Indian industries and the conditions of the workers specially the railway workers became worse. In 1925 the AIRF was founded on the background of post-war difficulties. Interestingly in spite of several hindrances the growth and development in the trade unions in the railway front was rapid and was spread over the country. It tried to bring every worker belonging to the railways under one umbrella. Initiatives were taken to organise even the workers in the different workshops, i.e., each and every category of workers were included and the response was outstanding. AIRF was at that point of time the only recognised union, therefore it played quite a promising and effective role in this direction.

Third Phase (1930-1946): Till the end of 1920s the organisation of AIRF was not so strong and could not play any active or positive role in the labour movement in the country. In 1932, first time it tried to negotiate with the Railway Board on the time of retrenchment of the Southern Maratha Railway Employees and ultimately it launched a strike which lasted for almost three months in this region. This period had witnessed some internal disagreements, friction and mismanagement within the unions due to various reasons. The strength of a union could not only be measured by its size and recognition, but also by its organisational strength.

Economic conditions of the workers became more miserable due to the outbreak of World War II in 1939 especially the railways were the most affected industry in the country. The entire railway industry of India was utilised for the purpose of the British war. Railway workshops were turned into the production units of commodities required for war. Railway tracks, wagon, locomotives were also supplied to the Middle East and a bulk of railway employees were sent there. The production of railway industry almost came closure during this time. Shifting duties was introduced in the industries double shift or night-shift became

common. Therefore, the work pressure had enhanced immensely. Thus, the number of accidents grew. Before independence 80 percent of the total railway men were lowly paid or rather lower grades workers. Sukomal Sen had observed that during the worldwide depression the wages of the industrial workers were cut and in 1944 the minimum and maximum wages of the railway workers differed between Rs, 10/- and Rs. 12/- and Rs. 16/- and Rs. 34/- respectively; in 1939, the average yearly income of a railway worker remained at Rs. 541/- only and the amount by which were amplified till the year 1940 was much lower than that in the textile and even in metal industries (Sen, 1997, p. 225). To protect the existing standard of living, the workers had conducted several struggles throughout the country. As a result the industrial workers depended on the trade union in the closing decades of the colonial rule naturally the union membership had grown up. The following table revealed the growth of membership of the unions in different industries.

<b>Class of Industry</b>	<b>1937-38</b>	<b>1944-45</b>
Railways and other communications excluding Tramways	158,068	304,486
Tramways	2,425	10,390
Textiles	69,444	210,712
Printing Presses	6,566	13,560
Municipal	11,698	11,928
Seamen	46,057	79,501
Dockyards and Port Trusts	16,047	37,098
Metal and Engineering	3,505	35,513
Miscellaneous	76,302	186,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>390,112</b>	<b>889,388</b>

**Source: Sen, 1997, p. 348.**

At the end of the Second World War the economic and political conditions of the country became feeble hence it affected all sections of the people. Historians were of the opinion that, India's railway development was massive, but the colonial rulers had not assessed that whether this expenditure on the country's economy would have been required or beneficial and whether this proportion had really modernised India's life. The process of the establishment of the railways in India's history however had deeply affected the country's economic life (Thorner, 1955, p. 213). The working class of India played a significant role as an anti-imperialist force in the nationalist struggle of the country. They stood as an organised social strength in the centre of the movement for the transfer of power (Sen, 1997; p.363).

## II

### **Union Movement in the Indian Railways: 1947-1973**

In this section of the study we seek to discuss the nature and development of workers' resistances in Indian Railways after independence till 1974. It also looks at the reasons behind the proliferation of the craft based unions in the railway industry. The formation and existence of craft unions had indicated the enormous grievances and discontentment among the workers towards the authority and the recognised trade unions. It might have decided the course of workers' resistances in the railway industry which led to the agitations like the general strike by the Indian Railway men in May 1974. In the previous section we had noticed that the Indian working class had suffered enormously from the exploitations and deprivations since the very beginning of the industrialisation process in India during the colonial rule.

Independence steered immense hope among the working class of the country and they expected a magical end of all miseries and exploitations. But along with this hopefulness there were risks, precariousness, instability and insecurity arising out of partition and economic crisis due to high prices of food grain, scarcity of essential

commodities, large scale retrenchment and unemployment (Dhyani, 1986; p. 45). Independence mainly changed the political scene of the country, i.e., political power had transferred from the British bourgeoisie to Indian bourgeoisie. Indian capitalist land lord and elite classes held the political as well as economic powers of the country hence it was supposed to go against the interests of the working class. Therefore, national liberation was the main purpose and objective of the mass of the people of India in the pre-independence period. To achieve this goal the Indian working class had yet to develop the sense of socialist class consciousness. But Karnik said that the Indian working class was the helpless mass of downtrodden, uprooted from their rural traditions and surroundings and puzzled and bewildered by the new conditions under which they had to work (Karnik, 1967; p.1).

Independence was accompanied with splits in trade unions which resulted into the weakness of workers' collective actions and their consciousness. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was representative of all the working class in India in the eve of independence; it was mainly controlled by the leftists and communists. Few months before independence in May 1947, Congress founded the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). It was the first step towards controlling the workers' movement by the Congress. After independence state's interference in regulating employees and employer's relationship ultimately led to the weakening of growth and maturity of the trade union movement of the country. It also adversely affected the development and consolidation of working class consciousness.

The Planning Commission of India through its first Five Year Plan envisaged that the dignity of the labour and their partnership must be recognised especially in the public sectors. According to the First Five Year Plan, the employer-employee relationship had to be conceived of as partnership in a constructive endeavour to promote the satisfaction of the economic needs of the community in the best possible manner. It also argued in favour of collective bargaining which helped to reach a co-operative settlement on the part of the employers and organised strength of the workers. For rapid industrial growth through proper planning cooperation between trade unions and employers was essential. Not only that the Industrial True Resolution was passed in December 1947 which guaranteed that both the employers and workers tried their best to avoid the use of lockouts, slow-downs strikes etc. tactics to get their demands fulfilled or to resolve any matter, i.e., any party should not

hamper the pace of industrial growth in any ground. Trade unions should be associated with every step of implementing the provisions of the Plan. Both the unions and management had equal responsibilities and significant role to maintain the economic health of the country, improve the productivity of the working class, provide favourable working and living conditions to the industrial workers, ensure social justice etc.

The First Five Plan had reported that the need for maintaining peace in industry and for avoiding interruption of work during the period of implementation of the Plan was obvious and in the interest of national economy, unions and employees should exercise the utmost restraints in this respect (Report of First Five Year Plan, 1957; p. 10). From the above discussion it was clear that the Government tried to interfere in every step of independent decision making power of the working class. The Government had forced the trade unions to depend on authority to solve any problem and to accept the dominating presence of the Government especially in the case of public sectors. According to Sharit Bhowmik the autonomy of trade unions was diluted as they intended to depend on the state to resolve their problems with the employees (Bhowmik, 1996; p. L-39). State tried to manipulate the trade unions to control the workers' activities. The objective behind this attitude was to minimise the possibilities of opposition in the industrial front, although the main purpose of the trade union movement was to eliminate the political, economic and social exploitations. The splits in the trade unions caused further fragmentation of the workers' collective actions. Hind Mazdoor Sabha and United Trade Union Congress were formed in 1949. Then Bhartiya Mazdur Sangh was also formed in 1955 and this trend of splits continued till 1960s at the national and regional levels. However, independence brought along with it some severe malfeasance like huge inflationary crisis, immense rise in prices of daily commodities and fall in real wages. In this situation working class of the country resisted heavily against the state in order to protect its interests.

The workers resorted to several techniques to protest against the management e.g., go slow or gherao, work to rule or strike etc. At that point of time the economic condition compelled the workers to protect their interests in the background of modern industrial complexities. This present study tried to give an account of industrial disputes in private and public sectors which had a considerable effect on the industrial production and caused loss of man days due to work stoppages.

No. of Industrial Disputes resulting in work stoppages, workers involved, man days lost, separately for public and private sectors and average number of workers involved per disputes during 1962-1972.

Year	No. of Disputes			Maximum no. of workers involved			Number of man days lost			Average no. of workers involved per disputes
	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total	
1962	177	1314	1491	128,345	576,714	706,059	532,157	5,588,419	612,0576	473
1963	117	1354	1471	67,722	495,399	563,121	277,269	2,991,255	3,268,524	583
1964	254	1897	2151	154,184	848,771	1,002,955	747,393	6,977,301	7,724,694	466
1965	198	1637	1835	102,165	888,993	991,159	704,326	5,765,666	6,469,992	540
1966	345	2211	2556	239,722	1,170,334	1,410,056	1,276,659	12,569,670	13,846,329	552
1967	441	2374	2815	367,550	1,122,796	1,490,346	2,539,774	14,608,177	17,147,951	529
1968	386	2390	2776	433,722	1,235,572	1,669,294	1,971,890	15,271,789	17,243,679	601
1969	389	2238	2627	337,297	1,489,569	1,826,866	1,424,263	17,624,025	19,048,288	695
1970	446	2443	2889	438,562	1,389,190	1,827,752	2,062,214	18,501,167	20,563,381	633
1971	385	2367	2752	363,560	1,251,580	1,615,140	2,253,410	14,292,226	16,545,636	587
1972	538	2705	3243	415,843	1,320,894	1,736,737	3,345,618	17,198,298	20,543,916	536

Source: State Labour Departments and Regional Labour Commissioners (Central). Indian Labour Book, Labour Bureau: Ministry of Labour, 1972; p.70.

After independence from 1947 onwards the Central Government led by the Congress had an uninterrupted rule over the country till the late 1970s. During this period it never

allowed the trade Unions to have any separate identity or to have independent decision making power. Interestingly, the trade unions were too much entangled with the management or with the authority hence ignored the main purpose of their existence. They started pleasing the ruling government to remain in its position and became less interested to strengthen its workers' base. Thus, strained industrial relation resulted into un-utilisation of full capacity of industrial and workers' potentials. The following tables had shown the number of man days lost and the causes of disputes during the period 1961 to 1972.

**Number of Disputes Resulting in Work-Stoppages, Workers involved and Man days Lost**

		1961-1962	1966-67	1969-70	1970-71	1972-73
A. Total						
1.	No. of Disputes	1,357	2,556	2,627	2,889	2,137
2.	No. of Workers involved ('000)	512	1,410	1,827	1,828	1,227
3.	Man days lost ('000)	4,919	13846	19,048	20,563	12,750
B. Central Sphere						
1.	No. of Disputes	160	315	321	336	425
2.	No. of Workers involved ('000)	82	204	544	341	351
3.	Man days lost ('000)	364	928	1,783	1,689	2,936
C.State Sphere						
1.	No. of Disputes	1,197	2,241	2,455	2,291	2,464
2.	No. of Workers involved ('000)	430	1,207	1,125	1,486	1,477
3.	Man days lost ('000)	4,555	12,918	15,460	17,351	17,627

**Source: Mehta and Maheswari, 1974; p. 60.**

### Percentage Distribution of Disputes by Causes

	Cause	1961-62	1966-67	1968-69	1969-70	1971-72
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Wages and allowances	30.4	35.8	38.4	36.0	37.1
2.	Bonus	6.9	13.2	9.4	10.0	10.6
3.	Personnel and Retrenchment	29.3	25.3	28.2	26.6	25.6
4.	Leave and hours of Work	3.0	2.4	1.9	2.2	2.1
5.	Indiscipline and Violence	-	-	3.2	3.8	3.8
6.	Others	30.4	23.3	18.9	21.4	20.8

Note: The figures on industrial disputes relate to disputes resulting in work stoppages to involving 10 or more workers and are exclusive of political or sympathetic strikes.

**Source: Mehta and Maheswari, 1974; p. 61.**

In any society the existence and growth of harmonious industrial relations is a pre-requisite for higher productivity and higher growth rate of the economy, moreover, harmonious industrial relation should result in a better deal for labour and gainful employment in order to live with a reasonable level of comfort and dignity (Dutt, 2003; p. 11).

The growth of trade union activities in the national scenario enhanced the membership and during the period of 1947 to 1970 showed a considerable increase in this regard.

**Union membership, 1947-1970**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of registered unions</b>	<b>Number of members</b>	<b>Percentage change from the preceding year</b>
1947-48	2766	1662929	+19.90
1948-49	3150	1960107	+15.16
1949-50	3522	1821132	-7.63
1950-51	3766	1756971	-3.65
1951-52	4623	1996311	+11.99
1952-53	4934	2099003	+4.89
1953-54	6029	2112695	+0.65
1954-55	6658	2190450	+2.71
1955-56	8095	2275000	+4.96
1956-57	8554	2377000	+4.29
1957-58	10045	3015000	+21.16
1958-59	10228	3647000	+17.33
1959-60	10811	3923000	+7.04
1960-61	11312	4013000	+2.24
1961-62	11476	3723000	-7.64
1962-63	11620	3667000	-1.66
1963-64	11740	3956000	+7.31
1964-65	12744	4441000	+10.92
1965	12948	3763000	-
<b>(Apr-Dec)</b>			
1966	14370	4369000	-
1967	15024	4503000	+2.97
1968	16409	5094000	+11.61
1969	18460	4866000	-4.69
1970	20282	4850000	+0.33

**Source: Padmanabhan, 1980; p. 126.**

This table shows enormous fluctuations in the membership base which was due to splits in trade unions and this division in the trade unions had adversely affected the workers' faiths and trust on their organisations. Interestingly in 1959 the Second Central Pay Commission (CPC) announced its recommendations which conceived the price index number 1949=100 for adjusting the price through Dearness Allowance. It also declared that if the consumer price index continued to rise the employees' grant to dearness allowance should be considered as the relevant circumstances of time. Sukomol Sen noted in this connection that the retrograde recommendations of the Second Pay Commission were universally deplored by the Central Government employees as well as by the entire trade union movement of the country (Sen, 1997; p. 389). As a result in 1960 the Central Government employees including the railway employees formed a Joint Council of Action which consisted of almost all the government employees including the railways, defence, Posts and telegraphs etc. The General Secretary Peter Alvares was elected as the Chairman and Secretary of the Council. Joint Council urged all the trade unions for their co-operation. Except INTUC, the unions of all political colours had supported this strike. This strike started on 11th July and continued for five days. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took all the measures to suppress the agitation. The government treated the strike as an anti-national activity (Fernandes, 1984; p. 26). Indiscriminate and excessive use of power crushed the strike action. Massive dismissal, suspension, imprisonment, victimisation took place which caused death of few employees in Western Railways too. Railwaymen completely rejected NFIR's stand for not joining this strike on the basis of "constructive trade unionism" (Sherlock, 2001; p.200). This strike ended without any immediate impact on the central government employees' demands but it had deep and long term effects on the future struggle of the working class. It provided a strong platform to the trade union movement of the country. In the later years the Government of India took reasonable initiatives to meet the workers' demands including bonus and dearness allowances. National Labour Commission was appointed to enquire into the matter relating to workers' resentments and disappointments in 1966-68, prior to which the Bonus Commission was engaged to look at the issue in 1962. This strike was followed by an one day token strike on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1968; again by the Central Government Employees. This action was also condemned as 'Black Acts' of the workers by the the Government. In 1967-69 the struggle of the Life Insurance Corporation workers gave a new

impetus to the Indian Trade Union activities. Negotiated settlements of the workers' grievances were never achieved in this country. Almost all the P.S.U.s, like Port and Dock, Railways, Post and Telegraph, Defence etc had joined the strike. M. N. Joshi was the Chairman of the J.C.A which had the following demands:

- a) Merger of D.A. in basic pay;
- b) need based minimum wage;
- c) full neutralisation of the rise in prices; and
- d) withdrawal of the proposal to retire employees, who are alleged to be ineffective or whose integrity is allegedly in doubt at fifty years of age (Sen, 1997; p. 393).

This strike was again dealt with heavy hands. Government resorted to police action; physical and mental torture of the employees and widespread repressions was observed over all the segments of the central government employees. However, the immediate effect of this struggle was the appointment of Third Central Pay Commission in the year 1970 in April, which published its recommendations in 1973 i.e., after three years of its appointment, the Commission was able to submit its report to the Central Government.

Another important development that took place in country's political context was the general Lok Sabha Elections of 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967 which had shown a steady growth of communists and their strong presence was also reflected in the mobilisation of working class in India. In this political background numerous trade unions had emerged in Indian industries and they had considerable number of membership base during these periods. The following table had shown the number of trade unions registered under the Trade Unions Act, 1926, membership of unions submitting returns, average membership per union and the percentage of women members to the total membership (Indian Labour Book, 1972; p. 60).

**Numbers of Registered Trade Unions (Workers and Employees) and  
Membership of unions submitting Returns for the Years 1951-52, 1956-57 to  
1970**

Year	Number of Registered Trade Unions	Number of Trade Unions submitting	Membership of Unions submitted Returns			Average Membership per Union submitting Returns
			Men	Women	Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1951-52	4,623	2,556 (55.3)	1,847 (93.2)	136 (6.8)	1,996	781
1956-57	8,554	4,339 (51.4)	2,097 (88.2)	280 (11.8)	2,377	540
1961-62	11,614	7,087 (61.0)	3,607 (90.7)	370 (9.3)	3,977	561
1962-63	11,827	7,251 (61.3)	3,335 (90.6)	347 (9.4)	3,682	508
1963-64	11,984	7,250 (60.5)	3,628 (91.2)	349 (8.8)	3,977	548
1964-65	13,023	7,543 (67.1)	4,113 (92.1)	353 (7.9)	4,466	594
1965 Apr.-Dec.	13,248	6,932 (52.3)	3,565 (94.1)	223 (5.9)	3,788	546
1966	14,686	7,244 49.3)	4,078 (92.9)	314 (7.4)	4,392	606
1967	15,314	7,523 (49.1)	4,197 (92.7)	329 (7.3)	4,525	602
1968	16,716	8,851 (52.9)	4,700 (91.8)	421 (8.2)	5,121	579
1969	18,837	8,423 (44.7)	4,546 (92.8)	355 (7.2)	4,900	582
1970(P)	20,314 (E)	7,002 (34.5)	-	-	4,241	606

Notes:

- (1) Figures relates to the entire Indian Union except Jammu and Kashmir. They also exclude Manipur for 1951-52 and 1961-62, Chandigarh for 1966 to 2968 and Andhra

Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Manipur for 1969.

- (2) Figures in the columns 4 and 5 do not always add up to those shown in column 6 since sex-wise classification of members in respect of certain unions is not available.
- (3) Figures in brackets in column 3 shows the percentage response from registered trade unions.
- (4) Figures in brackets in column 4 and 5 shows the percentage of 'men' and 'women' members respectively to total membership.
- (5) Due to rounding off, totals may not necessarily tally.

(P) – Provisional

(E) – Estimated by repeating the previous year figures in respect of those states for which information was not received.

**Source: (Annual Returns under the Trade Unions Act, 1926. Indian Labour Book, Labour Bureau of India, Ministry of Labour; 1972; pp. 50-61.**

The strength of lockouts or strikes could be measured by the average number of days in which the labour participated in any agitation. The economic and political potentialities of any labour unrest could be judged by the number of loss of man days and number of shifts of duties per disputes. The following table should reveal the average number of days a worker was involved in a strike and lockouts and maydays lost per dispute.

**Number of Workers Involved per Dispute in Strike/Lockout and Average  
Number of Days a Worker was involved in Strike/Lockout**

Year	No. of workers involved per Dispute in		Average no. of days a worker was involved		No. of Mandays lost per Dispute		Intensity Index (7=6/5)
	Strikes (‘000)	Lockouts (‘000)	Strikes (‘000)	Lockouts (‘000)	Strikes (‘000)	Lockouts (‘000)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
1961	348	684	6.9	24.4	2,390	16,667	7.0
1962	412	1,368	8.8	8.2	3,624	11,178	3.1
1963	360	673	4.5	14.4	1,634	9,719	5.9
1964	442	747	6.5	15.7	2,889	17,102	5.9
1965	524	739	5.1	18.2	2,721	3,427	4.9
1966	536	729	8.2	23.4	4,410	17,089	3.9
1967	551	395	7.9	43.6	4,342	7,232	4.0
1968	598	628	7.6	30.2	4,520	18,972	4.2
1969	720	495	9.2	25.5	6,602	12,618	1.9
1970	597	948	9.5	20.9	5,677	19,979	3.5
1971	596	507	8.0	34.1	4,746	17,310	3.6
1972	516	679	9.3	25.9	4,812	17,606	3.7
1973	797	453	5.9	36.2	4,686	16,417	3.5
1974	1,079	339	12.4	45.6	13,403	15,464	1.2
1975	628	371	16.2	46.8	10,162	17,374	1.7

**Source: Dutt, 2003; p.16).**

Interestingly from all sections, powers and force were utilised to refrain the workers to go on strikes but surprisingly despite all oppositions and discouraging consequences, workers had the tendency to go for agitations. Without the right to agitate and voice their grievances, workers were extremely under the grace of the employers. Therefore, a new type of awakening among the workers was found in the industrial front. Fragmentations and splits in the trade unions were the most significant weakness in the history of labour movements of India. Gour had assessed that the climate of industrial relations had improved in 1965 obviously because the trade unions of all groups set their differences aside and joined together to defend the country's freedom and integrity during the periods of war with the China in 1962 and by Pakistan in 1965 (Gour, 1986; p. 110).

During this entire period AITUC starting from 1947 till the early 1970s launched various direct actions and became more revolutionary which resulted into the formation of several unions. Immediately after independence huge industrial disputes were noticed. The following table would show the number of workers involved in the industrial conflicts in the year 1947 to 1949.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Disputes</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>	<b>Number of Mandays Lost</b>
1947	1811	1,840,784	16,562,666
1948	1259	1,059,120	7,837,173
1949	914	6,48,188	6,580,887

**Source: Dhyani, 1970; p. 49**

Most peculiarly these unions started competing with each other in the same industry for the same end. AITUC in its different sessions adopted some resolutions like, to protect the right of the workers as human beings etc. S.A. Dange became the General Secretary of the AITUC in 1954. In the later years especially in 1964, some members began accusing Dange on the ground that he was sacrificing the real causes of the workers and also criticised him for his bureaucratic attitude in administering internal matters of the unions. Therefore he was branded as class-collaborationist. In 1970, Centre for Trade Unions was

formed which tried to give a shape to the Indian labour movement and fighting for the cause of the workers. It also gave efforts to awaken the working class consciousness. It had its declared objectives to lead democratic and revolutionary and economic anti-imperialist struggle in every part of the country. B.T. Ranadive and P. Ramamurthy were elected as the President and General Secretary of CITU respectively. Since then a host of changes of grave importance to the lives of Indian people, have taken place in the political scene of India; working class actions too excelled all previous records (Sen, 1997; p. 400). In 1971, a series of hartals, bandhs were occurring – some places of West Bengal, Kerala, Calicut, Tamilnadu, Bombay in different industries such as coir, textile, iron and steel etc. on various issues. All these struggles and movements were conducted or supported by diverse wings of trade unions, therefore, it was easily assumed that all the political parties started taking interest or getting entangled with the industrial as well as labour fronts. The Central Government made many efforts to refrain the workers from agitation and tried to sustain peace but all its attempts went in vain. The all India general strikes of Central Government Employees in 1960 and 1968 had shown many horizons in this regard. In 1973 almost forty thousand government employees organised a strike action and in 1973 there were several other strikes and struggles by the government employees were observed, whose demands were mainly of economic, minimum need based wage, bonus, dearness allowance etc. From the Government's part there was no single step was taken for settlement, it only sought to use force to break the strength of the working class. Within a few years of independence and freedom from imperialist bondage, Indian working mass again faced the trouble and trapped in various types of black holes. But we must mention that the government's endeavour and eagerness to intervene in industrial disputes in early period of independence was not wholly to numb the workers' struggle, it rather tried to protect the weak and helpless workers by taking multiple steps even by enacting legislations to protect different aspects of employment, e.g., wage, bonus, recruitment etc. Ultimately the pro-labour policy of the government had changed with the passing of time specially when the workers posed serious challenges to the authority. The authority was scared of the oppositions of any kind. The entire industrial scene of the country was in a turmoil situation. The harmonious relationship did not persist in any of the industries.

## **Development of Trade Union Movement in the Railway Industry**

In 1947 the partition of the country had immense effect on the railroad workers. The violence and disruptions of the partition left the railway industry in a very feeble condition. The railway industry had to manage and sort out the difficulties and issues of post war crisis. Thus transfer of power had largely transformed many things. The railroad authorities were repeatedly strained by political pressures and many times they had to approve such policies and practices which they regarded as unprofitable and unacceptable (Kerr, 2012; p. 153). Post-independence roused monumental aspirations among the railway workers like the other industrial workers. Thus, the unharmonious and un-cooperative attitude of the government threw them in a helpless and miserable situation. At the time the nature and activities of the railway trade unions were not optimistic and hopeful for the workers. But the modern system of communication had connected the remotest corners of the world and had broadened the scope of markets and enhanced the production systems. It was well known that without workers' contributions, no industry could run effectively and efficiently. Therefore, the trade unions and the management too must play a more positive role in favour of the working class. The improvements of transportation system had helped the emergence and development of other industries as well. In India railway industry as a mode of transportations had occupied a very crucial position in accelerating the industrial growth and economic progress of the country. Railways in India had been the life blood of modern trade and commerce. But economic progress of the country did not ensure the progress of the men behind this development.

Since long there was a demand for Indianisation of the entire workforce in the railway industry that was supposed to be completed within few years of independence. I. J Kerr reported that the railroads had 1,033,217 permanent employees in 1947 of whom 1,345 were European and 12,281 were Anglo Indians. Though additionally a substantial portion of workers were employed in the railroad industry purely on casual basis, there was no statistics found in this direction which could support the data. Kerr also mentioned that the number of railroad contractors under whose supervision these large number of labourers worked in the railway industry, also remained unknown (Kerr, 2012; p. 172). Throughout

the 1950s railway industry had employed enormously and expansion of the industry itself had taken place. In the Indian Railways (I.R.) employees were categorised into four groups – Class I and II were not allowed to form any union as they were called gazetted officers. Class III and IV were eligible to become a member of trade unions. Interestingly at that point of time the majority of railway workforce belonged to Class III and IV categories. There were more than 700 categories of work found in railways and the detail of which were not even available. However, railways in India as a public utility sector faced so many hurdles and hindrances towards the unionisation of the employees. Narshima Reddy explained that the railway employees were treated not only as industrial workers but also as the government employees and this doubleness had created difficulties for them because different standards of rules and regulations were applied to the railwaymen under various labour legislations (Reddy, 1979; p. 1652). Moreover, the varied categories of workers got a platform when AIRF was formed in the colonial period. After independence Congress had to constitute another trade union in the railway industry on a political basis. In 1948 Indian National Railway Workers' Federation thus came into being. The main purpose behind the formation was to seize the absolute powers of the Royist and communists over the railway workforce and also to influence them in pro-congress party vision in the post independent India. Interestingly for the Congress leaders it was much easier task to form a new union rather than to win AIRF under rightist ideology. Hariharnath Sashtri, G. Ramachandran etc. were the men behind its Constitution.

The history of AIRF was much intricate and complex. During the closing years of independence, AIRF tried to improve its relation with the management by supporting the war efforts. But having the leaders like V.V. Giri and Jayprakash Narayan immediately after independence it adopted or took to the strategy of confrontation. In the meantime when the Government disregarded the recommendations of the First Central Pay Commission relating to dearness allowance it created an atmosphere of workers' resentment and anger. Thus the leadership was forced to call a strike in March 1949. Government agreed to review the issues and appealed to withdraw the strike. The ordinary workers were not happy with the decision of calling off the strike. AIRF had curtailed its affiliations with those who went against its decision in order to show its allegiance to the government. Thus, by the end of 1950-51 the militant trade unions in the Railways were thoroughly suppressed and

disorganised (Chakraborty, 1987; p. 57). In 1948 the authority decided to regroup the twenty eight railways into six zones as a result the union leaderships had to reorganise the structural and functional basis of the unions.

In this connection we must discuss the policies of the railway authority to grant recognition to the trade unions in railway industry. Railway Board in 1949 announced certain principles for getting recognition. Among these principles some were already existed in the guidelines of railway administration since 1935. Followings were the pre-existing terms and conditions:

- 1) that the union must consist of a distinct class of government employees;
- 2) that government employees of the same class must be eligible for membership; and
- 3) that the union must be the one registered under Trade Unions Act, 1926.

The additional conditions were:

- 1) the membership of a union seeking recognition should not be less than ten percent of the total number of non-gazetted railway employees on the railway concerned;
- 2) sectional unions, i.e., unions composed of either category or a limited category of workers should not be recognised; and
- 3) recognition should not be granted to a union which in the opinion of the railway administration has been or is likely to engage in subversive activities (Reddy; 1979; p. 1653).

This policy was actually designed to prohibit the growth of not only the categorical unions but also to restrict the activities of the unions.

In 1948 the NFIR was born, during its inception NFIR was known as Indian National Railway Federation (INRWF). In 1953 after prolonged and detailed discussion the AIRF and INRWF merged and a new union came into existence, e.g. National Federation of Indian Railwaymen. Within a few years, AIRF found that NFIR was more keen to favour the members of erstwhile INRWF and protect the right reactionary forces within the union. Then AIRF decided to work along its own ideological path hence it left NFIR and began functioning independently from 1956. However, these two unions – AIRF and NFIR were

the only recognized unions in the Indian Railways till date. There were several other trade unions that existed in the railway front but the unions were affiliated to either of AIRF or NFIR.

The main source of income of these unions was their affiliation fees. The affiliation fees of AIRF were lower than the NFIR. Sometimes, it also happened that the affiliated unions protested and resisted the increase of affiliation fees and most of the times it was reported that due to these protests the recognised unions had to reduce their fees. The following table would reflect the situation.

Year	Total Income (in Rs.)	Affiliation Fee*	
		Amount (Rs.)	Percent of the Total
1953-54	8,081	7,830	97
1954-55	2,804	2,704	96
1955-56	6,288	6,188	98
1956-57	8,461	8,456	100
1957-58	17,464	14,911	86
1958-59	21,897	16,428	75
1959-60	2,532	382	15
1960-61	24,115	22,208	92
1961-62	15,739	14,062	89
1962-63	19,795	27,762	90
Total	1,27,176	1,10,931	87

\*The amount of affiliation fee shown in this table is the amount actually received during the year and not that which become due during that year.

**Source: Mast, 1969; p. 75.**

Railway employees were mainly supposed to abide by the Factories Act of 1948 and Hours of Employment Regulations under the Indian Railway (Amendment) Act 1930. Railway workers since its inception had the primary complaint against the length of ‘working hour’. The hours of work in the railways have three aspects.

- a) Classification of workers;
- b) Maximum hours of work for each class; and
- c) Weekly rest period.

**(Reddy, 1979; p.1651).**

Apart from the workshop employees and clerical based jobs, the railway workers were regulated by Hours of Employment Regulations and they were divided into four categories:

1. Intensive’
2. Continuous’
3. Essential Intermittent and
4. Excluded.

The last two categories did not have any particular maximum hours of duty. The following table would indicate this categorisation of the workers.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Employees (1970)</b>
Intensive	2,467
Continuous	9,09,931
Essentially Intermittent	1,46,592
Excluded	50,547

**Source: (NFIR Memorandum to the Third Pay Commission, New Delhi; 1970, p. 27)**

**(Reddy, 1979; p.1653).**

It was quite natural that the workers must have a long demand to reduce the work pressure by minimising the working hour. Loco running staffs of the railways were described as continuous and essentially intermittent staff. In 1955-56 several agitations took place in the different railway zones such as; in Eastern zone, South Eastern zone – Adra and Khurda stations, Bilaspur division etc. Workers went on strike and halted the work on various issues. In 1956 three remarkable struggles were witnessed at Kalka, Kharagpur and Kazipet on three different issues. e.g.:

- 1) The Chairman of the Railway Board denied to receive the memorandum submitted by the workers and not only that he ordered the police to disrupt the gathering of the workers;
- 2) In Kharagpur workshop, the workers struck when the authority refused to accept the demands of some staff to upgrade them into the pay scale of the skilled workers. Here also the authority resorted to force to control the workers' activities and most peculiarly AIRF did not agree to intervene the matter;
- 3) In Kazipet workers went on strike on the demand of reducing duty hours.

Another strong agitation was observed in 1956 in Calcutta when the head quarter of North Eastern Railways was shifted to Gorakhpur. As a result of this agitation North East Railways were divided into two parts (i) North East Frontier Railways and Eastern Railways. During this whole period upto 1958-59 AIRF did not play any significant role in leading the workers and launching any struggle. Though they indulge in militant trade union activities in various centres, there was a lack of a concerted effort to organise themselves into a powerful nation wide movement (Fernandes, 1984; p. 24). To settle the labour disputes and to achieve peace in the railway industry, the Government decided to constitute Permanent Negotiating Machinery in 1952 whose main function was to maintain day to day liaison with the workers and the management. It was established at all the three levels:

- 1) Zonal level;
- 2) Divisional level;
- 3) Railway Board level.

In this situation the recommendations of the Second Pay Commission compelled the central government employees including the railways to go on a strike in 1960 on the 11<sup>th</sup> July. While the railwaymen were in the forefront of this struggle under the leadership of the All India Railwaymen's Federation, the National Federation of Indian Railwaymen indulged in its professional strike breaking activity (Fernandes, 1984; p.27). This All India General Strike was suppressed by the government and the railwaymen's struggle was awarded with failure. In this situation the Congress led trade unions began to take advantages from the authority by showing its loyalty towards the government and by disrupting the strength and confidence of the workers. The most adverse result of this strike was that the feeling of disintegration among the workers was generated.

In the Southern Railways numerous employees' associations were formed, Employees' Associations were affiliated to NFIR and Southern Railway Employees' Unions were affiliated to AIRF. These two merged and ultimately formed Dakshin Railway Employee's Union affiliated to AIRF. The following table provided the picture of railway unions functioning in the Southern Railways. In Southern Railways, The unions were divided into broad categories and these were: Industrial Federal (IF); Industrial Regional (IR) and Industrial Categorical (IC).

### Some Features of IF and IR Unions in Southern Railway, 1975

Name of the Union	Year of Establishment	Union Type	Membership (Year)	Union Affiliation	Political <sup>1</sup> Affiliation
Southern Railway Employees Sangh	1957	IF	42,370 (1971)	NIRF and INTUC	Congress (O)
Southern Railway Mazdoor Union	1960	IF	36,100 (1972)	AIRF	Socialist
Dakshin Railway Karmik Sangh	1970	IF	NA	BRMS	Jana Sangh
Dakshin Railway Employees' Union	1961	IR	18,193 (1962)	-	Communist CPI (M)
Southern Railway Labour Union <sup>2</sup>	-	IR	-	-	Communist CPI
Southern Railway Employees Progressive Union	1970	IR	9 (1970)	-	DMK
South Rail Industrial Workers' Union	1970	IR	23,000 (1971)	-	Congress (R)
Southern Railwaymen's Union	1973	iR	NA	-	NA
Dravida Railwaymen's Union	1973	IR	NA	-	NA

- i) The political party affiliations as obtained in 1973, many changes had since the taken place regarding the case of political parties and their union affiliations.
- ii) It was merged with DREU in 1964, but was revised again. The exact date is not available.

**(Source: (1) Office of the Registered Trade Unions, Madras.**

**(2) Southern Railway Headquarters Office, Madras.**

**(3) Railway Board, New Delhi.**

**(Reddy, 1980; p. 1623).**

In this respect, we can say that the position of AIRF had become weak and rudderless. AIRF was confused whether to ventilate the workers' demands or to go with the management's industrial relation. Among the railwaymen a general feeling of hopelessness and frustration gradually began to appear. The AIRF became unpopular amongst the railwaymen. Meanwhile, a deadlock situation was created when the railway workers demanded to reconsider the matters relating to need based minimum wage and revision of dearness allowance. Government agreed to revise the same but in practice it did not take any constructive decision. The leadership in the AIRF were anxious about the sentiments of the railwaymen towards the union's stand, hence they had prepared twenty seven charter of demands. The workers were determined to go on a bigger movement. On the other hand, All India Central Government employees assembled to voice their resentments through a country wide struggle which resulted in the decision of a "one day token strike". It was held in July, 1968. The central trade unions had made several attempts to negotiate with the Government but Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India expressed no willingness to listen to them. Thus, in 1968 in the month of September a one day token strike was taken place by the central government employees including the railwaymen. It was reported that the government resorted to all sorts of repressive measures. 5,825 railwaymen were arrested, 8 railwaymen were killed in police firing at Mariani and Bongaigaon of N.F. railways and Bikaner and Pathankot. On Northern Railways in Delhi at Indraprastha Bhawan one employee was beaten to death by the police (AIRF Publication, 1924-99).

The strike action did not get any immediate success but the massive victimisation was withdrawn in the later years. And the Third Central Pay Commission was appointed by the Government immediately after the strike. Surprisingly the response of the recognised unions of all sections was very depressive and their participation in this struggle was very poor. Only handful of them had joined the strike. AIRF leadership could not command any resoluteness in this direction and remained very much passive. Nrishingha Chakroborty as a member of AIRF admitted that the reason behind the condition of AIRF might have appeared due to the death of the General Secretary Mr. Guruswami in 1963, who was mainly the guiding force of the union. He told that Maniben Kara shouldered the president ship of the union upto August, 1968. Maniben Kara was very popular among the workers and also

in the management; she used to represent workers' issues not only forcibly and convincingly but always counselled them and argued reasonably with the authority. But by this time, i.e., during the central government employees' strike AIRF could not prove itself. Chakraborty argued that the failure of AIRF leadership to fight for the just cause of the railwaymen, their serviceability to the railway administration and their democratic functioning within their organisations (i.e., suppression effected branches and unions) had led to rise of category sentiment (Chakraborty, 1987; p. 69).

In this connection we should refer to the category wise employment of the Indian Railways. Indian Railways consisted of varied types of works skilled to unskilled, educated to uneducated workers. The following table would highlight the department-wise employment in the railways.

**Department-wise Employment in Indian Railways: As on March 31, 1973**

Departments	All the Nine Zonal Railways	Production Unit			Total
		CLW	DLW	ICF	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Administration	36.28 (2.6)	454	379	429	37,546 (2.7)
Accounts	29,563 (2.2)	499	261	321	30,644 (2.2)
Civil Engineering	2,93,342 (21.4)	898	639	414	2,95,313 (20.9)
Signal and Tele Commu- nications	49,837 (3.6)	44	-	-	49,881 (3.51)
Transport	1,90,088 (13.5)	-	-	-	1,90,088 (13.5)
Commercial	1,10,320 (8.0)	-	-	-	1,10,320 (7.8)

Departments	All the Nine Zonal Railways	Production Unit			Total
		CLW	DLW	ICF	
Mechanical Engineering	4,29,243 (31.3)	9,074	3,314	9,453	4,51,084 (31.9)
Stores	36,581 (2.7)	806	715	516	38,618 (2.7)
Electrical	92,969 (6.8)	923	622	1,143	95,657 (6.8)
Medical	49,111 (3.6)	604	84	-	49,799 (3.5)
Railway Protection Force	54,826 (4.0)	507	236	469	56,038 (4.0)
Railway Board and other Railway Offices	-	-	-	-	8,029
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,72,164 (100)</b>	<b>13,809</b>	<b>6,270</b>	<b>12,745</b>	<b>14,13,017 (100)</b>

Notes: CLW : Chittaranjan Locomotive Works  
DLW : Diesel Locomotive Works, Varanasi  
ICF : Integral Coach Factory, Madras

Figures in parentheses represent percentages

Data on Department-wise distribution of employment in the Railway Board and other offices are not available.

**Source:** Ministry of Railways, Supplement to the Indian Railways, Report and Accounts 1972-73, Statistical Statement, Delhi, 1974.

**Reddy, 1979; p. 1652.**

Indian Railways consisted of wide range of departments hence, employed several types of workers. These department wise staff had their own problems and difficulties relating to their employment. The grievances and resentments must also be varied and diverse. Surprisingly, no recognised unions strived to protect the interests of the workers and voiced their demands. Therefore, the reactions of the different segments of railway workers were the manifestation of dissatisfaction and disappointments not only towards the attitude of the management but also to the performance of the recognised unions. The railway workers began looking for an alternative to these recognised unions which could provide a platform of strength and solidarity of the working class. As a result a number of category wise unions were formed by the different sections of the railway workers. Sporadic actions like go slow, work to rule etc. started occurring throughout the country.

The earliest of all category-wise unions in the railways was the Station Masters' Associations of 1953 but it never seemed to be very prominent and competent too because their members were scattered and not united. Another craft union which came into being in the Indian Railway was Indian Railways signalling and Telecommunication Staff Association in 1966. These workers too conceived the role of the recognised union as displeasing and unable to fetch any change in its position. The following table indicated the above statement, i.e., a large number of Staff Councils existed in the railway industry.

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Staff Councils</b>
1956-57	160
1957-58	157
1958-59	214
1959-60	261
1960-61	300
1961-62*	400

**Source: Indian Railway, Ministry of Railways for 1956-57, 1957-58, 1958-59, 1959-60, 1960-61; pp.65, 69, 76, 89 and 109 respectively.**

\*Report, NFIR, VII Annual Convention, New Delhi, 1963, p. 18, (Mast, 1969; p. 92).

A railwaymen's Federation remarked that "Parallel organisations are being created deliberately and some like the Staff Councils not only have been endowed with the power and functions of trade unions but are also allowed to enjoy more benefits privileges than those allowed to trade unions...These councils are formed by nomination yes-man of the administration as representatives of employees and their functions is to divert the attention of the employees at large from their trade unions" (Mast, 1969; p. 93).

The most significant amongst them was the emergence of Firemen's Council which provided a serious blow to the labour movement of the Indian Railways. In October 1966 a group of firemen formed an independent Firemen's Council at Madurai loco shed in Tamilnadu free from any superior upper level control. As they thought that they were nothing but the bonded labours of the railways, they began to spread their influences over the grass root level workers in the entire southern region. They initiated several meetings, deputations and demonstrations to ventilate their grievances. Their organisation was "Southern Railway Fireman's Council". In July 1967, out of six hundred firemen five hundred and thirteen workers were reported 'sick' which resulted into serious halt to running of trains – goods and passenger both. Management condemned the mass sick leave and more surprisingly the recognised unions declared that they did not have any link with this action. Southern Railway and South Central Railway managements resorted to police force to break the strike and several other methods but the firemen did not go back to work. Not only the firemen, but later they were joined by the Shunters and the Drivers too. Ultimately the authority accepted all the demands and assured that no victimisation would take place. The authority had no other options and negotiations were made between the management and the recognised unions because the Firemen's Council was not affiliated to any recognised unions. The Firemen's Council had established itself as a new militant pole of attraction in the railway workers' movement (Sherlock, 2002; p. 60). On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1968, again the Firemen's Council went on mass sick in protest of the victimisation of leaders who were terminated from railway service on the ground of the activities during the previous agitation. In 1968, out of three thousand firemen two thousand and five hundred had joined in the struggle in Southern Railway and thirteen hundred out of seventeen hundred in South Central Railways. Management threatened that 'severe disciplinary action' would be taken

against the workers. The railwaymen resumed their work on 16<sup>th</sup> July when the Railway Minister of State Parimal Ghosh assured that the workers' prolonged demand of reduction in working hours would be taken care of and the victimisation against the workers would also be withdrawn. These two struggles of the firemen rendered an immense strength and solidarity to all the sections of railway workers. Firemen's agitations paved the way to the formation of the broad based organisation of the loco men. The split between the ministers or politicians and the bureaucrats or the management was another outcome of this agitation. There had been long and several issues to be dealt with e.g., issues like long working hours, dieselisation from late 1950s abolished the hope of the senior firemen to get promoted to the scales of drivers when the authority started recruiting the young educated men to the post of the drivers. Before independence the firemen were treated as socially lower beings than the drivers and after 1947 the same mentality and attitude persisted. They demanded for fair treatment for their positions. However, in 1970 May, again they went on six days strike, this time the cleaners, drivers and shunters had participated with the firemen. Eventually the strike was called off on the promise of the Railway Minister to consider the issues and no victimisation would be taken place. In the background of agitations, category wise associations at the all India level formed Indian Railway Employees Confederation in 1969 whose main purpose was to settle the local demands. They launched several sporadic movements in the shape of stoppage of work or go slow etc. The intensity of these struggles forced the recognised unions either to join or to declare disassociation with them. But a new kind of unity and solidarity had developed among the railwaymen. The strike at Adra Station in South Eastern Railways had shown tremendous strength and solidarity in June 1970 and it spread upto Bilaspur Division where the workers struck in support of the demands of the workers at Adra Station. And surprisingly the authority was again compelled to assure workers to review their wage structure and to grant special leave for the strike days and authority had taken measures in favour of these promises.

These struggles of firemen in 1967, 1968 and 1970 showed the strength of the loco staff and paved the way to the formation of All India Loco Running Staff Association in 1970 in the month of August in Vijawada in Andhra Pradesh. It brought four thousand delegates from different parts of India indicating the solidarity of the workers. Railwaymen were basically inspired by a feeling of self confidence and unity to mount their own

agitations without the support of the recognised unions which were incapable to fight for the basic demands of the workers. In the end of 1970, another significant struggle occurred in N.F Railways where the management had to acknowledge the demands of the workers. In the N.F. Railways Loco Running Association got involved in the struggles of Barauni and Garhara in Bihar. In Siliguri in northern part of West Bengal four loco men were arrested and in protest against their arrest seven hundred workers had ceased to work on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1970. Sherlock nicely described the incident of Siliguri that, their attitude could not have changed when on 25<sup>th</sup> July five hundred soldiers detained by the stoppage at New Mal Station near Siliguri ran riot, attacking railway workers and looting grocery shops and the railway canteen...by the sixth day the strike had spread to New Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Bongaigaon (Sherlock, 2002; pp.100-101). Government took hard steps and deployed police and B.S.F. in the entire region as the area was strategically and geographically important as it connected the north east India with the rest of the country. In spite of the repression the strike ended on the assurance of the Railway Minister that no victimisation would take place, arrested leaders would be released and the workers who had lost their jobs would be getting back.

A convention was held in 1971 through which all the category wise and unrecognised unions joined hands and established the United Committee of Railwaymen in N.F. Railway Zone (Chakraborty, 1987; pp.75-76). In South Eastern, Eastern and N.F. Railway, innumerable struggles occurred during the early 1970s. The general trade union movement in India always faced splits and rivalry, therefore these two features specially the fragmentation was accompanied with weakness and essentially the “trade union democracy was sacrificed in the process” (Chakraborty, 1987; p.77).

Agitations and struggles kept on continuing in different parts of the country, such as in Dhanbad Division twenty thousand railway workers had paralysed the movement of trains between Gomoh and Gaya stations which had also affected the movements of rails in the neighbouring zones. The reason behind the disturbance was due to the frequent assault of the workers by the RPF men. In August 1972 the workers in South Central Railway in Hubli Division went on mass sick leave when the Divisional Manager rejected to receive the memorandum of demands from the Loco Running Staff Association for increasing the pay for all section of workers. The loco men got frustrated regarding the economic conditions of

their life. First and the Second Central Pay Commissions made all the central government employees extremely hopeless including the railway workforce. And when the report of Third Pay Commission was delayed, they became furious. Each and every division of Southern Railways had participated in this action. The campaign was so successful that even railway authority had to admit that five thousand and three hundred workers out of six thousand seven hundred loco men in the Southern Railway had participated in the strike and that only hundred of the normal five hundred fifteen goods trains were moving and two hundred and thirty six of the normal six hundred forty passenger trains (Sherlock, 2002; p. 103). Workers confronted with tremendous torture and repression including DIR. Huge Territorial Army was utilized to crush the strike but the railwaymen remained unmoved despite of arrest and lots of sufferings.

In this period the unrecognised category wise unions always tried to approach the recognised unions for joint action and united struggle. But the situation was never favourable for the craft unions. The unremitting hostility of the recognised unions was a constant background against which the Loco Running Staff Association had to operate (Sherlock, 2002; p. 113). Interestingly, clear distinctiveness was observed in the struggle of the loco men in the eastern and southern regions of the railways. Types of campaigns and solidarity were different, e.g., in the east the craft unions had tried to build a solidarity among themselves or rather they always tried to launch their movements in cooperation with the others, i.e., an atmosphere of craft consciousness always prevailed. In the south campaign for struggle or the strategy for uniting the workers to lead any agitation were unique. It had been argued that craft consciousness was an underdeveloped form of class consciousness and suggested that Loco Running Staff Association needed to foster a greater degree of class consciousness to succeed as an alternative to the recognised unions (Sherlock, 2002; p. 135). The Loco Running Staff Association started building a federal structure uniting the loco staff of various zones - eastern to southern. The united strength which the different strike actions in different zones had shown provided momentum to lead an all India united struggle. Interestingly in West Bengal the periods of late 1960s and early 1970s were the period of general mass upheaval. The Communists and Leftist traits in politics were trying to uproot the Congress led Government and channelized the working class strength to this end. As a result of this the militancy in the railway trade union activity

had flourished. The Naxalite movement in West Bengal led to the imposition of President's Rule. In this situation (1969-72) Railway Labour Tribunal (Miabhoy Tribunal) on working hours of the workers published its recommendations which had taken the unrecognised unions into its consideration. But it failed when NFIR refused its proposal of inclusion of unrecognised craft unions in the deliberations. Sukomal Sen analysed that in the background of overall economic crisis and growing upsurge of struggles all over the country, the Loco Running Staff Association decided to go into action, beginning with mass deputation to local authorities and then with work to rule, they prepared for bigger action (Sen, 1977; p. 413).

The category wise unions by the time had gained immense power and had led several militant movements in the railways. In January, 1973 at Burdwan, West Bengal, in its Annual Convention the Loco Staff Association declared that if the Rail Bhawan did not consider the demands, they would go for a country wide strike. In the month of May they started their agitations in the form of 'mass sick leave' when they repeatedly appealed to the Railway Minister L.N. Mishra and the management too for redressing their grievances, but all these went in vain. Workers were back to work when the authority gave assurance to review their demands and also submitted an undertaking that they would not go into any movement for next six months if their demand would have met. But unfortunately on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1973 the AILRSA called an all India strike which continued till the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> August. This strike totally halted the train movement and paralysed the entire functioning of railways. In N.F. Railways a complete deadlock situation persisted. The Government's responses towards the agitations were very much negative. It arrested four hundred loco running staff and announced the strike illegal. Loco Running Staff were requested to join the work by both the recognised unions – NFIR and AIRF. The Hindu reported that Mishra decided to begin negotiations on 8<sup>th</sup> August with the leaders of the Loco Running Staff Association. The leaders agreed to meet him hence the negotiations started on 10<sup>th</sup> of August and an agreement was announced on 13<sup>th</sup> August (The Hindu, 10.8.73; P. 1). Mishra tried to include the leaders of the recognised unions in the settlement process but they didn't agree with the Railway Minister. The AILRSA did not agree with the Railway Minister on this point and forced the authority to remove the recognised unions. The strike was called off, no worker was victimised and arrested workers were immediately released and above all

the working hour had been reduced to ten hour maximum in a day. This agreement was an outstanding achievement of the railway workers. The success of this strike provided a greater impetus and a new height to the labour movement of the country because the majority of the Indian working class was composed of railway workers, thus, it offered a revitalisation of trade union movement of the railways as well as the entire country. An environment of strike struggles in the railways continued till early 1974 by the different craft unions such as Station Masters' Association, Train Examiners' Association, Technical Supervisors' Association etc. went on work to rule in the month of February 1974. Times of India reported that in the eastern India especially the coal and steel belt was badly hit by the different unrests by the craft unions and a chaotic situation was prevailed here for couple of months (Times of India, 7.2.74; p.4). Sherlock analysed the entire situation and said that loss of credibility amongst the workers was in itself a threat to the recognised unions, but the real matter of worry was that many workers revolted against the lack of effective representations and committed to building new organisations (Sherlock, 2002; p. 195). However, these movements revealed the fact that the workers had lost every faith from the recognised unions and these unions specially AIRF on the other hand lost effective leadership therefore, it tried to regain its power to retain in its position.

## **Chapter IV**

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

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

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

# I

## The Grievances of the Workers and the Preparations for the Strike

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Real Earnings (Base: 1961=100)**

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

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

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

### Industrial Injuries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Preparation of the Railwaymen's for the Strike**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**(Siddhanta, 1974; p. 30).**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Council also directs the affiliates:

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

**(Siddhanta, 1974; p.25).**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter V**

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

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

#### **1**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter VI**

### **The Strike and its Impact in the Northeast Frontier Railways**

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

#### **1**

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

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

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

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

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

	<b>Meter Gauge Section</b>	<b>Broad Gauge Section</b>
Major bridges	101	91
Minor bridges	823	450

(Choudhuri, 2004; p. 26).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Workers'. N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union along with the other units had joined in the strike and this action was dealt with heavy hands; the working class of the country thus faced a brute force utilised by the Central Government. The reasons behind the workers resentment mainly revolved around the structure of their payment; long duty hours and poor accommodation facilities. When the workers found that the minimum requirements of livelihood went out of reach and sufferings increased day by day, began to articulate their demands and planned to place them before the authority. The rise of prices of essential commodities made the situation worse. Bimalendu Chakraborty<sup>23</sup>, member of N.F. Railway Mazdoor Union, posted at first in Chittaranjan Locomotives in 1958 as a draftsman and then transferred to Pandu, Assam informed that the hardships and sufferings of the daily life agonised the railwaymen. Chakraborty had commented that Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India too took very firm steps to suppress the Central Government Employees strike and as a result it was withdrawn after five days. Huge victimisation took place, workers were charged with several cases and faced break in services, removal etc. In Siliguri the strike was complete and the railway workers actively participated in this agitation. Nabajyoti Chowdhuri informed that on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1960, a very big procession of all the Central Government employees at Siliguri rallied over entire town. Basanta Ghosh and Baswan Singh, MLA was also present on that occasion (Chowdhuri, 2004, p. 44). Leaders like Priya Gupta, Peter Alvares etc. visited Siliguri during the period as Assam was debarred from joining the strike due to the internal communal disturbances of the state. Before the strike began an agitation occurred in Siliguri, as a result of which curfew was promulgated on 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 and from 11<sup>th</sup> midnight an indefinite strike had started. Several workers of Siliguri Town, Siliguri Junction and NJP had been victimised and the recognition of the union was also withdrawn. High Court of Calcutta restored the recognition of the union. In 1968 a 'one day token strike' was organised and most of the workers of this region including DHR had participated in the strike.

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

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

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

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

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

\*In millions

(Source: Kerr, 2012; p. 176)

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

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

provided with any quarters to live along with their families, those who were staying in the railway quarters had complained several times to the authority about the poor conditions of the quarters, but they always remained ignored and unheard (Brahma, 2016; p.107). Nikhil Bhattacharjee<sup>25</sup>, the member of United Committee for Railwaymen was a Guard, posted at Badarpur, Assam in 1973 and a member of Zonal Action Committee of NCCRS confirmed that the ‘gang huts’ – the one room quarter mainly allotted to the class IV workers of Indian Railways were so unhealthy and sub standard, suffocating and filthy that workers lived for years in those quarters which were mostly built in the colonial period. These ‘gang huts’ did not have a proper system of ventilation, sanitation and were very much unhygienic, dirty and nasty. Samaresh Chandra Som<sup>26</sup>, a second Fireman at Alipurduar Junction was a member of UCR in N. F. Railways spoke about the uniforms, those were supplied by the management were so poor in quality that the workers did not even like to wear that during their duty hours. The workers like Som who was mainly engaged in the heavy engine, specially the fireworks required proper uniforms and during the time of steam engine duties the workers had to work with water, coal, fire, grease etc. for which they needed proper uniforms. He stated that the railway management of Alipurduar Division was tremendously corrupt. The tender for uniform was given to those who could well bribe the management staff. Quality was compromised for money. There was a huge case of malfeasants and malpractices documented but no official measures were taken against any of them. Dishonesty, corruption and mismanagement were the common features of the dealing staff in all the zonal railways. Lots of cases of discrepancies in the railway management in these regions were noticed but no one had questioned the authority not even the union leaders. The union leaders were bribed so that they ignore such corrupt practices and avoid the complaints of the general workers.

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

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

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

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

There was another reason behind the workers’ resentment which had persisted since the colonial period and that is the system of hierarchy in every sphere of work. The category sentiment had inevitably grown up and a marked difference between different grades of the workers was predominant in the railway industry. Casual workers were the sufferers of this phenomenon. Pallab Kr. Majumdar<sup>27</sup>, a casual worker in Katihar Division posted at Thakurganj in 1974 was a member of the Mazdoor Union he informed that most of the casual labourers were incorporated under the umbrella of AIRF, because the casual workers always demanded for fixed pay and decasualization. They were paid only Rs. 3.5/- per day and were appointed for 120 days but always terminated on 119<sup>th</sup> day from their work and after a gap of one or two days or a week again were given some other work by the same or different department. Usually the casual workers had to visit different departments for works. The departments of signalling system, construction works mainly the construction of bridges required more skilled and unskilled labourers. They were not entitled to get any facilities and benefits from the industry. Majumdar regretted that these casual workers were termed as “Murgir deem”, it meant that if any mishap took place like accidents or sickness, they were simply terminated from their services and got no benefits from the authority. They were compared with the ‘eggs’, if the eggs got spoiled, the management just dismissed the casual workers they were not in the position of any use. The position of the casual labourers

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

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

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

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

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

condemned the arrest and victimisation<sup>28</sup>. A 'bandh' on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1970 was held in Siliguri and Alipurduar against the decisions and responses of the authority demanding the release of the arrested leaders. At last the Railway Minister had directed the General Manager of N.F. Railway to take necessary measures and negotiate with the workers and advised that everything should be resolved immediately. Therefore, the Railway authority promised that no victimisation and disciplinary actions would take place against the striking workers and then the strike was called off.<sup>29</sup>

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

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

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

Chandra Das<sup>30</sup> informed that as UCR represented all the shades of unions and categories of workers, it was enough capable to mount any mass movement in the entire N.F. Railway zone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Samiti, the strike notice was served to the General Manager, N.F. Railways after a massive rally of railwaymen at Maligaon Headquarters on 23rd April evening. They proposed total withdrawal of labour for an indefinite period to achieve their six-point charter of demands, which was going to commence from 6:00 a.m. of May 8th 1974 (Assam Tribune, 24.4.74; p. 1). Indibar Konger, the Convenor of Action Committee of N. F. Railways along with the other leaders on 23rd April held a meeting and addressed the workers for inspiring and motivating them to join hands to participate in the struggle. All the unrecognised and craft unions had joined hands and voiced their demands which included: payment of bonus, need-based minimum wage, eight hour duty per day, linking of dearness allowances with cost of living, supply of subsidised food grains, decasualisation and grant of all trade union rights. The Employees' Union of N.F. Railways affiliated to NFIR decided to refrain from participating in the strike. They described the strike as politically motivated and interested more in sectional and personal gains rather than in securing economic rights and demands of the railway workers. Employees' Union (NFIR affiliated) resorted to every measure to restrain the railwaymen from associating and involving in this struggle. They also organised counter activities in public forums in various places in Assam like holding of meetings, rallies etc. to convince the workers and explaining the consequences of the proposed strike. Pradyutananda Sarkar<sup>33</sup>, Controller in Lumding Division i.e., a management staff and a member of Employees' Union affirmed the above matter.

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

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

Kumar Sen<sup>34</sup>, a Fireman posted in Katihar Junction since 1963 was a member of UCR. Sen along with other his colleagues protested and rallied against the authoritarian attitude of the government. They were determined to launch the strike by involving more and more workers for an indefinite period. In Katihar the Action Committee rendered its best effort to consolidate the workers to initiate the preparation of the indefinite strikes and strengthen the morale of the workers. He argued that strong trade union sentiment and an honest and fresh approach towards working class movement had helped the workers in this Division to acquire power and solidarity and firmness for the movement. Sen communicated that several meetings and gatherings were organised in this division for encouraging the workers in favour of the strike. Following the government's line of action, all the Action Committees of N.R. Railways decided that eminent leaders of the trade unions should go underground in order to avoid arrest and police threatening and torture. Therefore, in almost all the Divisional Headquarters and important Junctions no leaders were found available.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1974, every division under N. F. Railway observed 'Protest Day' against the decisive attitude of the government and its decision to arrest the frontline national leaders of the Action Committees of NCCRS. The Convenor of the Action Committee of N.F. Railway Indibar Konger stated that the government had provoked the railway men to go on strike, but the NCCRS was thinking of a negotiated settlement with the government. In some places "pen down" agitation took place. In Dibrugarh and Luming several meetings and rallies were held in protest against the arrest. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May in Guwahati, a meeting was conducted by the Action Committee that might be the longest and largest meeting ever held in the N. F. Railway because all the prominent leaders of the trade unions and the workers of all political colours had attended the same to prepare the action plans of the strike days. The leaders were directed not to stay in their railway quarters but to meet in a proposed and fixed place every day in order to get information about the day to day happenings and developments. Sisir Kumar Nandi<sup>35</sup>, a signalling staff, member of All India Signalling Staff Council and AILRSA was posted in Guwahati in 1974 attended the meeting and witnessed the enormous volume and strength of the meeting. The railway workers were

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

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

so aggrieved that nothing could restrain them from joining the strike. They had already begun sporadic revolts at local levels from 3<sup>rd</sup> May onwards. On the other hand, the Employees' Union, along with the Congress party members propagated against the strike notice and tried to dominate the railway workers in Guwahati and its surrounding areas. In Guwahati a meeting of Presidents and General Secretaries of the District Congress Committees of Assam has appealed to the people in general and Congressmen in particular to mobilise public opinion against the proposed strike by the railwaymen (Hindustan Standard, 3.5.74; p.8). Ajit Kumar Das<sup>36</sup>, a Fireman of NJP station was the member of Fireman's Council and AILRSA and before the May strike had joined UCR asserted that from the early days of April the strike preparation had started. He was assigned to the duty of collection of money. He expressed his gratitude to all the members of railway trade unions who had not thought twice to contribute money for this purpose. As it was an indefinite struggle, they required enough money to continue the movement. He told that the people of nearby areas, employees of other Public Sectors and astoundingly a large number of management staff and members of NFIR also had contributed as much as they could donate. Before the strike began, almost all the quarters of the NJP Railway Colony became free of male members and only the women members of the families remained in the quarters. The railway men fled from the colonies and work place.

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

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

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

## **II**

### **Situation in North Eastern Frontier Railway Zone during the Strike**

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

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

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

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

which took place from 8<sup>th</sup> May (Siddhanta, 1974; p. 63). In the N.F. Railway in some places especially in the areas of North Bengal, it started on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 and continued till 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1974. In Assam on 4<sup>th</sup> May when a bulk of trade union leaders of the railways were arrested in different divisions, the railway workers started protesting against the treacherous moves of the government and the railway authority. A total of 26 railway workers were kept behind the bars in Assam. The State Secretary of the CPI (M) of Assam condemned the arrests of the leaders, Achintya Bhattacharya stated that “unwilling to meet the just and pressing demands of the masses and faced with their peaceful united struggle, the government had resorted to the path of wanton repression, arrest of leaders and attack on the civil liberty of the people” (Assam Tribune, 5. 5. 1974, p. 1 & 6). The trade unions/associations of other industries in North Eastern States demanded for the release of leaders of railway trade unions, they said otherwise the situation would further deteriorate. Jatindra Kishore Sarkar<sup>37</sup>, an ex-Train Examiner posted in NJP, member of UCR recollected that he left his quarter on 6<sup>th</sup> night and fled to Kurseong and then to Darjeeling. He stayed there for ten days mainly to avoid arrest. He informed that majority of the striking workers of NJP Rail Colony escaped from their work place and houses because of police harassment and pressure from the authority. He affirmed that in NJP, most of the striking workers were the members of UCR who actively participated in the struggle and the members of LRSA also remained spontaneously absent from their duties from 7<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1974.

Dhrubalal Banerjee<sup>38</sup> a senior Train Clerk, posted in NJP stated that a large number of loco running staff were engaged in the tram yards, marshalling yards of NJP who successfully escaped from the yards on 6<sup>th</sup> May night and took shelter in the nearby areas. He reported that in the end of the year 1973 in NJP station, extension works had been initiated by the authority and for the establishment of broad gauge line. Few of them began to function during the early months of 1974. Thus, all the gauges - narrow, metre and broad gauge tracks were operational in this phase. Thus, N.F Railways employed quite a good number of labourers for this extension works. According to D.L Banerjee when the strike began on 8th May 1974, all these workers casual and permanent went on strike and the

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

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

entire area including the station premises wore a deserted look. Moreover, the UCR at NJP was very much active and the railwaymen were well known for their solidarity and united struggle. Abhiram Sarkar<sup>39</sup> a courier clerk in Executive Engineer's Department in Bongaigaon and member of Mazdoor Union described the situation that existed in Bongaigaon before and during the strike days. He said almost all the supporters of the strike had stopped working and from 6<sup>th</sup> May evening. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May morning he was sent to the head quarter, Maligaon in Guwahati to deliver an important letter. When he reached Maligaon in the evening he found that the atmosphere of the office of Engineering Department was quite gloomy and tensed. A small number of workers were present in the department and he did not find the concerned person to whom he was supposed to handover the letter. He witnessed that from the 7<sup>th</sup> morning the strike started at Maligaon head quarter, thus he could not return back to Bongaigaon because of the strike action the train serves were fully disrupted. He had to stay in Maligaon for next 6 days and after 6 days when he managed to come back, was arrested by police and sent back to Bongaigaon. Police kept him under their custody for the next fourteen days, as he had denied to resume his duties. He narrated how the arrested workers of Bongaigaon were forcefully sent to their respective offices and departments. He also remembered that from the 24<sup>th</sup> of May most of the workers had returned back to their duties in order to avoid police torture. According to Sarkar with the passing of time cruelty and atrocities by the police and armed forces multiplied and became more intolerable. The CRPF and Police did not show little leniency to the women and the children of the striking workers while interrogating and pressurising them. This indirect harassment strained the striking railwaymen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

trains but their attempts were unsuccessful. According to Kalyan Kumar Gupta<sup>40</sup>, an Accounts Clerk in the Divisional Head Quarter, Alipurduar a member of UCR workers from all categories of railway industry had spontaneously joined the agitation, not only that the categorical councils were too united and got engaged with its full force under the umbrella of NCCRS. He said that the newly appointed workers in Alipurduar Division also participated in the struggle. He was of the opinion that there was no compulsion on the workers from the trade union leaders for joining the strike; employees were driven by themselves to join the struggle. He narrated that the newly appointed workers of N.F. Railways as he was also a freshly recruited employee, joined only in 1972 cooperated with the trade union activities whole heartedly. This section of the workers realised the need of protest for their future survival. Gupta narrated an interesting incident which took place in Alipurduar Junction on the second day of the strike. The Territorial Army began to run passenger trains from the station but not a single passenger was there inside the train and they went upto 5 to 6 kilometres ahead and came back to the station. From morning to evening almost in every hour, at least once they repeated the same. While doing this the Territorial Army kept on honking the whistle throughout its way on and back. The real intention behind this activity was to show the people of the area that normal railway services were available and no labour unrest in the railway industry had occurred.

In the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> May a shuttle train moved between Pandu and Narengi with few railway staff. Bimalendu Chakraborty<sup>41</sup> was a Draftsman posted here in 1965. He described the situation that existed in this area during the strike days. Pandu was a small town grown up mainly with the railway colonies. Even before the strike started when the railway workers had been preparing themselves for the indefinite struggle the place itself seemed to be in a war like situation. On the one hand when the workers were conducting meetings, conferences, organising rallies, processions, on the other hand, the government also started cancelling trains, preparing their line of actions, deploying CRF, Para Military Force, Armed Force, alerting police etc – an environment of fear and suspicion persisted

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Statesman reported that on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1974 the movement of the limited number of passenger services in the hill regions of north east were stopped totally. Only food special trains were given preference and moved to Badarpur in Cachhar district which was in a “peculiarly vulnerable position having a tenuous communication link with the Brahmaputra Valley (Statesman, 10.5.1974, p. 1 & 5). Only a few trains were moving in this section of N.F. Railways. Nikhil Kumar Bhattacharjee<sup>42</sup>, posted in Badarpur was a Guard and a member of Guards Council of India and when NCCRS was formed, he was appointed as a convenor of Local Action Committee of Badarpur. He discussed about the situation of strike in Badarpur and nearby places. He told that the place was severely hit by the strike. The striking workers before the strike started escaping their colonies because the workers and their families were wholeheartedly in favour of the struggle. He was of the opinion that sometime they observed that the Congress supporters, the members of the Employees’ Union and even the police helped the striking railwaymen by providing food and shelter and by not arresting them. Sometimes they gave financial assistance too and helped them to escape in a safe place. Due to heavy rainfall and natural calamities in this area temporarily the workers movement got distracted and mobility of trains was also hampered heavily. Only food specials were running and all the mail, fast, express trains, even goods traffic also were cancelled. In order to meet coal crisis some goods train carrying coal from coal mines of Assam were in operation.

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

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

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

Surprisingly N.F. Railways had advertised for vacancy in the railway services under N.F Railways on 15th May as it suffered from acute crisis of staff. Those railway employees who were dismissed from their services were to be replaced by some fresh recruitment. N.F. Railway authority from Maligaon Head Quarter claimed that overwhelming response from the youth of the state was received and they would be absorbed within the days after completing the appointment procedure. The authority also mentioned that there were a lot of regular vacancies too which were to be filled up by this time. Hundreds of boys had applied for these posts which were mainly the posts of loco men class III and IV. N. F. Railway management spoke to the correspondent of Assam Tribune on 15<sup>th</sup> May that clerks, loco running staff and several other categories of workers would be appointed in the respective posts in near future. The news papers detailed that the authority tried to run 22 goods trains out of 42 in Guwahati and Lumding. Wagons were placed here for unloading but the target could not be achieved. It also accounted that two hundred home guards had been engaged in running trains both the passengers and goods in Assam region of the N.F. Railways. They had been carrying out their duties, working in the engines of the trains from Dibrugarh to Alipurduar including the branch lines of Lumding, Badarpur and Rangapara; Assam home guards had also been entrusted with the responsibility of guarding all the bridges throughout Assam zone (Assam Tribune, 17. 5. 1974; p. 1 & 6). Anita Chakraborty<sup>43</sup> corroborated that the women members of the striking workers family organised a rally in support of the struggle of the railwaymen and against the atrocities of the police and armed forces at

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

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

In the newspaper dated 18.5. 1974 it was stated that about four hundred Territorial Army men were flown to New Jalpaiguri and Siliguri in special flights to maintain the train services, because the railway management here stated that movement of trains in this region had been languishing very much till now, therefore they required a good number of Territorial Army including the railway personnel such as drivers and maintenance staff (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 18.5. 74). Tushar Chatterjee<sup>44</sup>, an Assistant Station Master posted in Rangia since 1970 was a member of Station Masters' Association and became the member of broader Divisional NCCRS of Alipurduar. He described how they stayed in tension and anxiety during the strike days. From the beginning of the strike, the Station Master of Rangia fled from his workplace and when the strike started there was no employee had turned up and the station remained vacant. He stayed in his quarter for the first few days then he also left his workplace otherwise police might force him to join duty or get arrested. He took shelter in the nearby jungle and at night he used to stay with his friend in the town. He recounted that for the first one week not a single train had passed by through this station and the station seemed to be left abandoned. Ticket counters were not opened for almost ten days, no cabin man, no signaller had joined their duties. Only one goods train carrying essential commodities and food stuff reached at Rangia from Alipurduar on 18<sup>th</sup> May and then it proceeded to Tempura via Rangapara. According to him, after ten to twelve days, acute food scarcity arose in Rangia, as it was a small place without its own source of production. Therefore, they had to depend on the import of goods. The small shops or the

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

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

In Lumding Division the normal activities of the railway industry was completely halted as the loco running staff were totally absent from their duties. The office staff and station masters of different stations were absent from work. In the Divisional Head Quarter only handful of workers had continuously operated all the functions of the respective departments. These workers were not allowed to go home from the evening of 7<sup>th</sup> May onwards. Pradyutananda Sarkar<sup>45</sup>, Controller, posted in Lumding Divisional Head Quarter was a member of Employees' Union affiliated with NFIR. As his trade union denied to join in this struggle he also abstained from joining the strike. But he witnessed that the office of the Head Quarter were deserted because a large number of workers participated in this movement, not only the Head Quarter but the different junctions and small stations under this division were paralysed due to the massive inattentive men on the part of the employees. He informed that the strike affect was so strong in this division that they even did not get any news regarding the developments that were taking place in various places. From the head quarter they tried to contact with the different offices and stations but they were unable to connect with any station masters for the first three or four days. Thus, the intensity of the strike could easily be estimated. Sarkar was of the opinion that Lumding was among the worst affected areas of N.F. Railways nearly 99% of the staff in all the offices did not join the work. He shared his experience during the strike days. They stayed in their offices for the first five day and they were supplied with food and other essential commodities during their stay in the offices. Sarkar commented that it was really a strange experience to remain confined inside the office premises for five long days. But after five days they were permitted to stay in the quarters only at nights under police protection. They had to return back to their duties early in the morning escorted by the police cordon. From the beginning of the second week of the struggle the situation gradually started improving, still approximately fifteen days they had followed the same routine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, leaders of the Central Committee of trade unions met in Delhi to decide on the fate of the strike and after considering the position of the strike its workers as the movement was fizzled out throughout the country, the leaders were in favour of the withdrawal of the struggle. The most important reason behind this decision was that financially the striking workers had been crippled and heavy repression by the government also had been breaking the confidence of the railwaymen. Bimalendu Chakraborty<sup>46</sup> commented that the news of the withdrawal of strike was reached at Pandu on 27<sup>th</sup> May at

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Sri. Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12. 2016 at 12 noon

late night but when the workers came to know about the decision unconditional withdrawal from 28<sup>th</sup> May morning at 6:00 a.m. they were annoyed and distressed. The workers had suffered a lot but they had to accept the decision of the national leaders and to be abiding by their directives. According to Sri Chakraborty, workers did not join their duties on 28<sup>th</sup> May here but on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1974. Kalyan Kumar Gupta<sup>47</sup> of Alipurduar Division affirmed this information as in Alipurduar Division too the workers had joined their work on 29<sup>th</sup> May instead of 28<sup>th</sup> May morning. Not only that all the workers together in procession, went to the Divisional Head Quarter and office of the Divisional Manager and submitted their joining letters to him in a victorious mood. In Siliguri, Malay Chandra Das<sup>48</sup> told that the railwaymen became immensely disappointed with the decision of unconditional withdrawal of the strike action. The workers of this zone predicted that if the strike would have continued for another two days, it might be able to convince the authority and might secure some concessions for the railwaymen. It was a 'black day' for them and they did not want to go back to their work and they perceived this decision as an act of 'betrayal'. To the workers this treacherous decision of the national leadership had insulted those who suffered a lot, faced tremendous trouble from day one of the agitation. Now financially they have collapsed, physically and mentally tremendously exhausted, tolerated immeasurable repressions but gained nothing. They obtained no honourable settlement, no recognition or no negotiation with the authority on any of their demands. Therefore, the railwaymen who braved every torture, harassment and assault, were disillusioned with the nature of the trade union leadership and with the process of administrative decision making and experienced the nature of authoritarian character of Indian democracy.

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

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Sri. Kalyan Kumar Gupta on 25.1. 2017 at 10.30 a.m.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Sri. Malay Chandra Das on 28.12. 2016 at 7.00 p.m.

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

### **III**

#### **Impact of the Strike in the North Eastern Frontier Railway Zone**

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

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

MISA. Railwaymen fought a heroic battle to stop police atrocities. Kajal Nayan Gupta<sup>49</sup> a Guard of goods train, posted in Malda and a member of the Guards' Council and UCR maintained that police and CRPF took the hold over the railway colonies of Malda two days before the strike started, i.e., from 6<sup>th</sup> May all the railway colonies of the town went under the control of the armed forces. He added that he was successful in escaping the police arrest during the strike days as he fled away from Kishanganj station on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 morning. But he was arrested by the police under 'Penal Measure' after the withdrawal of the strike. Interestingly, Sri Gupta got his bail from Purnia Session Judge's Court and his case was declared as 'null and void' by the Calcutta High Court, thus, he returned back to his service after six months. He got his remuneration for these suspended periods but it was only half of his monthly wages. However, he portrayed the intensity of the strike. In Malda, before the strike started many workers were passive to join in the agitation but when the strike began, i.e., from 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1974 all the rank and file workers expressed their willingness to join the movement and were driven by the pro unity and solidarity thrust of the movement. Gupta blamed the leadership in Malda which never tried to reach absolute solidarity at the bottom level workers thus the process of uniting the railwaymen was partial here. According to his opinion, the leadership itself could not reach unity which affected the solidarity process of the workers in this division. They failed to attain complete agreement and consensus in the entire course of the movement. Although majority of the workers had participated in the movement and the area was completely paralysed during the strike days. But Sri Gupta also said that even if the strike was unconditionally and unilaterally withdrawn, the railwaymen were in a victorious mood, the magnificent unity, courage and determination of the railwaymen were rewards of this struggle.

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

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

10th of May only a single train, the down Assam Mail, passed through Guwahati; at Maligaon Head Quarter of N.F. Railways most of the employees stayed away from duty (Times of India, 11.5.74; p.1). Therefore, it was quite easily assumed that the magnitude of the workers' strength and their potentiality to stand against the government's harshness was extremely high. Because the authority from the negotiating table had been vehemently opposing every demand of the workers and every single approach of the trade unions was rejected. As a result of government's firmness and hostility towards the workers' cause, in many places of N.F. Railways the workers had to resume their duties before the calling off the strike<sup>50</sup>. Due to immense repression and terror attacks unleashed by the authorities, only half of the total striking workers had been with strike up to the end of the struggle and rest of them resumed to works before its withdrawal (Biswas, 1977; p.13).

While analysing the intensity of the railway workers' movement in 1974 and the character of the overall trade union movement in N.F Railways, the striking workers had their own views to examine the entire discourse, based their own experiences. Amalendu Bikash Kanjilal<sup>51</sup>, posted in Maligaon as upper division clerk and a member of UCR regretted for the roles played by the right reactionists and left adventurist forces of Indian trade unionism during the most prominent working class movement of the country in 1974. These two sections of trade unionism actively existed in the N.F. Railway Zone. They always tried to get some economic and political benefits from every action of the workers. Kanjilal accused these sectarian forces of politics for destroying the foundation of the trade union movement in India in general and in N.F Railways in particular. He said that in the railway industry in every sphere of its activity, it is based on a hierarchical method of functioning and a very undemocratic manner of decision making. The recognised trade unions in their internal matters always ignored the opinions and interests of the lower level workers. But it was necessary to listen to the grievances of the workers for the smooth

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

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

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

In Siliguri and nearby areas the impact of the strike was quite different because of the ongoing Naxalite Movement which was in its full swing. Almost every day curfew was imposed here from 6:00 a.m. morning. The Railway authority attempted to resist the railwaymen's struggle with the help of the police and armed forces, therefore in Siliguri, the political upheaval of the society was equated with the industrial agitation which was purely economic in character. Thus, the police force started confronting and counter attacking the striking railwaymen and treated their peaceful struggle as a political agitation along with the Naxalite agitators. Police arrested the railway workers randomly without judging their position and tortured their families to a great extent. The then Police Commissioner of Siliguri Handa had become the symbol of terror and torment. Kalyan Kumar Choudhury<sup>52</sup> posted in NJP as a carriage khalasi and the Zonal President of Loco Running Staff Council described the days of the strike. He also talked about the responses and reactions of the authority during and after the strike period. He informed that the train services in New Jalpaiguri, Siliguri Alipurduar junctions and in the hill stations of Darjeeling were completely dislocated. According to him, the main strength of this strike was the support and participation of the loco staff. The loco running workers had wholeheartedly joined this movement especially the loco employees of Alipurduar, Siliguri, NJP and Katihar remained absent from work from day one of the struggle. For this reason, the regular activities of these

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

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

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

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

Kailash Lala<sup>53</sup>, an Assistant Station Master in Alipurduar junction and the Cashier of Station Masters' Council of Alipurduar junction since 1970, recollected some incidents that occurred in this division of N.F. Railways. He remembered how hundreds of railway workers were released in the dark nights in the dense forests of dooars, when they could not accommodate the striking workers in the jails, how they starved for long two or three days and how they roamed from one place to another simply to avoid police arrest, how they had to walk and run for several hours under the sun and rain only to evade police torture and how the innocent family members of the striking men were insulted, ill-treated and abused by the armed forces and by some goondas. For Sri Lala this story of humiliation and torture was so painful and no words would be enough to describe the grief of the sufferers. The memories of these old employees sometime betrayed them but still they became excited and annoyed while narrating their day to day experiences of those strike days. Sri. Lala said that in Alipurduar junction not a single train had moved upto the mid of the second week of the agitation i.e., upto 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Mat, 1974. The railway authority in the local areas circulated the false news of train's movement. He added that in Alipurduar junction all the small shops like the shops of stationery items, grocery, food stuff, hotels etc. remained empty and no visitors or passengers were found buying or eating anything. Therefore, these small businessmen had suffered a lot, in fact economically they became crippled due to the railway strike. Lala also recalled the incidents of betrayal and double crossing by the members of Employees' Union as well as by the Mazdoor Union. In N.F. Railways CITU also played a dubious role to weaken the struggle of the railwaymen. He said the behaviour and attitude of these leaders sometimes created confusions and anxiousness among the striking workers. In Siliguri, Sunil Bhowal, 'A' grade Fitter, Diesel Shed, Vice President, Diesel Shed Staff Council reported for duty on 15.5.1974 along with CITU followers; Sri Aurobindo Pal, Fitter, Loco Shed, Organiser, Loco Shed Staff Council, joined duty on 15.5.1974 along with CITU members of the Loco Shed under Police protection; in New Guwahati, C.L. Biswas, Trains Clerk, Operating Department, leader of CITU and Treasurer,

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Manager

Northeastern Frontier Railways

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Manager

Northeastern Frontier Railways

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

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

Satya Narayan Singh<sup>54</sup>, a driver of goods train, member of UCR posted in Katihar since 1970 remembered the days of horror in the month of May, 1974. He described the terror attack of the armed forces on the railway men and their families. Almost all the male members of the railway colonies in Katihar fled away to avoid arrest and harassment. Those who got arrested were bitterly beaten in police custody and then forced to join duty. The family members were mercilessly interrogated, insulted, abused and sometimes the women members were even physically assaulted by the police and para military forces. As a result of this immense torture, the local leaders of N.F. Railways in Guwahati and nearby regions went underground to escape this repression and Maligaon and Pandu railway colonies were left unguarded. Bimalendu Chakraborty<sup>55</sup> of Pandu corroborated that with another four local leaders he went underground and Police, BSF and CRPF did every harassment in the name of discharging their duties in Pandu. When a reporter of Assam Tribune reached the railway

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

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Sri Bimalendu Chakraborty on 24.12. 16 at 11.30 a.m.

colonies of Pandu on 15<sup>th</sup> May'74, he found that most of the quarters were wearing sombre look, very few people were out on this streets and most of the quarters were seen with door and windows closed (Assam Tribune, 15.5. 74; p.6). Anita Chakraborty<sup>56</sup>, wife of Bimalendu Chakraborty remembered the days and nights of terror during the strike of the railwaymen. She narrated the story of the reactions of the authority and the police forces. Armed forces used to come and enquire about the striking railwaymen and pressurised the families and even the small children to take out information regarding the workers. If they did not get satisfactory answers, they started harassing them, threw out all the utensils or clothes etc. from the quarters. Day and night no matter, they visited the colonies and asked unnecessary questions. Sometimes BSF and Para military force took out the roofs of the quarters with the help of cranes to find out the trade union leaders or local leaders of the railways. Mrs. Chakraborty told that at night the movement of the armed forces used to increase. The families of the striking workers were asked to vacate the railway quarter several times but they never even tried to leave the quarters for a single day in spite of lot of harassments.

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

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

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

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

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

In this situation the N.F. Railways Unit of NCCRS Action Committee had decided to carry on the struggle till the government came forward and settled the issue of the railwaymen. But from the beginning of the third week of the strike i.e., 22nd May, 1974 onwards the strike started to fizzle out nearly in all the divisions of N.F. Railways with few exceptions. Maligaon Head Quarter reported 40,000 railwaymen had joined duty throughout the zone (Assam Tribune, 23.5.1974; p. 1). Strike situation in Bongaigaon, Rangia, Tinsukia and in NJP had improved a lot. Chittaranjan Mitra<sup>57</sup>, Traffic Booking Clerk posted in NJP a member of Mazdoor Union discussed the situation in the concluding days of the strike. Many of the striking workers had decided to join their work and some were confused regarding their future steps as the local leaders were all in underground and no further directions were given to them. The railway services began to normalise from 23<sup>rd</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> May, booking counters, loco men also became operative at the mid of the third week of the struggle. He criticised the role played by the members of Employees' Union who actually had helped to break the morale and confidence of the striking workers. They used to inform

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

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

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

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

existence of political factions in one industry had created a cleavage among the workers. N.F. Railways set an example in this direction. UCR was the most powerful unrecognised union in this railway zone. Nevertheless, it inevitably led to the fragmentation in the solidarity of the working class. Apart from this the N.F Railways was badly affected by several cases of betrayal. Members of Employees' Union and in some cases members of Mazdoor Union played a dual role and deceived the striking workers during the strike days. Bimalendu Chakraborty<sup>58</sup> convenor of local Action Committee, Pandu was of the opinion that the workers in Assam and in the areas of North Bengal had suffered from the treacherous activities and behaviour by their fellow workers within the different sections of the trade unions. These people continuously assisted and helped the authority, police and armed forces in the course of the workers' movement. He said that the main objective of the trade unions during those days was to secure the right to bargain with the authority. Unfortunately the unions in the railways could not voice the workers' demands and channelise their potentialities to lead a successful movement, above all failed to convince the authority. Resultantly, huge sacrifices of the workers of each and every zone remained ignored and unnoticed by their countrymen. Unpreparedness of the railway workers and their trade unions, financial, moral etc. acted as an instrument of failure of the struggle. Though Fernandez had called it a 'grand success' but it was associated with inevitable strife and bitterness within the workers' organisations and the authority and within the trade unions also.

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

## **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.

## Chapter VIII

### Summary and Conclusion

In this study as stated earlier we have attempted to answer some specific questions relating to the railwaymen's strike of 1974 like, what were the reasons behind the railway strike of 1974? How did the railway trade unions prepare themselves for an all India general strike? Did the category wise unions participate in this strike? What was the situation in the Eastern and Northeast Frontier Railway-zones during the strike days? How did the Government of India respond towards the striking workers of Eastern and N.F Railways in 1974? What was the final consequence of the strike of 1974 in Eastern and N.F Railways? What was the political and economic impact of the strike? We have answered the questions in different chapters. Now it is time for a conclusion but before we conclude the study let us summarise the contents of the chapters. In chapter one, we describe the process of industrialisation and the emergence of the industrial working class in India during the colonial era with the advent of the Railway industry till 1974. This study explained the reasons behind the establishment of the railway industry by the colonial rulers in India. It had elucidated the course of the emergence of the industrial working class in the Indian railways in the colonial period from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century till independence. The British capitalists primarily were not interested in investing in the railway establishment in this sub-continent. But two companies i.e., GIPR and EIR agreed to build railway tracks with a five percent guaranteed return on their investment. Ironically, even though British capital invested in the development of the Indian industry but the risk was taken entirely by the Indians whose taxes were used to pay the guaranteed returns and the profit was also earned by the companies throughout this period.

Railways had a long term impact on the socio-cultural life of 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Industrialisation and urbanisation were intermingled with each other, hence a new class had emerged, i.e., the industrial working class. Improved transport system began to revolutionise the economic and social life of the countrymen. Barriers of caste, creed, race, religion and language had been surpassed and the people entered into the new threshold of modernity.

The industrial workers in India had a unique character, initially they belonged to the traditional village societies but their search for good living had compelled them to join the British industries. During the harvesting season they all returned back to their homelands, resultantly these agricultural labourers could never become complete industrial workers during this early period of industrialisation. Thus, it took more than three decades for the Indian workers to emerge and consolidate themselves as a separate class and establish their own distinct position and identity in the social and economic system.

The year 1947 was marked as the year of transition, transition from two hundred years of colonial bondage; transfer of power from British Parliament to independent and sovereign authority, transition from agrarian economy to industrial economy; transition from rural agrarian society to urban industrial society, i.e., political, economic and social transition. India in the year 1950 had launched Five Years Plans for the overall development of the economy and it aimed at distributing the benefits to reach to every section of the society. Indian planners including Nehru were of the opinion that the state had a major role to play for rapid and all round transformation of the country's economy. This was because the entire country had suffered extreme colonial exploitation and drainage of economy. During this period since 1950 to 1974, four Five Years Plans had been implemented and in the year 1974 April the Fifth Five Years Plan had started. Indian Planners had insisted on growth and expansion of heavy industries in this phase of planning.

After independence the Indian Railways (I.R) became the largest and oldest Public Sector industry and biggest employer of industrial workers in India. It had faced troubles due to violence and upheavals before and after partition and transition from colonial domination to independence. The Government of India had emphasised on reformation of labour policy for strengthening the political and economic base, hence they entered into the era of planning and progress. The workers were the principle instrument towards the achievement of the goals set by the Planning Commission. Central Government employees including the railwaymen were already unhappy with the recommendations of the First Central Pay Commission and the decisions of Second Pay Commission made them furious and violent as it entirely neglected the principle of minimum need based wage. The cost of living index had determined the actual economic status and financial condition of the

workers and dearness allowances (D.A.) was the instrument to cope up with the increased cost of living and decline in real wage earning of the employees.

As a result we note that a section of railway workers known as loco running staff became highly annoyed with the pay structure of the I.R. As they were 'continuous' staff of the industry, they had to work for long hours-fifteen to sixteen hours per day. Working conditions sometimes posed formidable challenges to the railway workers especially to the continuous loco running staff. The living conditions of the railwaymen were very much unsatisfactory and accommodation was inadequate. The Class IV staff lived in the dirty slums called as 'coolie line' which were full of noise, heat and bad smell. They did not have proper system of sanitation and clearance. Rooms were small with insufficient ventilation. Another issue that was proliferating in the railway front was the position of the casual workers. Indian Railway engaged almost two lakhs casual workers in the year 1974 but they were lowly paid and were frequently terminated from their jobs. A casual worker, serving continuously at least for 120 days, was granted temporary status with minimum advantages of wages, leave, health facilities etc., thus, they were terminated on the 119th day of the appointment. Casual workers were mostly employed for construction works which were really hazardous and dangerous at the same time. They were not allowed to take leave, even if there was a genuine reason of sickness or other. The worst sufferers were the women workers, they did not get leave more than twenty days even on the maternity ground and most of the times they faced break in service.

In chapter two we looked at the growth and development of workers' resistance in Indian Railways from the colonial era till 1974. In this chapter we had traced the genesis of workers' resistance during the colonial period and its nature in the post independent period up to 1974. In India the process of industrialisation had began with the establishment of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1853 the first engine of change had moved but the building of railways had started from nearly 1930s. Interestingly therefore the mid nineteenth century's workers' resistance was the result of their own time and circumstances. In the mid nineteenth century this new class had to depend on the sale of their own labour for survival. Characteristically the Indian working class in this early phase was of complex type, because most of the industrial workers were landless agricultural labourers who had a strong bondage with their villages and never became full time industrial workers. The most

fascinating feature of the railway workforce was its various types of works involving numerous workers – skilled to unskilled. Thus the workers were exposed to several types of adversities and stresses of advance industrialisation. Resultantly varied forms of protests and resistance had cropped up among the workers.

Prior to 1900s most of the united protests came from the European and Eurasian and mainly for wage increase. For united action Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants was formed in 1874 in India which provided a platform for voicing the resentments of these railway workers. In the late 1990s the guards, signallers and station masters struck against management but this action was suppressed firmly. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) which was the first national level trade union of the Indian working class, emerged in 1920. AITUC provided necessary strength to the workers in the Indian industries to organise themselves in a more consolidated manner. All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) was founded in June, 1925. All the small railway unions of the country started getting affiliated to it. However, in 1936, the biggest strike of the colonial era occurred in B.N. Railways where twenty-six thousand and five hundred workers had participated and it continued for more than two months. Years preceded the Second World War saw a huge fall in real earnings, price rise, imprisonment of most of the nationalist leaders etc. that had aggravated the labourers. In this situation World War II broke out in 1939 and the Indian workforce especially the railway workers faced tremendous hardship because the entire railway industry of India was utilised for the purpose of British war.

Independence was accompanied with splits in trade unions which resulted in the weakness of workers' collective actions and the process of developing the consciousness. After independence state's interference in regulating employees and employers relationship ultimately led to the weakening of the progress towards maturity of the working class movement. It adversely affected the development and consolidation of working class consciousness. I.R as a transportation industry had played a vital role in accelerating the industrial growth and economic progress of the country. Railways in India had been considered as the life blood of modern trade and commerce. In 1948, the NFIR was born and in 1953 was merged with AIRF. But when AIRF found that it was more keen on favouring the ruling party, AIRF left the union and began functioning independently and separately from 1956. However, these two unions – AIRF and NFIR were the only recognised unions

in the Indian Railways till date. The recommendations of the Second Pay Commission compelled the central government employees including the railways to go on strike in 1960 on the 11<sup>th</sup> July. This general Strike was suppressed by the government and the railwaymen's struggle was awarded with failure. Again all India Central Government employees including the railwaymen were preparing for struggle which resulted into the decision of holding of "one day token strike" in September, 1968. Several attempts were made to negotiate with the Government but Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India refused to listen anything. The strike action did not get any immediate success but the Third Central Pay Commission was appointed by the Government immediately after the strike. However, this period was characterised by a steady growth of communist movement and their strong presence in the mobilisation of working class in India. In 1970, the Centre for Trade Unions was constituted which tried to give a shape to the Indian trade union movement.

The attitude of the management and the performance of the recognised unions compelled the railway workers to search for an alternative which could provide strength and solidarity to the working class. As a result a number of category wise unions were formed by the different sections of the railway workers. These struggles of firemen in 1967, 1968 and 1970 showed the strength of the loco staff and paved the way for the formation of the All India Loco Running Staff Association. It was formed in 1970 in the month of August in Vijawada in Andhra Pradesh. Railwaymen were basically inspired by a feeling of self confidence and unity to mount their own agitations without the support of the recognised unions. On 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1973 the AILRSA called an all India strike which continued till the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> August. This strike halted the train movement completely and paralysed the entire functioning of the railways. The strike was called off on the assurance of the Railway Minister that no worker would be victimised and arrested workers were immediately released and above all the working hour had been reduced to ten hour maximum in a day. This agreement was an outstanding achievement of the railway workers. The success of this strike provided a great impetus and a new height to the labour movement of the country. Thus, it offered a revitalisation of trade union movement of the railways as well as the entire country. The result was the strike of 1974 by the Indian railwaymen.

The grievances of the workers had reached its peak during the late 1960s and early 1970s which ultimately resulted in the strike. In this background, in chapter III we had analysed the grievances of the workers which forced the workers and their unions to take the decision of launching an indefinite, general strike in May 1974. Here we have discussed the preparations for the workers to launch an all India general strike. It had unfolded the situation of the strike in different railway zones throughout the country during the days of the struggle.

In the 1970 there was a wave of crisis. Numerous strikes, bandhs, go slow, mass sick, lock outs had occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s which indicated the unharmonious relationship in the industrial front. The working class of the country had suffered from low wages, unsatisfactory working and living conditions, rising prices, absence of wage link with D.A, non-payment of adequate bonus, absence of leave with pay, problems relating to casual workers etc. During the years 1970-73 India had undergone its worst inflationary crisis since independence. In this moment the government had decided to disburse the D.A. in instalments. This decision made the workers furious when they found an absolute decline in their real earnings. But the leadership of the recognised unions in railway industry – both the AIRF and NFIR were reluctant to go against the authority as they developed an alliance with the bureaucrats. Therefore by the end of the 1960s a new trend had emerged in the railway front i.e. the formation of category wise unions hence AILRSA was founded in August 1970 which had agitated against the authority against long hours of work; harsh working condition, poor living condition, poor quality of uniform etc.

The success of AILRSA movement had revitalised the other recognised unions. NFIR though always remained loyal to the ruling government, declared not to go on direct actions. AIRF on the other hand, had a tradition of militant activities and ability to mobilise the workers. But during the whole of 1960s it had suffered from indecision and self contradiction. But to retain its position, it had to do something to influence the workers hence, it initiated to change its leadership. George Fernandes, a stormy trade unionist and Chairman of the Socialist Party was brought into AIRF to revamp the Federation. In December 1973 thousands of category unions from all over India met and discussed the demands and problems of the railwaymen and submitted a Charter of Demands to the Chairman of the Railway Board. But neither the category-wise unions nor the AIRF were

capable to mount any movement on its own. Therefore on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1974 in New Delhi a National Convention was held. Almost two thousand delegates were present in the meeting. A coordinating committee of all unions was established to launch a country wide indefinite strike with Fernandes, as Convenor and the committee was known as the National Co-ordinating Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle (NCCRS). On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1974, in its first meeting NCCRS constituted a thirteen member Action Committee. The union government had decided to take a tough line to deal with any possible struggle in the railway industry. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May in the midst of negotiation suddenly George Fernandes, P.K. Barua and others were arrested which indicated the unwillingness of the authority to settle the issue. NCCRS announced that all works on the Indian railways would stop, no wheels would move and the trains would terminate at the next main stations at 6 a.m. on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1974.

A united struggle of more than two million workers of the most significant public sector industry was such an outstanding event that no one could ignore it. The determination and solidarity that was achieved by the railway workers was not seen before in the history of labour movement in India. In almost all the railway zones the strike was intense and complete. Few places showed some exceptions. In the main railway centres of the country, e.g., Delhi Main and New Delhi, Bombay Central, Madras, in Calcutta both the Howrah and Sealdah, Gorakhpur, Guwahati, Mughalsarai etc. not a single train had moved and services were completely paralysed during the first few days of the strike. In the entire Southern region the strike was exceptionally strong. In the railway workshops like Kharagpur, Kanchrapara, Jamalpur, Perumbur, Golden Rock near Tiruchirapally, Chittaranjan Locomotives etc. remained deserted. Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi regretted for the entire attitude of the leaders of the railwaymen's unions.

For the government it was not possible to meet all the demands of the railway workers in the perspective of national economic conditions. At the end of the second week, the railway authority agreed that there were serious inconveniences that still existed in running the trains – both passenger and goods. In North East it had been difficult to maintain uninterrupted goods traffic which actually obstructed the tea trading in this region especially in Assam. In Calcutta and Bombay the suburban electrical multiple rakes were kept abandoned and inoperative due to the absence of the maintenance staff. From the mid of the second week i.e. from 19<sup>th</sup> May in different railway zones like Western, Central, Northern,

Southern, some divisions of Eastern and North-East Frontier Railways almost a pre-strike environment appeared to exist. It is under this condition that the rail strike had been called off from 28<sup>th</sup> May at 6.00 a.m. The twenty day long strike was withdrawn by the Action Committee of NCCRS unconditionally. So far the circumstances were concerned, the Action Committee had to consider all these perspectives and thus, withdrew the strike. According to the Action Committee the strike was called off due to current economic status of the workers and the country as well. In the course of assessing the intensity of the strike and the participation of the workers, Fernandes mentioned that out of fourteen lac permanent employees almost twelve lac faced break-in-service and fifty thousands were dismissed from jobs. Therefore, this figure itself symbolised the strength of the movement.

In chapter four we have studied the grievances of the workers and their story of deprivation in the Eastern Railway Zone during the period of late 1960s and early 1970s. It also focused its attention on the preparation of the strike by the railwaymen in this Zone. Here we have observed the situations that prevailed in the Eastern Railways during the strike days in May 1974. This chapter was also an attempt to assess the impact of the strike in this Zone. The main reason behind the workers' grievances was the wage structure. The salary which they were paid was so less that they could not avail minimum livelihood. It was really very tough for them to run a family of six to seven members with this amount of money. The heavy price rise of daily commodities especially the prices of food grains and edible oil had become immensely high which ultimately immersed the railwaymen into darkness. Workers also had disappointment on the bonus issue. In this background the employees of the Eastern Railway got frustrated by the role of the management and the railway trade unions too were frustrated.

In this situation, the trade unions in the railways had found it extremely difficult to appease the authority on the one hand and to subvert the labour movement on the other. In the Eastern Railway and in case of Northeast Frontier Railways, the role of the trade union leaders in harmonising and uniting the railway workers was remarkable. They started consolidating the working class and attempted to reach solidarity. In the meantime, NCCRS was formed and Zonal NCCRS was proposed for pursuing the decisions of Action Committee. As a result in E. R an Action Committee was formed. Bimal Dey, the general secretary of Eastern Railwaymen's Union was elected as the Convenor of this Action

Committee. Railway authority, on the other hand began its arrangements to manage the strike situation. Calcutta Corporation suspected that it would not be able to continue the water supply if the proposed rail strike materialised because the coal stock for the two pumping stations – Tallah and Palta were highly inadequate. FCI had prepared its own mechanism to increase its stock in order to meet the exigencies of the situation during the strike days. Eastern Railway had ordered to reduce the number of suburban trains in each and every division especially in Howrah and Sealdah.

The developments that took place in the strike days had impacted heavily the life of the mass in general and railway workers in particular. Two days before the strike a huge number of employees of the Eastern Railways and South Eastern Railways were taken into the custody. The E.R authority had declared that they had cancelled a few trains but the movement of the goods trains would be maintained so that essential commodities like food grains, coal and oil could be mobilised. From 8<sup>th</sup> May at 6'0 clock in the morning, most of the station areas were deserted because majority of the employees went on sick leave or remained absent from their duties. All the four sections in Howrah division demanded that they were in dire need of railway staff to run the trains and to maintain minimum services. E.R demanded that few goods trains carrying food grains, coal and raw materials to steel plants had begun resuming after one week, i.e., from 16<sup>th</sup> May 1974. Till the end of the fifteenth day of the strike large-scale absence of the Cabin staff was seen and the pictures of the crucial railway centres were more or less similar as the earlier. Eastern the Railways had demanded that goods trains too started moving and railways now were ready to provide services to the industries by transporting raw materials based on the Calcutta and its surrounding areas. It was on 27<sup>th</sup> May evening at 6 p.m. that the railway workers in E.R got the news of the unilateral decision of withdrawal of the railwaymen's strike from 28<sup>th</sup> May. The local leaders were of the opinion that the unilateral decision of strike withdrawal would certainly influence adversely the activities of the grass root trade union leaders and members too.

The impact of the strike of 1974 by the railwaymen was deep and manifold. The unity and solidarity achieved during this strike was historic. Eastern Railways had almost two lac of employees. In almost all the divisions, the workers had participated spontaneously in the strike till May 28<sup>th</sup>. The workers of the workshops in Liluah, Kanchrapara and

Jamalpur workshops had continued the strike remarkably. The Jamalpur Workshop was deserted till the end of the strike, the workers were keen to continue the strike to pressurise the Government to achieve their demands and sought an honourable settlement. At the Head Quarter in Calcutta almost ninety five percent of the workers remained absent from work. In Asansol division the strike was not at all intense, only hand full of railwaymen had joined the strike but the struggle was complete in Andal, Sitarampur and few more places under this Division.

The coal movement in this region was greatly hampered. In Calcutta and its surrounding areas the fish market was in critical condition, vegetables like potatoes, onions etc. became scarce and the prices started rising. The manufacturers of the products like soap, detergent etc. stated that the raw materials had become so scanty due to the railway strike. Supply of cooking gas was very irregular, petrol and diesel became similarly meagre in meeting the demands of the Eastern region.

The Divisional Head Quarters in Howrah and Sealdah and the station areas were under the control of military and para military forces, it seemed that the station became the base camps of army and their troops operation. At the end of the second week the strike fizzled out and ended with huge repression, victimisation, arrests, betrayal, loss of national income, stagnation in industrial progress. Huge amount of employees of the Eastern and South Eastern Railways had faced break-in-services, removal from services and suspension for participating in the strike. The West Bengal Government treated the strike as a political challenge thrown to the Congress ruling party by the leftist leaders. Siddhartha Sankar Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal had resorted to brute force to suppress the every little action of the railwaymen. Police did not spare the women and little children of the striking workers. In all the railway colonies a vast number of CRPF, BSF, and Paramilitary forces were deployed to handle the situation. Even at midnight police used to come at the colonies, scattered everything in the quarters in search of the striking workers. After the strike was called off, CITU organised a meeting consisting of all left parties, where a Legal Aid Committee was formed to look after the cases of victimisation like break-in-service, removal etc. and fight and defend them in the Courts.

In the Fifth chapter we have focused our attention on the grievances of railwaymen in North Eastern Frontier Railways. It has tried to describe the preparation of the railway workers of this zone before the strike began and during the days of the struggle. This study has intended to discuss the strike situation throughout the N.F. Railways in this period. This chapter has been concluded by analysing the consequences and effects of this workers' movement in the entire N. F. Railways. After independence in Assam and in the entire north east region a well developed railway connectivity did not exist, hence the link between Assam and the rest of the country was poor. Thus the Government of India had initiated towards eradicating the problem and formed a separate railway zone here and Northeast Frontier Railways came into existence on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1958. It had four divisions in 1974- Katihar, Alipurduar, Tinsukia and Lumding with the Zonal Headquarter in Maligaon, Guwahati.

Railway workers of N. F. Railways had similar types of grievances as the workers of the rest of the country. But since they were the workers of the frontier states their problems were much more grave and hardships were more profound. Following were the causes of workers' discontentment in this zone:

- 1) the erosion in real earnings because of huge price rise aggravated the railwaymen and the D.A. formula that was used to bridge the gap, had failed to serve the purpose,
- 2) the bonus as deferred wages was also not permitted to the railwaymen,
- 3) in the hilly region of entire North Eastern States it was more difficult to manage the livelihood as there had always been a scarcity of essential commodities which ultimately led to price hike,
- 4) most of the railway workers in the north east states were provided with 'gang huts', the one room quarter which were so unhealthy, suffocating and filthy that living for years in those quarters was miserable,
- 5) the workers, engaged in the heavy works like those involved in fire works as a first or second foremen in the rail engines or the drivers of steam power, had to work in dirt and grease they needed some uniforms while they were performing their duties.

But the quality of the uniforms were so substandard that the workers were not able to wear them even for a single day.

- 6) railway workers in Assam were also disappointed on the issue of frequent disciplinary actions taken by the authority against them on little and insignificant matters even on personal grudges,
- 7) another problem that was very significant was the number of casual workers and their mode of payment, they were paid only rupees 3.5 per day on 'no work no pay' basis and employed for 119 days.
- 8) above all, the railway trade unions never fought for the interest of the railway workers rather remained busy to satisfy the management,

These problems existed in this zone and the resentments of the workers were increasing day by day. The recognised unions here never took any initiative to redress their discontent. Thus, the inactiveness of the recognised trade unions and their policy of appeasement of authority had forced the local leaders to form United Committee for Railwaymen (UCR) in the year 1970 and started organising themselves to convince the authority for fulfilling their demands separately. The entire union activity of N.F. Railways was dominated by the UCR. A greater unity was observed here by coordinating the unrecognised categorical associations and UCR played a pivotal role in this regard. But all these craft unions came under the leadership of NCCRS in 1974. The Convenor of Zonal Action Committee and Working President of Mazdoor Union, Indibar Kongar played a strong role in the entire process of uniting the workers at all levels. The Action Committees were actually assigned with a great responsibility to organise and prepare the workers to launch and continue the nationwide struggle. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1974 a massive rally of railwaymen went to Maligaon Headquarters in the evening and had served the strike notice and threatened total withdrawal of workforce from 6:00 a.m. of May 8<sup>th</sup> for an indefinite period. The news of the arrests of national level leaders such as George Fernandes, H.S. Chowdhury etc. compelled the railwaymen to protest against this treacherous action of the government. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May, every division under N.F. Railway observed 'Protest Day' against the decisive attitude of the government.

In many places of North Bengal, the strike started on 7<sup>th</sup> May and continued till 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1974. The areas of Darjeeling Hills were completely detached from the rest of the state. Train services became extremely irregular in North Bengal including in the hills and the plains. In Katihar Division the mobility of trains had been disrupted since 7<sup>th</sup> May 1974 but the authority was incapable to move the trains towards their destinations because of the scarcity of the loco running staff. N.F. Railway authority ran only food grains special goods trains. But the staff attendance in various stations in Assam was so limited that after five days of the strike, supply of essential goods in Assam could not be maintained properly and the mobility of passenger services in the hill regions of north east were stopped totally. The Railway Board declared that maintaining discipline on the part of the employees was an important factor for the development of the railway industry. Thus, the railway authority considered this strike action in 1974 by the railwaymen as a breach of service rules hence, penal measures were taken against the striking workers.

The strike struggle in almost all the Divisions of N.F. Railways ended on 29<sup>th</sup> May morning instead of 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974. The aftermath of the agitation was not at all favourable for the striking railwaymen. The magnitude of the railway workers' struggle and their determination to challenge the authority were accompanied with the heavy cost of their own services because innumerable break in services, removal, suspension, arrest under DIR and MISA took place. At the beginning of the movement, the struggle was complete and the workers participated in it enormously. As a result of government's use of brute force and hostility towards the workers' cause, the railwaymen had resumed their duties before the withdrawal of the strike.

The Mining industry especially the iron ore and coal belt of the east had suffered a huge loss. Due to the immobility of the trains the production in most of the coal mines in Assam came to a halt. For the frontier states railways were treated as the second link to defence and the strike of twenty days was really a matter of great challenge for the authority. The most important impact of this railway strike in N.F. Railways was the food scarcity which had become an emerging matter of concern in Assam and its neighbouring states. The strike had affected the supply of food grains such as wheat and rice in the areas of the Darjeeling hills, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura etc. The Tea industry in Assam was the worst sufferer. From day one of the strike not a single

chest of tea was released from the state by rail to any part of the country. The agitation had encompassed several chains of disruptions which adversely influenced various other industries such as coal, steel, iron ore etc. and indirectly led to general increase of price level and thus the cost of living. Immobility of trains resulted in great inconveniences to the tourists in the Darjeeling hills, Dooars and in Sikkim. A large number of tourists including people from foreign countries had been stranded in Siliguri.

Unpreparedness of the railwaymen and their trade unions in N. F. Railways was the reason of the failure in the struggle. This strike was associated with inevitable strife and bitterness within the workers' organisations and the authority and trade unions also. In spite of all weaknesses, this struggle had achieved a solidarity that never before and never again, was seen in the history of Indian labour movement in general and Indian rail workers movement in particular.

In chapter six we have looked at the attitude and the reactions of the state to the railway workers' strike in May 1974. In this chapter we have made an assessment of the role of the state towards the working class movement in the country. It also tries to analyse 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 strikers. It has focused its attention to find out the reasons behind the heavy repression that let loose over the railway employees by the Government to crush their movement. The attitude and response of the government had repeatedly been moving towards imposition of authoritarian rule in the country. And the Government became intolerant towards any opposing force within the country. The two struggles of 1960 and 1968 by the Central Government Employees had indicated that the government did not have any willingness to negotiate or settle any issue or dispute with the working class or their unions.

If the government was determined to confront the workers with its full state power and strength, no segment of working class belonging to ever biggest industry of the country could hardly manage to win. Indira Gandhi's government had utilised all its state apparatus to compel the railwaymen first to go on strike and then to surrender unconditionally and withdraw the movement unilaterally. The government conceived its success over the railway workers as a lesson to all the industrial working class especially the workers engaged in

Public Sector Undertakings and industries. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April Mrs. Gandhi briefed in the Parliament that a strike in the 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 railway administration declared that the strike notice itself was illegal under the Defence India Rules (DIR), the government would be justified in taking penal actions against strikers according to law.

Arrests in the crucial phase of negotiations had revealed the attitude of the government. But the authority argued that it had no intention of arresting and detaining the railwaymen. The Railway Board accused Mr. Fernandez for creating an atmosphere of distrust and confusion which ultimately led to this nationwide strike. Interestingly, the detention of Mr. Fernandez made him a national hero and he most skillfully utilised this image and tried to re-establish his party's importance in the national political scene. However, to some critics the Government had attempted to divert the attention of the countrymen from its failure to control the economic crisis which confronted the nation and shifted the agitation launched by the working class. Mrs. Gandhi's government showed power in handling labour unrests like lookouts in LICs and brought more tough labour policy to deal with the new trade union regime in the country and growing discontent among the industrial workers.

In the railway industry, the most important component was its loco running staff. They were required to keep the mobility of the trains hence they were more brutally forced and insisted to join their duties. They were beaten mercilessly and even were taken at the point of guns. 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 the jail. In West Bengal the torture on the railway working class was tremendous. While repressing the railwaymen's agitation, the Government of West Bengal led by Siddhartha Sankar Ray showed a fascist attitude and it was so organised and skilful that it could be compared with a murderous attempt. The government took the help of a well equipped armed and police forces so that not a single railway worker could escape from this monstrous encounter.

Railway Board announced the termination of the casual workers before the strike began in May. Because they also had incorporated their demand of decasualisation in the Six Point Charter of Demands and participated in the struggle. As a result the railway authority had resorted to the weapon of dismissal of the entire casual workers of the industry. All the major stations, junctions, divisions, railway depots, loco sheds, yards etc went under the control of the armed forces. In most parts of the Northern, Central and Southern Railways, the authorities utilised the instruments of torture and harassment against the railwaymen in a same intensity in all the cases of opposition. Physical, financial, mental pressurisations were simultaneously employed against the railway men. According to B. T. Ranadive the brutalities of armed forces had crossed all the limits of terrorising the people. The police had raided the houses of the railway workers. They went on insulting and assaulting the women and children not only mentally but physically too, above all there were several ‘cases of rapes on workers’ wives, daughters’ also (Ranadive, 1999; p.5). The railway authorities in various zones had been repeatedly reminding the striking workers that any disruption of railway services would lead to termination from services.

M. N. Berry expressed his deep gratitude to the Ministry of Defence and Defence Minister Govind Narain for their prompt and effective assistance and support in the time of railway strike of May 1974. Railway Board had made every possible effort to keep the wheels of the transport industry moving. M.N. Berry appreciated all the secretaries, officers, supervisors, men of every department for their dedicated services during the railway strike in May 1974.

Apart from all these attacks and counter attacks by the trade unions and the authorities, the strike of May 1974 had symbolised the unity and solidarity of the working class of the country. It also represented the ability of the government to manage an internal crisis through dedicated involvement of the officers and their zeal to combat the hurdles and restored the services. This struggle was an isolated event in Indian labour history because both the workers’ activities and government’s reactions during the strike period had never occurred in contemporary India –sweeping involvement of the workers, their aggressive attitude, intensity of the movement did not know any boundary and touched the hearts of the millions and traversed the geographical boundary. Reconstructing the awareness and authoritarian attitude in the post colonial era were the two most significant components of

this movement which resulted in the consolidation of the working class and imposition of National Emergency in June, 1975.

## **Conclusion**

Now let us arrive at a conclusion. The concluding years of 1960s and early 1970s we found were marked by several crises and the crisis took the form of industrial disputes, labour unrests, inflationary crisis, huge price rise etc in the economic perspective at the same time the political scenario of the country had represented discontent, contradiction, antagonism, corruption etc. These factors made the people of the country disillusioned and hopeless. The policies and the efficacy of the government was being questioned. And the year 1974 had crossed all the limits. The twenty days long general strike of the railwaymen which ended on 28th May 1974, became a matter of discussion and debate of every individual, every household, office, shop, market place so on and so forth throughout the country. The critics said that in India the economic breakdown was caused mainly due to the unsatisfactory performance of agriculture. Since the 1970s agricultural production especially the production of food grains were far below than the estimated rate i.e., it could not reach the calculated level of production. The years preceding 1974 were the bad years of harvesting and the result was the shortfall in production. Another reason was the failure of the management in distributing agricultural goods. Moreover, it did not reach the expected level due to several reasons, e.g., the emergence of Bangladesh during 1971-72 which had put pressure on the economy of the country. The Government had spent crores of rupees on the reliefs operation. War with Pakistan was another factor which strained the country's economy. Not only external assistances but internal causes were also responsible for the huge expenditure on national purse. Peculiarly, all these expenditure were charged from the pocket of the common man of the country. Enormous increase in population was in the period 1970-73, had a great impact on the agricultural production. The country was unable to cope up with the emerging situation. The years (1972-73) also required drought relief operation which incurred huge amount of money. In this background of overall national and

international crises, political condition of the country was extremely unfavourable for the smooth functioning of the administration. Economists were of the opinion that the monetary data had revealed that the Central Government's total indebtedness to the RBI which climbed by Rs 882 crores in 1971-72 and by Rs 800 crores in 1972-73, between January 26th 1973 and January 25th 1974, it mounted up by Rs 1,120 crores (Dandekar, 31.3.74, p.33).

In this economic context in a diverse country like India one must have a colossal of distress and annoyance and discontentment. Hence incidents of mass agitations occurred during this period. It appeared that the political process of the country was assumed to be operated only for dealing the instruments of coercion. It appeared from the attitude of the Government that it had the desire to reserve these problems to retain in power. The refusal of meeting the unwanted strain in the employer-employee relationship, refusal to abolish the growing unrests among the downtrodden and industrial-agricultural labourers had generated a kind of antipathy towards the attitude of the authority. The entire atmosphere of the country was affected by the increasing demands of the working class on the one hand and by the excessive use of arbitrary power and authority on the other. The basic dilemma of this type of political system was the centralising tendency of the authority and its hesitation of undertaking the systematic usages of economic and technological resources and socio-cultural power. In this political juncture and in the midst of economic crisis the Railwaymen's strike of May 1974 took place. It had occurred in the context of political instability and in the peak of a volatile situation.

In this connection it can be said that the trend of over centralisation in every aspect of political and administrative system had gradually deteriorated the relationship inside the political parties, their leaderships, in the industrial front or within the whole social groups. The tendency of autocratic rule and authoritarianism actually revealed the inner weakness of the political system, lack of accountability on the part of the administration and its inability to deal with a critical situation. The administration that was entangled with full of insecurities and anxiousness, lack of farsightedness was not in a position to attend any constructive or conclusive decision. It was observed that some narrow interpretations of current events and incidents left permanent and long term scar and blemishes on the country and on its mass of the people. During the early 1970s the policies of the government were

determined by the interests of the big business houses, traders-merchants, industrialists and by the rich farmers. The government had insured substantial support to the big industrialists for their sustenance and on the other hand this section of economy had provided the desired security to the ruling party for remaining in power.

To Pranab Bardhan the policies of the government, they were designed to control the public resources and finances of the country in favour of the industrialists. According to him “the policies of the import substituting industrialisations of quantitative trade restrictions, providing automatically protected domestic markets, of running a large public sector Essentially to provide underpriced capital goods, intermediate products and infrastructural facilities for private industry, of mobilising public lending institutions for private industrial finances, of providing for various forms of investment allowances, of permitting a very lenient tax treatment of capital gains and all kinds of real and fictitious business expenditure-all these had been to the considerable benefit of the industrialist partners in the ruling coalition” (Bardhan, 1978; p.529). Through all these measures the industrialists got better access to the national economy and participation in the social and political affairs of the country. At this juncture the relatively weaker section of the society was at the bottom of the bargaining process and did not participate in any mainstream political processes of the country. They also did not have any share in the surplus of the economy. The then Congress ruling party and the Government conceived labour power as the element of production system and saleable item in the market. Thus the growing discontents inevitably resulted into agitations all over the country. Consequently the quality and efficiency of the administration narrowed down and the working people were under pressure. But the powerful autonomous tendency of the working class tried to capture their early position, hence confronted with their authority. The Indian ruling elites with their several internal divisions could not provide any solid solution to the proliferating demands of the working class hence the consequences was the breakdown of the economy and the Proclamation of National Emergency.

However, the 1974 Railwaymen’s Strike had its own relevance and significance. It could be said that the trade union movement in India with the railway workers struggle of 1974 reached to a new height and ferment. The industrial working class of India had demonstrated that it had the ability to get united with its full strength to challenge the very

existence of the authority. The question of income and wages of the railwaymen placed a legitimate demand which was predominantly economic in character. The principle of collective bargaining also gained some meaning and validity in the political process. Nevertheless it was launched when the industrial disputes in the country were at its height and workers' militancy touched the sky. Several political forces started playing their wild cards in the country, e.g., in West Bengal the Naxalite movement was in its full swing. The split in the Congress-I had extended the power of Indira Government. Its inclination towards centralisation, establishment of autocratic rule and authoritarianism had resultantly escalated tremendously.

This strike was unique in terms of unity and solidarity achieved by the working class of the country. The rank and file of the railway workers had participated in this struggle, not only the railwaymen but the other central government employees and other industrial workers showed their solidarity towards this movement. It brought all the trade unions across the spectrum under one umbrella for their very existence. This strike marked a milestone as it transcended all the barriers of political shades. It boosted up the railwaymen with unprecedented awareness regarding the consolidation of the working class and also enhanced its self confidence. This movement for the first time in the country attained some maturity in the attitude of the trade unions. It also showed a distinct change in the working class consciousness. However, the Mainstream argued that this strike had clearly uncovered the gap between the middle class leadership of the trade unions and the worker leaders, who symbolised the aspirations of the mass of the workers (Mainstream, 8.6.1974; p.40).

It transformed trade union activity into a political struggle and the opposition, to some extent utilised the workers' agitation to succeed in its goal to gain power in the next general election. This strike demonstrated industrial strength and organised trade unionism in the country. The upheaval in the organised sector had developed new type of offensive against the working class. Surprisingly, the purpose and principle of the unity drive among the workers were to attain more maturity in consciousness. But the authority skillfully handled it and advocated in favour of them as a new kind of strains and stresses had strived on them. The workers remained unaware about the basic issues of contradiction between the management and the trade union leadership. Therefore, immense hardship and sufferings were ultimately faced by the innocent railway workers. A conflicting trend was observed in

this struggle from its inception. Conflict between the railway trade unions and the authority; between the railway men and the management even between the leaders and the ordinary railway workers were also prevailed all along the struggle. A kind of strain was always felt in the entire course in both the sides. A deadlock situation arose during the strike days as none of the parties agreed to settle the issue. Surprisingly the leaders did not understand that delayed discussion or delayed settlement had gone against the interest of the workers which might isolate them.

Railway men's strike of May 1974 was probably the first general strike in the Indian Railways since its inception. Before 1947 there were another three attempts taken by the working class of India in the year 1949, 1960 and 1968 but unfortunately all these attempt failed miserably. The year 1973 had suffered from a number of labour unrests on different issues. Industrial relation in the railway deteriorated and lost all the past glories and legacy of transportation industry. Over the years the labour-management relation in this industry became so messy and chaotic that nothing had worked to settle any problem. This strike was supported by the mass of the people, as it also represented prevailing resentments among the people against the Government. However this strike had cleared that for restoring industrial peace and its smooth functioning, the relation between the employer and employees must be reshaped and the attitude of the Railway Ministry must be changed while dealing with the workers' demands and grievances.

Mainstream had admitted that 'the Indian railway men's nation- wide strike, from 8th to 28th May, 1974 was no ordinary event, rather it involved the railway network of 60,000 km. spread over the country employing an estimated strength of 17 lakh workers (Mainstream, 15.6.1974). Not only from the point of the mileage or the involvement of the workers in the strike, but it was really not an ordinary event because the heroism that was exhibited by the ordinary railway workers against the powerful autocratic Government led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi made it historical. The unity and solidarity of the rank and file workers had emerged as a new force of challenge and was marked as a new awakening and maturity of the working class in India. This struggles were not only the result of any sudden action, it was caused due to years long deprivation and several other developments that took place in the political plane of the country. This struggle was participated not only by the organised section but was immensely joined by the organised sectors of the railway industry.

The craft unions throughout the country with few exceptions had involved whole heartedly in the movement. thus it was termed as the biggest confrontation between the working class and the Indian State. It was the struggle whose impact on country's economy was unprecedented. It had actually affected several other sectors of national economy, e.g., tea industry, engineering industry because it cut the supply of coal, iron and other raw materials. Traders had taken the opportunity of the situation and created artificial scarcity and shortage of different essential commodities like sugar, oil etc. Thus it led to heavy price rise and daily consumer items vanished from the markets. Railways lost hundreds of crores of rupees and the Government spent other hundreds of crores to suppress the movement instead of negotiating with the working class.

The intensity of the workers' participation was historical in the pre and post independent era. Workers fought a heroic battle against the authority. The weapon in the workers' hand was their number and the strength was their unity. The strike was unprecedented in many respects; the moment the news of arrests of the national leaders of the railway trade unions were flushed out, the workers from other transport industries and employees of the electricity, taxi drivers of Mumbai and workers from many other sectors showed their solidarity towards the railway men's struggle. Not only within the country but different international trade unions and other organisations had supported the railwaymen's cause and their struggle whole heartedly. Samaddar rightly conceived that "the NCCRS was formed in February 1974 with the trade unions like AIRF, AILRSA, AIREC, AITUC, CITU, BRMS and around 125 railway trade unions joining hands to launch the biggest labour strike ever seen by the country, around 15 lakh railway employees engaged and the total railway traffic was immobilised". He also indicated "the importance of the strike could be understood from the fact that the main leaders being arrested by the Government" while negotiations were going on.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the success of the railway strike depended on the zonal and local union leaders and the rank and file workers also (Samaddar, 2015; p. 44).

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<sup>66</sup> Fernandes was arrested from Lucknow railway station on 2nd May, followed by country-wide arrests of thousands of railway workers

All the trade unions except NFIR got involved in this agitation. NFIR kept safe distance from this strike because it was affiliated with the ruling party, the Congress. The reason behind its inactiveness was to restrict the workers agitation against the authority. The Railway Board always aimed at discouraging and limiting workers' actions in the industry and resorted to the policy of compulsory recognition of the trade unions. Board utilised these recognised unions to regulate workers action. Surprisingly, not only in the railway industry whenever Government's intervention was needed it had all along acted as the agent of the employers as in the case of 1974 railwaymen's strike. In other industries like cotton textile, automobile or in jute industry it obviously took the sides of the management. Therefore through this trade union tactics it had pressurised the employees not to raise their voice against the authority. In 1974 all the trade unions in the railway industries (except INTUC backed ones) launched a nation-wide movement which achieved some sort of success in spite of opposition from INTUC. As a large number of railway workers had joined and railway services became immobile (Bhowmick, 1996; p. L-41). As Ananth quoted that Fernandes was reported to have said that "realise the strength which we possess - seven days strike of Indian Railways every thermal station in the country would close. A ten days' strike of the Indian railways, every steel mill would close down and the other industries in the country would come to halt for the next twelve months. If once the steel mill furnace was switched off, it took nine months to retire. A fifteen days' strike in the Indian Railways, the country would starve" (Ananth, 2016; p.18).

The strongest centres of the struggle were the areas where a large number of homogeneous groups of labourers stayed together and composed the population, such places were - Mugholsarai, Chittaranjan, Jamalpur, mainly the workshops where working class had strong trade union culture and connection. In these places the Government unleashed heavy repression and terror attacked on the railway workers. The solidarity and patience of the workers were beyond imagination. They braved brute force and where the Government declared the strike as illegal and imposed DIR, MISA against the railway workers. As a result they escaped from railway colony and took shelter in the nearby jungles and different places in order to avoid arrest and police torture. Most of the railway colonies wore a deserted look. All the windows and doors were tightly closed and the roads, streets and

market places all were emptied or deserted. Railway workers and their families were badly beaten and even the women members were physically assaulted.

The eastern region was affected in many respects, e.g., the region was rich in coal and steel production, the complete immobility of the railway transport made it very difficult for the administration to run other industries situated in different parts. Railway Board and the government focused their attention in this region and utilised heavy armed forces and resorted to every kind of measure which compelled the workers to join their duties and run the trains. The highest number of arrests and removal from railway services took place in this region- South Eastern Railways, Eastern Railways and N.F. Railways. Where the intensity of the strike was high, the torture was immense. Harassment and nuisance were enforced only to break the workers confidence and their resistances. The reactions of the government had itself proved that the struggle had really the capacity to challenge the might of the state. Thus the struggle was glorious because the railway workers had forced the government to accept the validity and justness of their demands.

The unity achieved by the railway workers was the first stepping stone towards their success. For launching an all India general and indefinite strike solidarity of the working class was the most essential pre condition. Not only unity but the determination, courage and firmness that were carried on by the millions of ordinary railway men were unparalleled in the history of labour movement of the country. Abnormal and unequalled repression and use of police and armed forces were bravely bore by the railway men during the twenty days of the strike. The anti working class policy and activities of the Government was never seen before. The intensity of the struggle, tenacity of the workers and the tyranny of the Government made this movement an extra ordinary and exceptional in comparison to the earlier ones. The strike was called off unconditionally and the decision was taken by the members of the Action Committee of the NCCRS unilaterally. The workers resumed their duties within the two days of the withdrawal.

The next phase of the battle was more dangerous and grave that started immediately after the strike ended. Immense torture and numerous cases of victimisation were unleashed against the railway workers which envisaged a strenuous consequence of the struggle. Workers had to overcome it. This must also be fought with same vigour and spirit of unity,

boldness and firmness as it was during the strike days. Victimisation and vindictiveness had become the weapons in the hands of the authority. This attitude of the management brought extreme hardship in the life of the railway employees, punishment transfer to the remote and rural areas was the most common one. Delayed payment of salary was another method but the loyal workers got the flu pay packets, incentives and over times. These activities of the authority had indicated Government's anti working class attitude and non co-operation with the working class. It also attempted to disable the activeness of the NCCRS, so that the railway men's struggle could be sent in the cold.

The reason behind the unconditional withdrawal of the strike was that it got started fizzling out in many important railway centres and it was going out of hand. The causes of failure of the struggle were manifold. Inter union rivalry was one of them. Left parties perceived the strike as a political battle against the Congress ruling party. They had heavily accused the ruling Government for its repressive measures and intended to capture power in the next Lok Sabha general election. Most interestingly those places where CITU was in strong position, the strike was proved to be weak. Critics were of the opinion that CITU set the examples of betrayal and unfaithfulness. The Ludhiana Loco shed claimed to be the strong hold of CITU did not join the strike and remained in their jobs from 8th May onwards, all of them earned monetary rewards from the authority (Biswas, 1977; p. 12). The members of NFIR including the Congress hooligans took active part in breaking the strike and it betrayed its fellow workers. CPM blamed AITUC chief S.A Dange for confusing the workers whether to be with the struggle or give it up. Interestingly the Socialist Party also faced split on the question of supporting the railway men's strike, whereas Fernandes was the Chairman of this party. But the members got fragmented on this issue. Various parties like Lok Dal or Jana Sangh showed some kind of antipathy about the railway men's struggle and their hardships. As Ananth pointed out that 'apart from making noise in Parliament and outside, the political leaders did nothing to maintain and mobilise solidarity actions even in places where they were strong (Ananth, 2016; p.19). Peculiarly, Jaya Prakash Narayan remained silent on the issue of railway men's strike though he was the General Secretary of the AIRF in 1948.

The CPI (M) believed in continuous revolution and compromise with the ruling elite was not at all acceptable under any circumstance. But the organised attack of the state with

full vigour was really difficult to resist. Railway authority and Government could not expect the complete shut- down of the industry and immobility of the railway transport system hence they unleashed terror attack on the railway working class. It was beyond the capacity of the railwaymen to continue their struggle for a prolonged period. The Government behaved as if a war like situation had been prevailing in the country and interpreted the struggle as an attempt of destroying the pillars of democratic government. However, J.M. Biswas had suggested certain measures for further struggles in future-

- a) Ensuring that the situation arising out of the railway strike would not be taken advantage by the forces of right reaction;
- b) It had to be taken care of that the unity of the railway workers forged through struggle, would not be utilised for furthering the sectarian aims of any party or groups their off,
- c) That the unity of the railway workers would be broadened further and guarded from fighting and division (Biswas, 1977; p. 20).

The railway men's strike of May 1974 was a milestone and played a pioneering role in reaching maturity. It set an example in inspiring and producing dynamism among the working class. It also ensured the economic, political and social transformation of the mass of the people. Indian railways were the largest employer of the country employing enormous number of workers (nearly 14 lakh workers). In all hours of day and night, winter and summer, in kind of climatic conditions - favourable or unfavourable, more than 10,000 trains were running from one place to another in India. It involved a certain amount of risk to the life and property of its users, this risk became significant when the railway staff was overworked, extremely tired, malnourished, insufficiently clothed, inadequately housed improperly trained. They remained under immense work pressure and resultantly grievances also increased. For this reason it was the responsibility of the railway authority and the government to ensure satisfactory working and living conditions for the staff members of the railway industry. It was also to take measures to expedite the process of redressing the workers' discontentment (Rao, 1974; p. 183).

Ironically, the workers were not capable of fulfilling their minimum livelihood and the Government was not at all interested in taking measures for providing better living to the

railway workers. Peculiarly, the attitude of the government and the magnitude of its repression had revealed the nature of governance and intention of the ruling elites. It was also true that the heavy use of brute force and the volume of torture had insisted the railway workers to surrender. But several factors were responsible for the failure of the struggle, e.g., not only the despotic nature of State Administration and barbaric repression but the attitude of the railway trade unions, their rivalry and betrayal had broke the morale of the workers. All these factors together had contributed to this end. (Dange, 1974; p.1).

In our study we have found one incident that how the authority and the officials forced the employees to join their duties. Dhar was a deputy magistrate of Chandannagar, during the strike days in 1974 he was posted at Kamarkundu railway station on Tarakeshwar - Sheoraphuli line. When the strike started on 8 May 1974, Dhar observed that the railway stations in this area were completely empty but the employees were waiting outside the station and watching the situation and the trade unions were constantly announcing not to join their duties. The entire area and the railway station became immobile but this region was important for agriculture and trading of essential commodities, thus Dhar decided to keep the trains running. He tried to convince the employees to join their duties and assured them to give protection. He arranged for patrolling system in the residential areas and managed extra staff from Howrah to continue the railway services. On the third day he was successful in running dummy trains with some passengers. The station master with very few staff had joined their duty. Hence it became easy for him to keep the transport alive. An operative rake was arranged which ran as a shuttle up to Howrah. He requested the traction driving inspector, signal inspector and permanent way inspector to drive the rakes. They hesitantly agreed but opined that with a defective rake how one could approve the mobility of any train. At last after 11th May 1974 Dhar was able to run one special train between Tarakeshwar and Chandannagar up to Howrah with the assistance of the technical staff. Some reporters said he got huge popular support as the first train was run in this area but according to some an unnecessary force was used to keep the rake mobile. This was a story of a dutiful officer but this was not the end of the story because the officer while performing his duty attempted in several ways to break the struggle of the railwaymen. In order to tackle the situation for maintaining normalcy Dhar had faced a lot of trouble and difficulty which symbolised the strength and intensity of the workers' involvement in the movement.

The method of breaking any workers' resistance through the use of brute force was a new phase of Indian polity. The State had exhibited the intolerance, uncompromising, unsympathetic and authoritarian attitude towards the mass of the country. The activities of the trade unions during the strike period too, showed the actual purposes of launching the indefinite strike throughout the country. The people in Government- Centre or State, were the representatives of petty middle class they had a great lust for money and power, hence administration and politics were the source of these things. On the other hand the leaders of trade unions pretended that they were only striving for workers' cause and had no other political ambitions but unfortunately failed to bring any revolutionary change for the working class of the country.

Interestingly, after independence some kind of maturity was observed among the large number of workers who attempted to consolidate themselves socially and culturally. Therefore the workers from different social and cultural strata, homogeneous or heterogeneous groups were seeking for their own identity as an industrial working class of the country. Another factor which had yielded a balance in the trade unions, was the emergence of craft based unions in the railway industry. These grassroots leaders were enormously powerful and motivated the workers that any agitation for this level could be able to shake the root of any authority of union. This change in the root of the worker had not been noticed by any of the leaders neither by the national leaders in power and administration nor by the trade union leadership. Labour unrests like this were quite inevitable in such economic and political background. Though the workers' agitations and industrial disputes had been growing like anything and the protest movements were at its peak, the entire political and economic situation of the country were unstable rather in a turmoil situation which prevailed throughout the country. The parties of all political shades must clearly assert their own opinions regarding the workers' strike. Although the strike was suppressed with brutal force and massive deployment of armed forces and the workers were bound to surrender but one could not claim this movement as a failure. It had achieved later what it aimed to attain.

Rajni Kothari had argued that the suspension of the political process also brought some relief to the whole atmosphere of chaos, confrontation, and bandhs etc. that used to take place almost every day without any reason. According to Kothari the dramatic conduct

of the Parliamentarians had abolished all decency and dignity of the House (Kothari, 1977; p. 14). Kothari referred to the decision of emergency which was implemented by the Indira government in June 1975. All the economic crisis or political upheavals to manage the labour unrests were the prelude to the implementation of the Proclamation of the Emergency on 26th 1975. However the railwaymen's strike of 1974 was a unique demonstration of unity and solidarity of the working class which had the strength to compel the people of all strata to rethink about the conditions of the industrial workers in India. It had the power to put a halt on the wheels of the nation. Unity was achieved as the essence of the effective resistance by the working class against the bureaucratic and authoritarian attacks on them.

Nevertheless, the Government India under the leadership of Mrs Indira Gandhi realised that the striking railway workers received support and sympathy from all over the country including various international forums. Though the strike had revealed not only the actual intention of the central government but also exposed the underlying weaknesses and controversies of the trade union leaderships, e.g., the famous Dange -Limaye conflict became an open matter of discussion which caused damage to the confidence of the striking workers. This issue was well taken up by the authority and they used it to create divisions among the unions. Another issue which had negative impact on the railway men's struggle was the call for 'West Bengal bandh' by the left parties on May 7th 1974 out of inter unionism rivalry and over jealousy for each other. The impulsiveness behind the decision of the central government employees to go on strike throughout the country from 10th May 1974 and its decision of withdrawal of the strike had a harmful effect on the railwaymen, especially when they saw a bad response from the employees.

In the sense of long term development of the trade union movement the battle of hundreds of thousands of railway men and their families had proved the enormous revolutionary potentials of the working class and a real threat to the capitalist ruling class in spite of the heavy repression and savage attack on them by the government of India.

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## **Interviews**

Interview with Prasanta Dhar on 21.12.2016 at Mazdoor Union office, Siliguri Junction at 4.00 p.m.

Interview with Tushar Chattopadhyay on 24. 1 2017, at his Court Complex Residence, Alipurduar at 7.00 p.m.

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

Interview with Suvendu Mukherjee on 19.01.2018 at 2:30 p.m. at his Kanchrapara Residence

Interview with Rabindra Chandra Roy on 19.01. 2018 at the Kanchrapara Residence of Mr. Suvendu Mukherjee at 5:00 p.m

Interview with Malay Ranjan Das on 21.01. 2018 at the Office of the Pensioners’ Association, Eastern Railways at 6:00 p.m., Barasat

Interview with Tarun Km Chatterjee on 20.01. 18 at 6:30 p.m. at the Eastern Railway Pensioner’ Association, Barasat

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

Interview with Maya Mukherjee on 19.01.18 at 6:30 p.m. at her Kanchrapara residence

Interview with Bhola Bose on 22.01.18 at 5.30 p.m. at his residence at Karunamoyee, Salt Lake, Kolkata

Interview with Prosanta Bhowmick on 21.01.18 at 5.00 p.m. at the Office of the Pensioners' Association, Eastern Railways at 4:30 p.m., Barasat

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Interview with Kanteshwar Paul on 10.2.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 5.45 p.m.

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Interview with Mrinal Kanti Sarkar on 10.1.2017 in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways Siliguri at 11:30 p.m.

Interview with Narendra Km. Singh on 6.1.2017 in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, NJP Unit, N.F. Railways Siliguri at 12:30 p.m.

Interview with Sishir Km. Nandi on 28.1.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 5.40 p.m.

Interview with Dilip Km. Mukherjee on 28.1.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 6.15 p.m.

Interview with Subodh Chandra Sarkar on 28.1.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 3.00 p.m.

Interview with Madhusudan Dutta on 10.2.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 4.00 p.m.

Interview with Barin Bhattacharya on 10.2.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 5.00 p.m.

Interview with Kanteshwar Paul on 10.2.2017 at Coochbehar Pensioners' Office, Station Chowpati at 5.45 p.m.

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## Appendix – A



Interview with Sri. Satya Narayan Singh, a former N.F Railways employee who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2017.



Interview with Sri. Pallab Kumar Majumdar, a former N.F Railways employee and a leader of Casual Staff Association affiliated under Mazdoor Union in Thaurganj who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2016.



Interview with Sri. Druba Lal Bannerjee, a former N.F. Railways staff who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike and a member of local Action committee NJP, on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2017.



Interview with Sri. Bimalendu Chakraborty, a former N.F Railways employee and convenor of the local Action Committee, Pandu, who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike , on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2016.



Interview with Sri. Subrato Dutta Roy, a former Eastern Railways employee who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 2nd January 2017.



Interview with Sri. Abhiram Sarkar, a former N.F. Railways employee who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2017.



Interview with Sri. Ajit Km. Saha, a former N.F Railways employee and a member of UCR who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2017.



Interview with Sri. Malay Chandra Das, a former N.F Railways employee and a Secretary of the Action Committee, Siliguri Junction Unit who participated in May 1974 Railway Strike, on 4th January 2017.

### **Section III**

## **Documents**

### **Two letters to the Prime Minister**

Dear Prime Minister,

On May 3, I had addressed you a letter from prison requesting you to intervene in the railwaymen's dispute and help us secure a just and honourable settlement in the very legitimate demands of the railwaymen.

From newspaper reports it appears that my request has not moved you a bit.

If anything, the campaign of lies and slander against me and against the railwaymen, in Parliament and outside, had been intensified by Shri L.N. Mishra, the Railway Board Chairman, Shri M.N. Bery and the members of the Government party. New firmans are also being issued in their dozens by the satraps of Rail Bhavan with the sole object of bullying the railwaymen into submission.

You will excuse my saying this, but your Railway Minister and his Railway Board are obviously not giving you a true picture of the situation on the Railways nor of the mood and temper of the railwaymen.

The Railway Minister is blissfully ignorant of the issues involved. Even as late as April 30, when he briefly put in his appearance at the discussion table, and I protested at his repeated statement that our demands would cost Rs. 500 crores when their actual cost was less than Rs. 300 crores, he said that Rs. 500 crores included the amount the government would have to spend for employees in all services including railwaymen. Both Shri Qureshi and Shri Bery had a few anxious and embarrassing moments in bringing Shri Mishra back on the rails.

As for the Railway Board, most of its members are completely oblivious of the changes that have taken place in this country since 1947, to speak nothing of what is happening in the world outside. I am not being rhetorical when I say that they look to the railwaymen as slave labour. They with their airconditioned offices and their air-

conditioned saloons will never understand the hunger and the poverty of the gangmen and khalasies or the sweat and blood poured out by the drivers and firmen.

Everyone calls the Railways the "life line" of the country. But, do you know that two railwaymen die of tuberculosis every day? And there are tens of thousands of railwaymen lying in hospitals afflicted by this dreadful disease, and with no hope of recovery?

And the men who man this "life line" work round-the-clock to keep the wheels of industry moving are among the worst paid employees in the public sector. Is the work of the railwaymen less arduous, less hazardous, less important than the work done by the employees in LIC, State Bank, Reserve Bank, Nationalised Banks, HMT, HSL, BHEL, ITI, STC, Modern Bakeries to name a few public owned undertakings?

In October last year, the Union Labour Minister settled the wage dispute in the cement industry. Is what is right for the cement workers of the country not right for the railwaymen?

Madam Prime Minister, these questions cannot be brushed aside any more. They cannot be answered by the BSF Territorial Army, CRP, SRP, not even by the Indian Army.

I note from the newspapers that according to sources close to members of Political Affairs Committee of the Cabinet, my letter to you dated May 3, did not contain any fresh proposals for a settlement. What proposals can we make if the Government position is "no" to our demands for interim parity with public sector and for bonus? We have justified our demands. Any impartial person will concede the justice of our demands.

It is for the Railway Ministry to make proposal to settle the dispute. I have always said so, and I repeat again that if any reasonable proposals are made, we shall not be found wanting in our response.

But if the idea is to have a trial of strength, then, this time, I hope, the railwaymen will not be found wanting in proving their mettle.

The spontaneous action by railwaymen on all railways is already on. The Southern Railway workers have now formally launched the strike. On other railways, formal strike action will be launched in the next 36 hours. You can still avert the catastrophe, if you wish.

With regards,  
Tihar Jail,  
Delhi  
May 6, 1974

Yours sincerely,  
George Fernandes  
Convener, NCCRS

Dear Prime Minister,

I had not anticipated that I would have to write to you on the railwaymen's problems from the prison, though I knew that I would have to seek your intervention to resolve the current dispute between the Railway Ministry and two million railwaymen.

During our talks which, as you know, have had a chequered course, the Railway Ministry has totally rejected all the vital issues on which we seek a settlement. Consequently, we have been pushed to a point where a general strike on the Railways has become inevitable.

Even now, I want to reiterate, with all the emphasis at my command that we do not want a strike. We are fully aware of the implications and consequences of a railway strike. But what are we to do when our most reasonable and legitimate demands are rejected?

The principal point which the Railway Ministry has made with us during our talks is paucity of funds to meet our demands. But you will appreciate that nowhere in the world has this argument been accepted as a valid reason to deny what is fair and reasonable to the workers.

Furthermore, we do not believe that there is any substance in the Railway Ministry's position on the finances as is evident from the following points:

1. During the last 19 years, the Railways have given to the Central exchequer about Rs. 2,000 crores as their contribution to the General Revenue.

2. Sixty per cent of the revenue earning tonnage on the Railways does not pay at all. Certain commodities are carried even below cost. In simple language, this means that the railways are carrying 60 per cent of freight at below even the present low cost of operation.

3. During the current year, the railways are underwriting "social burdens" to the tune of Rs. 225 crores. This is on account of the maintenance of uneconomic lines, loss on suburban services, other losses on coaching services and losses on freight carried at below the actual cost.

According to the Railway Ministry's own admission, railways in many countries such as Britain, West Germany, France, Italy, Canada and Japan are compensated for the loss sustained by them on account of social burdens by grants-in-aid from the Central or State Governments or local bodies.

Only twelve days back, the railways started work on a 24.7 kms. railway line between Dalmau and Daryapur, in your Rai Bareilly constituency, at an estimated cost of Rs. 1.40 crores. (The cost of the line could reach twice that figure by the time the work is completed.) Thousands of copies of a souvenir printed on art paper with pictures of Shri Lalit Narain Mishra, Shri H. N. Bahuguna and Shri Mohammed Shafi Qureshi and other photographs were distributed on the occasion. In justifying this patently uneconomic line, the Railway Board states in this souvenir "laying of a new line or restoration of a line, cannot be reviewed on the basis of financial return alone." Which is as it should be. But should the railwaymen bear the cost of it all? That question is at the root of our dispute.

4. The railways are required to pay a dividend of 5.5 per cent and 6 per cent on the capital-at-charge. Whereas most public sector undertakings in India have been making losses and yet paying fairly decent wages to their workmen, the railways are paying a dividend of Rs. 185 crores during the current year and yet are refusing to pay wages, at least on par with those of public sector undertakings which are making colossal losses.

5. The railways have been recently financing a lot of their developmental programmes from their own internal resources and thus expanding their capital base. The total amount so utilised is over Rs. 1,000 crores during the last seven or eight years.

6. Between the reserves used for developmental activities and the dividends paid to the Government in the last 19 years the railways have produced a surplus of over Rs. 3,000 crores.

While the public sector undertakings continue to make losses, this amount of Rs. 3,000 crores is the nett contribution by the railways to the capital formation in the country. This does not include social burdens borne by the railways which in the last two and a half decades would have amounted to an astronomical figure.

7. Between 1950-51 and 1972-73, labour productivity on the open lines of the Indian Railways increased by 64 per cent. Between 1957-58 and 1972-73 labour productivity in the railway workshops increased by 54 per cent.

It may surprise you but it is true that the railwaymen's wages were last revised in 1959-60 on the basis of the recommendation of the Second Pay Commission. The railwaymen have not been given any share of their productivity through increased wages.

8. Measured with any yardstick, the work of the railwaymen is no

less arduous and hazardous than that of workmen engaged in the public sector undertakings including the Modern Bakeries Ltd., which produces bread.

Yet while the average *annual pay* per employee in the public sector undertakings was Rs 6,313 in 1972-73, the average per capita *annual cost* of a railway worker in 1972-73 was only Rs 3,714.

This most unjustified and wide disparity in the emolument of the railwaymen and of workers in the public sector undertakings owned by the Government of India has had a devastating effect on the morale of railwaymen. It is but natural that they should resent and oppose this step-motherly treatment meted out to them.

It has been alleged that the railwaymen's agitation for better working and living condition is politically motivated. This is a preposterous charge, to say the least. What is the politics involved in the railwaymen's agitation to secure wages, dearness allowance, bonus, hours of work and other conditions of service available to workmen in Hindusthan Steel, Hindusthan Antibiotics, Hindusthan Machine Tools, Indian Telephone Industries, Hindusthan Aeronautics, Bharat Heavy Electricals, Modern Bakeries, Indian Airlines and other Government-owned undertakings?

I am approaching you with a request that you intervene and help us secure a just and honourable settlement on the very legitimate demands of the railwaymen. It is my deep conviction that only such a settlement of their demands will create among the railwaymen a sense of belonging, restore their morale and make them give of their best to make the railways run more efficiently. In any other course, lies only disaster, not only to the railways but also to the nation.

With best regards,

Tihar Jail  
Delhi,  
May 3, 1974

Yours sincerely,  
George Fernandes  
Convener, NCCRS

## A letter to the Railway Minister

Dear Lalit,

I have just seen your letter of May 1, delivered at my residence at 1 a.m. on May 2. I have also seen in the newspapers the various statements made by you in the Lok Sabha yesterday.

I cannot say I am shocked by your words or by your actions. You

# All India Railwaymen's Federation

B.P. Roy Chowdhury  
Asstt. General Secy.

(Estd. 1924)

125/E, BABAR ROAD, NEW DELHI-1.

5th March, 1974.

AIR/12(142)

Dear Shri Chakraborty,

Re : Case of Shri V.B. Mahadeshwar, Sr. Time-Keeper,  
Time Office, Central Railway, Parel.

...

A reference is invited to the discussions held on 2.3.74 vide item No. 32 of the statement, dated 26.2.74, indicating action taken on the minutes of the previous PNM meeting. It concerns review of cases of Railway employees who were punished for participation in the Strike of July, 1960 - Treatment of period of suspension "Item No. III(29) of 20/21-12-72". During the course of discussion an individual case requiring fresh opportunity to opt for authorised scales of pay w.e.f. 1.7.59 was raised by the AIRF's representatives. It was stated on behalf of the Railway Board that the particulars of individual case should be forwarded to them.

I have to write for your information that the case belongs to Shri V.B. Mahadeshwar, Sr. Time-Keeper, Parel Workshop, Central Railway. Shri Mahadeshwar was under suspension during the period from 12.7.60 to 18.11.61. He was asked to exercise option while he was under suspension and taking into consideration the then prevailing situation he opted to elect authorised scale of pay from the date of his next increment. The date of his next increment fell some time in the month of December, 1962. Now that the suspension period has been treated as duty for purposes of increment, it is advantageous to him to elect the authorised scale of pay from 1.7.59. Shri Mahadeshwar had submitted his representation, requesting for fresh opportunity to exercise his option from 1.7.59 and the same has been referred to the Railway Board by the Central Railway Administration.

It is, therefore, requested to kindly look into the matter and do the needful at an early date.

Yours sincerely,

*B.P. Roy Chowdhury*  
(B.P. Roy Chowdhury)

Shri A.K. Chakraborty,  
Director, Establishment,  
Railway Board,  
New Delhi



TELEPHONE 40947

URGENT 80

TELEGRAM RAILWAYMEN

# All India Railwaymen's Federation

(Estd. 1924)

123/E, BABAR ROAD, NEW DELHI-1.

AIRF/160-B(A4)

10th March, 1975.

From: Priya Gupta,  
General Secretary,  
All India Railwaymen's Federation,  
125/E, Babar Road, New Delhi-1



To  
S hri Kamlapati Tripathiji,  
Minister for Railways,  
Rail Bhavan,  
New Delhi.

MR/329  
TR-3-75

19/3

Respected Shri Kamlapatiiji,

Sub: May, 1974, Railway General Strike -  
Rehabilitation and normalisation -  
Commence of the PNM and other channels  
of negotiations.

DE MY  
AMS 12/3  
MR. desires to  
have a draft  
reply put up  
commenting  
on the points  
raised by  
Shri Priya Gupta

...  
I would draw your kind attention to the  
discussions I had with you when I met you in the  
Central Hall on 3rd March, 1975, and I submitted to  
you about the hardships and difficulties of the  
railwaymen arising out of the delay in implementation  
of the decision on the May 1974 Railway General Strike  
Victims.

S.A. to M.R  
10.3.75

I shall be very grateful if you could kindly  
consider sympathetically the cases of the railwaymen  
as assured.

DDSK  
GK 15/3

I for myself can vouchsafe that the railwaymen  
will leave no stone unturned to see that the ideal  
conditions be fulfilled.

MS/Secy  
17/3

I am enclosing details of the points for favour  
of your kind consideration.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

*Priya Gupta*  
(Priya Gupta)

General Secretary/AIRF.

Encl: as above.



# All India Railwaymen's Federation

(Estd. 1924)

123/E, BABAR ROAD, NEW DELHI-1.

AIRE/1604b (4)

10th March, 1975.

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS SUBMITTED TO  
SHRI KAMLAPATI TRIPATHIJI,  
MINISTER FOR RAILWAYS,  
FOR HIS KIND AND SYMPATHETIC  
CONSIDERATION -  
MAY 1974 RAILWAY GENERAL STRIKE -  
REHABILITATION AND NORMALISATION-  
COMMENCEMENT OF THE P.N.M. & OTHER  
CHANNELS OF NEGOTIATIONS.

1. Refusal to take back to duties on flimsy charges of intimidation.

Of late the Railway Administration has started a new slogan that intimidation is a charge for which so many railwaymen are to be kept back in addition to those cases of sabotage and violence. We have submitted categorically that intimidation is a criminal offence and that it must have to be established in the Court of Law and mere statement of railway officials and that too at this delayed hours,- stating that so and so employees have also charges against them of intimidation is not sufficient and refusal to put back to duty on this flimsy ground is malicious. You will kindly recall for the papers in such cases and find that even for those who had court cases against them (now acquitted, convicted or court cases withdrawn or pending) there having been no mention of charge of intimidation, are also being implicated now by a mere fresh statement by his concerned railway officials.

I solicit your kindly making sympathetic consideration to these crucial points and see that only for this whimsical attitude of a particular Railway Official the poor railwaymen may not be implicated and victimised by keeping them away from service on this pretext.

2. Railwaymen removed from service in May '74 Strike - Not allowed in P.N.M. & C.

On the question of introducing PNM and other machineries after long days in connection with May, 1974 Railway General Strike,- we are glad that the Railway Board's Office and the Zonal Railway Offices at G.M.'s, Divn.'s workshop(s) and local levels,- the meetings and channels of negotiations are being opened, and all privileges and facilities restored.

Cont d.....2/

It is painful to note that the Railway Admn. is refusing to allow in the PNM meeting and other meetings, the railwaymen who are our office bearers, active workers and members on the plea that they were out of service either having been dismissed or removed or terminated or discharged in connection with May, 1974 Railway General Strike.

Then in that case what is the position - we cannot all of a sudden pick up anybody else as office bearers at the Divisional and Branch levels in a democratic organisation as ours, where it is the general body who elect the office bearers at Branch, Divisional or Central levels, etc. Moreover, to attend to a negotiating committee meeting, PNM or otherwise, when you are allowing the same dismissed/removed discharged/terminated ex-employees if he is a central office bearer or as honorary member (outsider), I do not understand as to why in the same PNM and other meetings the similar set up of persons even they are out of jobs cannot be allowed to participate, by attending the PNM meetings.

3. Delay in taking back to service

I shall once again draw your kind attention to the cases which are pending for being taken back to jobs and they have no charges against them of violence or sabotage, and therefore, an early action for issuing directives to take them back to jobs be taken.

4. Transfers on Re-instatement

While on the subject the hardships caused to the employees on transfers from one place to another, when they are put back to service, have many times put up to Rly. Board the Member (Staff) Railway Board that the transfer should be cancelled and no further transfer should be made while taking back the employees to service.

5. Withdrawal of Court Cases - In spite of Home Ministry's Circular -

The local Railway offices at divisional & branch levels are in most of the cases putting objections, for which the District Magistrates and other judiciaries cannot withdraw the court cases. - Even of similar FIR's there are discriminations.

6. Regarding D.L.W. Railway

None of the 11 cases of DLW have been put back. I hope you will kindly consider the above points and do the needful at an early date.

Yours sincerely,

*Priya Gupta*  
( Priya Gupta )  
General Secretary/A.I.R.F.

rn\*

EXPRESS

STATE

TELEGRAM

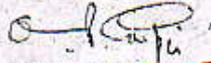
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CHIEF MINISTERS  
(All State Governments): By name.

IN VIEW OF THE THREATENED RAILWAY STRIKE FROM  
MORNING OF 8TH MAY, REQUEST THAT ADEQUATE BUS  
SERVICES ARE ORGANISED SO AS TO RELIEVE PRESSURE  
ON RAILWAYS AND SERVE IMPORTANT CENTRES, ESPECIALLY  
INTER-CITY AND SUBURBAN(.) IF POSSIBLE KINDLY PERMIT  
TRUCK AND TRACTORS WITH TROLLEY OWNED ALSO TO CARRY  
SHORT DISTANCE PASSENGERS IN VIEW OF THE SPECIAL  
SITUATION(.)

L. N. MISHRA  
MINISTER FOR RAILWAYS

(N. T. T.)



(O.P. GUPTA)

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO MINISTER FOR RLYS.  
5-5-1974.

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY.

O R D E R

Sub : Revocation of removal order.

Ref : DS's Order No. ~~E/SEC/strike/PI/APDJ/74~~ 27.5.74

~~K~~ ~~S.C.P.S./PNO~~ has carefully considered the appeal dated ~~3.6.74~~ preferred by ~~Sri Kailash Lala, Ex: ASM'B/KAMG~~ and he is pleased to decide that the order for removal from service in question may be revoked.

He will be allowed to join duty in his former post. He will not be entitled to any pay and allowances for the period of his absence from duty during the illegal strike as also between the date of removal from service and resumption of duty. The consequences of break in service for participation in the illegal strike will, however, operate in his case.

*S.K. Suden*  
( S.K.Suden. )  
Divisional Superintendent,  
N.F.Rly./Alipurduar Junction.

Memo No. E/SEC/Strike/PI/APDJ/74 Dated 17.6.74

Copy to :-

1. Sri ~~Kailash Lala, Ex: ASM'B/KAMG.~~
2. ~~S.M./KAMG~~ for information and display on the Notice Board.
3. ~~D.C.P./APDJ~~ for information and necessary action.
4. P/Case of Sri ~~Kailash Lala, Ex: ASM'B/KAMG.~~
5. CPO/PNO for information and necessary action please.

*scd*  
for Divisional Supdt. (P),  
N.F.Rly./Alipurduar Jn.

N. E. Railway.

Office of the  
Divl: Superintendent (P)  
N. F. Rly: / All purduar Jnc.

No. 7/SWC/APDJ/Strike/74(T)

Dt. 1st June, 1975.

To: Shri

Shri. Lal Bahadur Shastri

Through: SGM/SM/

Subject - Regularisation of period of absence  
from the date of removal from service  
to the date of re-joining.

You are requested to submit a declaration in duplicate to the effect that you did not take any employment or part-time employment during the period of your absence from the date of your removal from service to the date of re-joining and did not receive any pay or honorarium during the period.

  
for Divl: Superintendent (P)  
N. F. Rly: / All purduar Junction.

20.6.75.

N. F. Railway.

Office of the  
Divl. Supt. (P) / APDJ  
N. F. Rly.

M e m o r a n d u m .

In terms of GM(P) / MCG's letter No. B/201/MC/74 Pt. VIII dated 31/5/75, the period of absence in connection with strike in May/74 of the following staff who were removed from service under order of various authorities and have been ordered to be allowed to rejoin duties, with or without imposition of a reduced penalty according to the orders issued from time to time are regularised as indicated against each name.

No. payment is to be made to the staff for the period of their absence due to participation in strike up to the date of proceeding the date of removal from service.

The period of participation in strike is treated as 'Dies-non' and the period of unemployment due to removal from service for which pay and allowances equivalent to subsistence allowance is being paid, now will be treated as "Non-duty". The payment at the above rate will be subject to adjustment and production of a certificate by the staff concerned as in Sl. No. 15 to Cf to the effect that they did not take any employment or part time employment during the period of their absence from the date of their removal from service up to the date of rejoining, and did not receive any pay or honorarium during the period.

The amount, if any earned by the staff concerned between the date of removal and the date of rejoining duty will be adjusted from the amount to be paid and where the emoluments are equal to or less than the amount earned during the employment elsewhere, nothing is to be paid.

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
S. No.	Name of the staff	Designation.	The period of participation in strike treated as 'Dies-non'	The period of unemployment due to removal from service treated as 'non duty' but will get pay and allowance to the extent of subsistence and other allowance.
			From To	From To

D/Chri

1. U. Dasgupta,                      S.M./AMG      8.5.74 26.5.74 27.5.74 18.6.74
2. J. C. Nath,                        S.M./AGI       8.5.74 21.5.74 22.5.74 10.9.74
3. K. D. Banerjee,                   S.M./MTA      8.5.74 21.5.74 22.5.74 10.9.74

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
		Pr. T.	Pr. T.	Pr. T.
9/0/81				
4. P. K. Mitra,	D/ADM/APDJ	8.5.74	26.5.74	27.5.74 24.6.75
5. M. N. Banerjee	n/ADM/ACB	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 21.5.74
6. Kailash Datta	ADM(B)/KAMG	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 18.5.74
7. B. N. Singh,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	28.5.74	29.5.74 10.2.75
8. Jugal Kishore Singh,	ADM/ACF	8.5.74	27.5.74	28.5.74 18.5.74
9. B. N. Sinha,	or INC/NBQ	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 5.8.74
10. Sunil Ch. Paul,	G/C/APDJ	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 20.9.74
11. Suresh Ch. Kar	L/Man/KAMG	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 19.5.74
12. Ambrich Singh,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 28.6.74
13. S. Surenara Nath	Hd Clerk/	8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74 18.5.74
Bhawnick.	DO's office.			
14. S. Surenara Nath	Man/B/KAMG	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 19.5.74
Bhawnick.				
15. (a) Surenara Nath		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 5.9.74
Bhattacharjee.	TL/Safety/ APDJ.			
16. K. R. Das	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 2.7.74
17. K. Chatterjee	ADM/ACF	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 18.5.74
17. K. Panikar,	n/ADM(B)/	8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74 29.10.74
(deceased)	APDJ.			date of death.
18. N. K. Das Gupta,	ADM(B)/FLK	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 20.5.74
20. Surenara Nath	ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 21.9.74
	ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 17.3.75
	MJB			
21. Vinay Gopal Ram	ADM/AMZ now	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 28.5.74
	at FGN.			
22. Surota Ray,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	19.5.74	20.5.74 10.1.74
23. P. Singh,	ADM/AMZ now	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 22.9.74
	at G.M.			
24. Sunil Kr. Ghose,	ADM/AMZ now	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 24.6.74
	at KTC.			
26. Surenara Nath	ADM(B)/APDJ	8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74 18.3.75
Bhattacharjee.	now at LMC.			
26. Dilip Kr. Sarkar,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 24.6.74
27. Sarin Kumar Das,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	24.5.74	25.5.74 9.1.74
	now TL.			
28. Rajeswar Prasad,	n/ADM/AMZ	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 22.5.74
29. Samir Ganguly,	ADM(B)/DPO	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 20.5.74
30. Anil Kr. Goswami,	ADM/AMZ now	8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74 20.6.74
	ADM/ACB			
31. N. Chowdhury,	or INC/NBQ	8.5.74	20.5.74	27.5.74 2.8.74
32. N. C. Dhar,	Clerk/DO's	8.5.74	24.5.74	25.5.74 20.5.74
	office.			
33. R. M. Sanyal,	G/C/NBQ	8.5.74	19.5.74	20.5.74 22.9.74
34. D. K. Achikary,	G/C/ACB	8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74 19.5.74

Contd.....

*[Handwritten signature]*  
25/7

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
			From	To	From	To
35. D J Bagchi,	Ga/G/APDJ		8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74	5.8.74
36. T K. Ghose,	- do -		8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74	20.9.74
37. Sayed Ali Safer,	- do -		8.5.74	27.5.74	28.5.74	1.3.75
38. A B Banerjee,	- do -		8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74	24.2.75
39. Bhupendra Nath Ghosh	C Man I/ACF		8.5.74	27.5.74	28.5.74	18.6.74
40. Hariadas Dey,	C Man I/AVK		8.5.74	27.5.74	28.5.74	25.2.75
41. N. C. Sarkar,	- do -		8.5.74	27.5.74	28.5.74	6.11.74
42. Amal K. Biswas,	- do -/AMX		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	27.5.74
43. Debi Prasad Barua,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	26.5.74
44. Bhupendra Nath Saha,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	25.5.74
45. Jagannath Tewary,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	26.5.74
46. Bree Ram Gupta,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	26.5.74
47. Rajnarayan Mallick,	C Man II / DKJH		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	28.5.74
48. Ram Naresh Singh,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	20.9.74
49. Santialo	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	20.9.74
50. Sudeb Biswas,	L Man/BOGN		8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74	continuing
51. Puresh Bhownick,	P Man(A) /NGB		8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74	25.5.74
52. Sitaram Singh,	P Man/C /MBQ		8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74	5.7.74
53. Nabindra Nath Paul,	P Man/B /ADA		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	26.5.74
54. <del>xxxxxx</del>	<del>xxxxxx</del>		<del>8.5.74</del>	<del>20.5.74</del>	<del>21.5.74</del>	<del>20.6.74</del>
54. Kacha Manuall,	- do -		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	20.6.74
55. Suchit Mahato,	P Man/B /DKJH		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	21.9.74
56. Keshwar Sahani	- do -/DKJH		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	29.5.74
57. Guraku Jaswari,	- do -/APDJ		8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74	31.10.74
58. J. L. Buggi,	P Man/A /APDJ		8.5.74	17.5.74	18.5.74	25.2.75
59. Sarju Mandal,	P Man/B /DKJH		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	25.6.74
60. Ratan Lal Monuall,	P Man/B /DKJH		8.5.74	20.5.74	21.5.74	25.1.75
61. Anik Ghosal,	P Man/B' /AIM		8.5.74	21.5.74	22.5.74	2.6.74

/ Divl. Supat. (P) / APDJ

No. 2/Sec/APDJ/Strike/74(I)

dated 21-7-75

Copy forwarded for information & action to :-  
 1) HC/BI/Bill (2) staff concerned through  
 respective subordinate in-charges.  
 3) DAO/APDJ (4) P/Case.

/ Divl. Supat. (P) / APDJ

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7)

- 3. Samir Kumar Ganguly, ASM(B)/NMX. Rs. 625-640 8.5.74 to 26.5.74 27.5.74 to 20.6.74 Increments already granted are in order.
- 4. Shyamal Kr. Bhatta-Cherjee, ASM(B)/GOGH. Rs. 425-640 8.5.74 to 11.5.74 18.5.74 to 17.3.75 Rs. 500/- w.e.f. 1/1/74  
Rs. 500/- w.e.f. 1-1-74.  
Rs. 515/- w.e.f. 1-1-75.  
Rs. 530/- w.e.f. 1-1-76.  
Rs. 545/- w.e.f. 1-1-77.
- 5. Surendra Nath, ASM/FGN. 930-560 8.5.74 to 16.5.74 17/5/74 to 17.3.75 Rs. 404/- w.e.f. 1-4-74.  
Rs. 416/- w.e.f. 1-4-75.  
Rs. 428/- w.e.f. 1-4-76.  
Rs. 440/- w.e.f. 1-4-77.
- 6. Sunil Kumar Ghosh, -do- ASM/KTCH. 8.5.74 to 21.5.74 22.5.74 to 24.6.74 Rs. 392 w.e.f. 1/4/74  
Rs. 404 w.e.f. 1/5/75  
Rs. 416/w.e.f. 1/8/76  
(Effective from 1/8/76 due to WIT for 3 months)
- 7. Vijoy Bahadur Singh, -do- ASM/THU. 8.5.74 to 20.5.74 21.5.74 to 21.9.74. Rs. 404 w.e.f. 1/4/74  
Rs. 416/- " 1/8/75  
Rs. 428/- " 1/8/76  
Rs. 440/- w.e.f. 1/4/77.
- 8. Lalan Prasad Singh, -do- ASM/GOM. 8.5.74 to 20/5/74. 20.5.74 to 22/9/74. Rs. 380 w.e.f. 8/11/73  
Rs. 392 w.e.f. 1/3/75  
Rs. 404 w.e.f. 1/3/76  
Rs. 416 w.e.f. 1/3/77

contd...3...

Sum 12/4/77

NORTH EAST FRONTIER RAILWAY.

Office of the  
Divl. Supdt. (P)/APDJ.

OFFICE ORDER NO: 317.

Dated: 19-4-77.  
and subsequently *reinstated*  
in *service*

The following SMS/ASMs were removed from service in the context of May/74 strike. In terms of Rly. Board's letter No.E(LR)II 77-ST I/K7 dtd. 6.4.77 the period from the date of their removal to the date preceding the date of reinstatement as shown against each is treated as duty for the purpose of drawal of increments, retirement benefits etc. and the punishment of stoppage of increment imposed on some of them is treated as if the same was not imposed. So, their annual increments are ~~not~~ regularised as indicated against each.

The monetary benefit due to regularisation of increments is admissible w.e.f. 1-4-1977.

S/No.	Name & Designation	Scale of pay.	The period of participation in strike treated as 'dies - non'	The period of removal now treated as duty for the purpose of increment and retirement benefit.	Increments previously granted.	Increments now regularised.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<u>Sarvasri.</u>						
1)	Nirmal Kr. Dasgupta, ASM(B)/FLK.	Rs. 425-640/-	8.5.74 to 26.5.74	27.5.74 to 20.6.74	Increments already granted are in order.	
2)	Kailash Laha, ASM(B)/KAMG.	Rs. 425-640/-	-do-	27.5.74 to 18.6.74	Rs. 515/- w.e.f 1-3-75	Rs. 515/- w.e.f. 1.2.76
					Rs. 530/- w.e.f. 1-3-76	Rs. 530/- w.e.f. 1.2.77
					Rs. 545/- w.e.f 1.3.77	Rs. 545/- w.e.f 1.2.77

( Contd... 2.. )

911 102 3 4 5 6 7

- 9. Paratosh Kr. Mitra, R. 330-560 8/5/74 to 27/5/74 to R. 380/-+R. 12/-PP- R. 380/-+R. 12/-PP  
LR. ASM/APDJ. 26/5/74. 24/6/75. for passing Hind. w.e.f. 1-1-74 for  
Pragya Examination passing Hind. Pragya  
w.e.f. 1-1-74 Pragya Examination.  
R. 392/-w.e.f. 1/2/76 R. 392/-w.e.f. 1-1-75  
R. 404/-w.e.f. 1/2/77. R. 404/-w.e.f. 1/1/76.  
R. 416/-w.e.f. 1/1/77.
- 10. Manindra Nath, -do- 8/5/74 to 22/5/74 to R. 380/-+R. 12/-PP  
Lalit, ASM/GDX. 21/5/74. 21/6/74. w.e.f. 1-11-73 for  
passing Hind. Pragya  
Examination
- 11. Barin Kumar Das, -do- 8/5/74 to 25/5/74 to R. 380/-w.e.f. 1-4-74  
Ex. ASM/NMZ (Now traffic Appointee at KIR.) 24/5/74. 9/11/74. (Effective from 10-11-74 due to WIT for 3 months dies non and re-moved from service.)
- 12. Badan Lal Singh, R. 330-560 8/5/74 to 29/5/74 to R. 380/-w.e.f. 1/3/74  
ASM/KOKN. 28/5/74. 10/2/75.
- 13. Subrata Roy, -do- 8/5/74 to 20/5/74 to R. 370/-w.e.f. 27/11/73  
ASM/SVQ. 19/5/74 10/1/74 (10-11-74) R. 380/-w.e.f. 1/6/75. R. 380/-w.e.f. 1/11/74.
- 14. M'khil Ch: Das, R. 425- 8/5/74 to 26/5/74 to R. 485/-w.e.f. 1/4/75  
Ex. ASM(B)/MLDT. 24/5/74. 23/2/75. R. 500/-w.e.f. 1/4/76.  
Now ASM(B)/MLP. R. 515/-w.e.f. 1/4/77.

contd....4...

Signature

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

15.	K.R. Deb, SM/TQM.	425-64C/-	8.5.74 to 20.5.74 = 13 days.	21.5.74 to 27.7.74	R.500/- on 1.2.74 R.515/- on 1.3.75 R.530/- on 1.3.76 R.545/- on 1.3.77	R.500/- on 1.2.74 R.515/- on 1.2.75 R.530/- on 1.4.74 R.545/- on 1.4.75 R.560/- on 1.1.76 Pay fixed on R.600/- w.e.f. 15-11-76 in promotion to SM in scale R.455-700/-.
16.	J.C. Math, SM/AGT	425-640/-	8.5.74 to 21.5.74 = 14 days.	22.5.74 to 10.9.74.	R.515/- on 1.4.74 R.530/- on 1.8.75 R.545/- on 1.8.76	R.515/- on 1.4.74 R.530/- on 1.4.75 R.545/- on 1.4.76 R.560/- on 1.4.77
17.	R.D. Banerjee, SM/APDJ. now	425-640/- 455-700/-	8.5.74 to 21.5.74 = 14 days.	22.5.74 to 10.9.74	R.530/- on 1.1.74 R.545/- on 1.5.75 R.560/- on 1.5.76	R.530/- on 1.1.74 R.545/- on 1.1.75 R.560/- on 1.1.76 Pay fixed on R.600/- w.e.f. 15-11-76 in promotion to SM in scale R.455-700/-.
18.	U. Dasgupta, RG, SM/CQB. now	425-64C/- 455-700/-	8.5.74 to 26.5.74 = 19 days.	27.5.74 to 18.6.74	R.470/- on 21.12.73 R.485/- on 1.2.75 R.500/- on 1.2.76	R.470/- on 21.12.73 R.485/- on 21.12.74 R.500/- on 21.12.75 R.515/- on 21.12.76 Pay fixed on R.545/- w.e.f. 7.1.77 in promotion to SM in scale R.455-700/-.
19.	A.K. Goswami, R. SM/DQG. now	330-560/- ASM 425-64C/- SM	8.5.74 to 20.5.74 = 13 days.	21.5.74 to 26.6.74	R.404/- on 1.4.74 as ASM. Pay fixed on R.425/- w.e.f. 4.7.74 on promotion to SM in scale R.425-640/-.	R.404/- on 1.4.74 as ASM. Pay fixed on R.425/- w.e.f. 4.7.74 on promotion to SM in scale R.425-640/-. R.440/- on 1.7.75. R.455/- on 1.7.76.

contd....5...

Singhania (4/1)

S No 21/1

NATIONAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE FOR RAILWAYMEN'S STRUGGLE

125B Babar Road,  
New Delhi  
May 27, 1974

Press Release

Text of Resolution recieved from Tihar Jail :

The Action Committee of the NCCRS salutes the railwaymen for their glorious struggle waged with such courage and determination braving a government onslaught the like of which has never before been experienced by the Indian working class. More than 50000 workers have been illegally arrested and detained without trial; over 10000 men already served with dismissals orders; nearly 30000 thrown out of their houses with bag and baggage and with their helpless wives and innocent children; women raped by the minions of law and order; a Goebblian propaganda war against railway men carried through the state-owned radio, and television network; newspaper advertisements inserted with money from the public exchequer to defame and deride the railwaymen and their leadership; lies slander and perfidy of an unprecedented low level; use of the Army, Border Security Force, Territorial Army, Special Reserve Police, Central Reserve Police and other organs of state power butteressed with the most indiscriminate use of the draconian laws like Maintenance of Internal Security Act and the war-time Defence of India Rules; marching the workers to their work places at bayonet point; marching the workers to their work places at bayonet point; nonpayment of their earned wages in order to literally starve the workers into submission - these were the methods used by the Government to meet the just and legitimate demands of the railwaymen. The ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ resoluteness with which the railwaymen and their wives and children faced this terror and fought for their rights is a saga that must have few parallels in the annals of the working class and democratic movements anywhere in the world.

The Committee notes that the Government has not responded to the requests of the organised trade union movement both in India and abroad to settle the just and fair demands of the railwaymen and to end the repression against them. All the entreaties of the opposition political parties in the country - without any exception - to the Government not to pursue its antiworker course have also fallen on deaf ears. The constant persuasion by the country's newspapers traditionally friendly to the Government to adopt a reasonable and conciliatory attitude to the railwaymen's demands failed to impress the government. The appeals of men of goodwill like Jayaprakash Narayan and others to settle the dispute also failed to evoke any response from an adamant government. And most shocking of all, even the advice of the President of India conveyed so unequivocally and forcefully to come to terms with the railwaymen was spurned by the government most unceremoniously.

The Action Committee once again emphasises the fact that the railwaymen never wanted a strike.

More than anyone else they are aware of the disastrous economic consequences of a railway strike. What we sought and fought for was a negotiated settlement on our legitimate demands. It was the Government that forced the strike on the railwaymen by taking steps that are too recent ~~xxx kkkxrkikwaykxnxhyxtkwwkxks kpsxtkwt~~ to be recounted here. But even while the railwaymen were fighting what was purely and simply an industrial action, the government fought a mini-war from the pre-emptive arrests to the final combing operations in the workers housing colonies. In a confrontation of that nature, the odds cannot but be against the workers. The course of the strike has, if anything vindicated our repeated declaration that our action had no motivation other than securing the just and reasonable demands of the railwaymen.

The Committee notes with deep concern that the government has refused to enable the members of the NCCRS to meet either inside or outside the prison to take a decision on how to end the strike. This has created an extraordinary situation before the Action Committee which was charged with the conduct of the negotiations and the subsequent conduct of the strike. All decisions of calling for or withdrawal of the strike can be constitutionally taken only by "the full body of the NCCRS most of whose members are in prison in different parts of the country or are fugitives from the law.

6 a.m.  
on

The Action Committee having given deep consideration to the strike situation on all the zonal railways and in other railway establishments, and aware of the economic consequences of further prolonging the action, and conscious of the responsibility thrust on it in the circumstances, hereby resolves to unilaterally call off the strike with effect from Tuesday May 28, 6 a.m. The committee calls upon all railwaymen to return to work from that hour and do everything within their power to bring normalcy into the movement of trains.

At the same time the Action Committee calls upon the Government to immediately release all those railwaymen and others arrested on account of the strike; reinstate all ~~workmen~~ whose services have been terminated during and in the weeks preceding the strike; withdraw all penal action taken against the railwaymen and others; restore to the workmen their living quarters; and take all other necessary steps to restore normalcy on the railways.

Simultaneously, the Action Committee calls upon the Railway Ministry to resume negotiations with the Negotiating Committee of the NCCRS on the outstanding demands of the railwaymen in order to arrive at an amicable settlement on these demands.

The Action Committee assures the railwaymen that it stands united as ever in its resolve to secure their just and fair demands. The unity of purpose and action, cemented by the blood and sacrifice of lakhs of railwaymen from all over the country will not be allowed to be weakened under any circumstances till the railwaymen secure their demands. It calls upon the railwaymen to stand steadfast in the firm conviction that even now there is only one force that can defeat them and that is the enemy within their own ranks. The lessons of the last few weeks must be learnt by everyone and immediate steps taken to further close the ranks.

The Action Committee pays its homage to the martyrs of the railwaymen's struggle, Com: V.S. Mhalgi Comrade Sripal Dwivedy and Comrade Ramaswamy. The supreme sacrifice by Comrade Ramaswamy who was killed in cold blood by running over a railway engine on his person will forever inspire the railwaymen and other working people in the country to heroic deeds and total sacrifice in man's perpetual struggle against injustice.

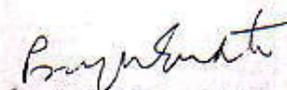
The Action Committee expresses its heartfelt gratitude to all trade unions, youth organisations, political parties, women's organisations, newspapers and journalists and all others who stood by the railwaymen in their trials and tribulations. It assures the working classes and toiling masses that the railwaymen will always be in the forefront of people's struggles for a better and happier tomorrow.

The Committee resolves to convene the meeting of the NCCRS as soon as conditions for the convening of such a meeting appear propitious.

Sd/- H.S. Chaudhary  
J.P. Choubey  
Parvathi Krishnan  
Srikrishna  
George Fernandes  
(Members of  
Action  
Committee)  
in the jail

D.D. Vashisht (Members of NCCRS - not a member  
of the Action Committee -  
in jail)

Outside: Sd/- Samar Mukherji, M.P. (disagreed)  
G.S. Gokhale  
M.M. Phatak  
Priya Gupta (Disagreed)

  
For Action Committee

ORDER

No. DCM.46/75/5-A.

Dated, August 21, 1975

In exercise of the powers conferred by sub-section (3) of Section 16A of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, 1971, as amended by the Maintenance of Internal Security (Amendment) Act, 1975 (No. 39 of 1975), I, Shri B.C.Gogoi, A.C.S., District Magistrate, Dibrugarh District, after considering the relevant records am satisfied that it is necessary to detain Shri Himalendu Chakraborty, son of Shri B.K.Chakraborty, of Chringgaon Railway Colony, P.S.Dibrugarh, District Dibrugarh, under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, 1971, for dealing effectively with the Emergency.



*B.C.*  
21/8/75  
( B.C.Gogoi )  
District Magistrate, Dibrugarh.

Home. No. DCM.46/75/5-A.

Dated, August 21, 1975.

Copy forwarded to:-

- 1) The Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Assam, Political (A) Department, Dispur.
  - 2) The Superintendent of District Jail, Dibrugarh.
- Three copies are sent herewith, one for service on the detenu, one for return with the signature of the detenu in token of receipt of the order and one for his record.

*B.C.*  
21/8/75  
( B.C.Gogoi )  
District Magistrate, Dibrugarh.

*Received copy  
for upgrada*

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**CONTENTS**

*From Editor's Desk.....*

**Articles**

*The Problem of Poverty and the State in Odisha (2000-2010)*

Anushuya Pal

*NGOs Working on Women Issues: Some Findings from Nanded District of Maharashtra*

Baburao Sambhaji Jadhav

*Citizenship for peace: Identity and conflicts in multiethnic Malaysia*

Khalid Ansari

*Security Mechanisms of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)*

Manabhanjan Meher

*Contesting Development: Understanding the Interface between Development Discourse and Subalterns Politics in Bihar.*

Pankaj Kumar

*People, PRIs and Rural Development: A study in the context of the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal, and Sikkim*

Ramesh Dural

*Workers' Resistances in the Indian Railways and the General Strike of May 1974*

Sanghamitra Choudhury

*Collective Mobilisation for Shelter: Politics of Informal Housing in Chandigarh Slums*

Shashi K. Negi

*Media and its role in curbing corruption in Nigeria*

Sarabjit Kaur

*Protection of Natural Resources and Proactive Role of Grassroots Institutions in Goa*

Seema P. Salgaonkar

*The Evolution of BRICS in International Political Economy*

Shameem C.C and K.Jayaprasad

*Simultaneous Elections: A Sure Recipe for Democratic Disaster*

Sumit Howladar

ISSN 2278-4039

*Government Policies for Development of Floriculture and its Impact in Sikkim: A Socio-Economic Study*

UjjwalBhui and Yashmin Bhandari

**Book Review**

*Dr. Nandini Basistha, Politics of Separatism, New Delhi, Vaibhav Publications, 2017,pp xiv + 296*

TrivikramTiwari

# **Workers' Resistances in the Indian Railways and the General Strike of May 1974**

Sanghamitra Choudhury

## **Abstract**

*Indian Railways has always been a significant factor in regulating the economic and political life of the Indians. Indian Railways might not have any revolutionary effect on people's life but since independence it has become an enormously big industrial sector and popularly is branded as heart and life blood of the nation. Therefore, a strike of long twenty days in May 1974 halted the economic, social and political pace of the country.*

*This study is an attempt to examine the reasons behind the grievances and resentments of the railwaymen in India. It observes the preparation of the trade unions for launching an indefinite strike and the situation existed during the days of the struggle. It also intends to enquire the attitude of the State in dealing with the railway workers' movement in 1974.*

**Keywords: Indian railways, Trade unionism, working class, grievances, struggle, railway workers movement**

## **1. Introduction**

Indian Railways was the single largest nationalized undertaking with a separate ministry and railway workers were a significant component of the organized working class in India employing nearly 15 lakh regular and approximately 2.8 lakh casual labourers in the year 1974. It employed numerous kinds of labourers ranging from skilled to unskilled, literate to illiterate workers. Ironically however this large section of the workers of the Indian Railway industry had never been able to persuade the authority in their favour. Since its inception during the colonial period the workers had to fight with the management to get their demands fulfilled and the situation remained almost the same even after independence. Indian Railways workers were well known for their innumerable struggles since its establishment. But the Railways workers' strike in May 1974 might be considered as an unprecedented event in the history of labour movement in India. The workers made a history by waging the longest strike in the Indian Railways.

The political and economic situation of India from the early 1960s up to 1974 was marked by crisis. There were numerous strikes, go slow, mass sick leave, lockouts etc. during this period which indicated the unharmonious relationship in the industrial front. There were several reasons behind the strained relationship between the employers and the employees in the Indian industries. The industrial workers specially the railway workers were aggrieved because of the failure of the negotiating machinery due to the emerging situations such as the inflation or the price rise of daily commodities, decline in real earnings, and absence of wage link with Dearness Allowance, non- payment of Bonus, absence of leave with pay etc. Workers disappointments grew up from late 1972 and touched the sky in early 1974. Thus the relations between the two had deteriorated and shown a breakdown of socio-economic equilibrium. However, the May 1974 Strike was a united struggle of more than two million workers of the Government of India and it was such an outstanding event that no one could dare to disregard it. The determination and the unity achieved by the railway workers were unparalleled in the history of Indian working class movement.

The objective of the study is to find out the reasons behind the strike of the railway men in 1974 and to find out their grievances which compelled the railwaymen to go for an indefinite general strike throughout the country. This study also attempts to analyze the preparations and activities of the railway trade unions for launching an all India indefinite general strike. It also looks at the situation in the different railway Zones during the days of the struggle. The present study seeks to measure the intensity of the strike action led by the Indian railwaymen in May 1974. It tries to examine the reaction of the Union Government towards the demands and the agitations of the railway workers. The study reviews the role of the railway trade unions and their performance during the strike of May 1974. We also make an investigation of the impact of the indefinite strike of the Indian railway men in May 1974. Keeping the objectives in mind the paper has been arranged in the following manner. The first section of the study enquires the reasons behind the grievances of the railway men which caused the strike of 1974. In the second section we discuss the nature of the preparations by the railway trade unions and their members. The third section focuses on the situation of the struggle in the various railway zones of the country. Then we analyse the response of the State towards the strike. We conclude the paper by assessing the impact of the struggle.

## 2. Grievances of the Railway Workers

End of the Second World War and the end of colonial rule in India required a speedy growth of industries for the purpose of all round socio-economic development of the country. Railways played a vital role in this sphere by ensuring a rapid growth in the transportation industry. But the employees of the public utility department remained lowly paid thus their resentment and annoyance revolved around the pay structure. The rise in prices of basic commodities made the situation worse for them. In this situation the ineffectiveness of the trade unions aggrieved the railwaymen. It was true that the workers in all the industries especially in the railways had been suffering from relative decline in real wage since the past two decades. But in the year of 1960-61 the gross traffic receipts increased from 1950-51 by 73.68% which indicated an improvement of Railway revenues. The central government employees including the railway workforce had abided by the recommendation of the Central Pay Commissions. Therefore they were not in a position to bargain with their authorities on the matter of payment. During the years 1970-73 when the Commission deliberated and the government dithered, India experienced its worst inflation since independence, under the impact of drought and oil price increases, wholesale prices increased by 70% between 1968-69 and 1973-74, with a 30 % increase being recorded in 1973-74.<sup>1</sup> The Times of India analysed that the price of the consumer goods in fact, had climbed steadily in the last few months and the latest budget levies had given the price curve rather a sharp swing (Times of India, 28th March, 1974; p.1).

Minimum Monthly wages in comparable Public Sector Undertakings and Industries

Sl. No.	Industry/ Sector	Minimum Monthly Wages (in Rs.)		
		Basic	D.A.	Total
1.	Central Government (including Railways)	196.00	112.60	308.60
2.	Life Insurance Corporation	125.00	285.00	410.00

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<sup>1</sup> Sherlock, S., Economic and Political Weekly, 1989; p.2312.

3.	General Insurance Corporation	125.00	285.00	410.00
4.	Nationalized Bank	116.00	260.00	376.00
5.	Coal	286.00	131.00	417.00
6.	Iron & Steel (Hindustan Steel Ltd.)	300.00	129.00	429.00

[Source: Indian Railwaymen: official periodical of AIRF; Vol.14; No. 6; 1978.]

Rising prices, shortages, corruption, parallel black money economy and incompetence have come to reinforce one another in such a manner that it has become extremely difficult to break the vicious circle (Jain, 8th May, 1974; Times of India). The prices of edible oils, food grains, Kerosene etc. augmented by 23% in 1973 but the Third Pay Commission had increased the wages very meagerly from Rs 170 per month to Rs 196 per month and Government declared that D.A would be disbursed in installments and the workers became furious when they found an absolute decline in their real income. The living conditions of the railway workers were so unhygienic and poor that the railwaymen's discontentment had increased a lot. In Lumding the workers were aggrieved because of the poor condition of the quarters, specially the quarters of the 'Group D' staff known as 'gang hut' had only one room with one kitchen and a separate bathroom. Nikhil Bhattacharjee a Guard in Badarpur, Lumding Division of Northeast Frontier Railways, member of United Committee for Railwaymen, and the convenor of Local Action Committee of NCCRS corroborated that the quarters of the gang man were poorly ventilated and rooms were so small that it was impossible to stay there for a family of five or six members, some of them did not have even electricity. He added that the quarters in which they lived, were very old thus required urgent renovation, but the authority did not pay any attention to the minimum requirements of the workers.<sup>2</sup> This was more or less a common scenario that prevailed in almost all the railway zones. Shuvendu Mukherjee, a technician in Kanchrapara Loco Workshop and the member of Eastern Railwaymen's Union, informed that the workers were disappointed on the issue of frequent disciplinary

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with Nikhil Bhattacharjee on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2016 in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, Siliguri Town Station at 11.30 am.

actions taken against them by the authority on small and insignificant matters. Authority resorted to penal transfer, retrenchment, disapproving the promotions etc.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason of workers' grievances was related with the dual role played by the recognized unions in the Railway industries; the Unions were AIRF (All India Railwaymen's Federation) and NFIR (National Federation of Indian Railwaymen). It was alleged that they developed an alliance with the bureaucrats which brought a halt to trade union activity specially in ventilating the grievances of the workers in the industry. By the end of 1960s a new trend had emerged in this industry, several categorical associations were formed, such as Fireman's Council, Guards' Association and finally All India Loco Running Staff Association (AILRSA) had appeared in August 1970. The life of the loco men became miserable; a large number of loco running staff had to work for long hours, fourteen to sixteen hours per day. They had to work under sun and rain, dirt and grease which led them to disease stricken life. In the month of May 1973 AILRSA had agitated against the long hour of work, harsh working and living conditions, poor quality of uniform provided by the authority etc. Majority of the drivers struck against the authority, not only that more than 50,000 of the loco running staff joined hands for their demands which forced the management to bow down. As a result of the prolonged talks, a settlement was finally reached on the night of the Sunday 12 August 1973 between the railway minister and the striking workers' action committee in the presence of the labour minister (Siddhanta, 1974; pp. 9-10). Railway Minister L. N. Mishra talked with the AILRSA members and agreed at ten hours of duty and assured that no victimisation would take place.

Indian Railways was the largest employer of casual workers. More than two lakhs workers were being exploited by the authority and deprived of minimum rights of the workers. A casual worker was employed for 119 days, purely on temporary basis and paid only Rs 3.5 per day. They were not entitled to get any facilities and benefits from the industry. They were usually termed as "Murgir deem", it meant that if any mishap took place like accidents or sickness, they were simply terminated from their services

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Shuvendu Mukherjee on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 in his Kanchrapara Residence at 2.30 pm).

and got no benefits from the authority.<sup>4</sup>Therefore, the casual workers were extremely annoyed with the authority and had demanded for security of their jobs.

Disappointments also grew among the workers relating to the question of promotion. Skilled workers with long years of experience were only promoted to the posts of Supervisors or Foreman and ended their carrier up to the local levels only, never reached the posts of Divisional or Zonal management. Apart from these issues, bonus was considered as another cause of workers' resentment. Along with several other reasons which led the railwaymen to revolt against their authority, the financial crisis in regular life played a vital role. The overall crisis in the economy marked by shortage of food grains and domestic fuel, charges of corruption against members of the ruling establishment and the rising tide of militancy in the trade union movement laid the basis for a strike (Ananth, 2016; p. 17). AIRF leadership in this situation was forced to launch any movement to regain its lost legacy of militant unionism and also to retain in power. The potentialities of the workers as an instrument of revolutionary social change remained untapped, what was accomplished by the moderate leadership was promotion of trade union consciousness but not revolutionary class consciousness (Krishna, 1980; p. 22).

### **3. The Preparation of the Railwaymen for the Strike of May 1974**

Industrial relations in India from 1965 to 1975 had lost all its past dignity and glory. The situation and the industrial relation in the railways became so poor and workers' grievances had touched the sky and their life became intolerable due to the economic hardship. The success of AILRSA movement revitalized the recognized unions. NFIR though always remained loyal to the ruling government, AIRF declared to go on direct action because it realised that the workers had lost their faith and conceived the unions as impotent. AIRF had a tradition of militant activities and ability to mobilize the workers. But during the entire 1960s the AIRF had suffered from indecision and self-contradiction. Therefore it faced tremendous erosion in its membership and support base. In the early 1970s the AIRF understood that to retain in power, they needed to lead a mass movement in the industry. It initiated a change in its leadership

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Pallab Kumar Majumder, a casual labour (construction of bridge and signalling system under Northeast Frontier Railways) and a member of Casual workers' Association affiliated with Majdoor Union under AIRF on 23rd December 2016 at 6.30 pm at Pensioners' Association Siliguri Junction Unit.

and George Fernandez became the President of AIRF. Fernandez, a stormy petrel trade unionist in and around Bombay and Chairman of the Socialist Party, was brought into AIRF by the sections that were desperate to reinvent the federation as a fighting organization (Ananth, 2016; p.17). In October 1973 at the Secunderabad Annual Convention the delegates took the decision of organizing a nationwide strike without considering the strength of the union. He said “Taking the platform at the conference I pleaded with the delegates not to take a decision without first possessing the requisite the organizational strength to go into action, but my appeal was in vain” (Fernandez, 1984; p.29). Then he decided to build a broad based unity and tried to strengthen the financial position of the union. On November 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> 1973 Fernandez convened a special loco running staff conference under the auspices of the AIRF to focus on the special problems of loco men and mobilize them in view of the possibility of the current agitation, culminating in a strike of railway men on February 27<sup>th</sup> (Sherlock, 1989; p.2318).

Meanwhile, in January, 1974 in South Central Railway all the class II and III staff of the Headquarter, Divisional and Accounts Department demonstrated in the General Manager’s Office, Secunderabad for almost three hours in protest of the discriminating attitude of the Railway Ministry in the matter of up grading the posts. In the month of February, 1974 in South Eastern Railways the movement of trains was heavily disrupted when the carriage and wagon staff went on ‘work to rule’ and Assistant Station Masters on ‘mass absenteeism’ in Adra Division. Sporadic agitations continued to take place in different zones with full of unity and enthusiasm. Therefore on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1974 in New Delhi a National Convention was held which was attended by the representatives of one hundred and ten recognized and unrecognized unions except the members of NFIR. Nearly two thousand delegates participated in the conference. For the first time in the past few years, AIRF was able to provide a sense of unity, solidarity and determination among the railway men. The Convention had ended with the decision that if the Railway Ministry did not negotiate with the unions by 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, the unions would go for an indefinite general strike. The National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen’s Struggle (NCCRS) was formed with one representative from each of the participating organisations while Comrade George Fernandez was elected its Convenor; an Action Committee was also

formed to conduct negotiations (Chakroborty, 1975; pp.8). This Action Committee consisted of thirteen members. Following were the members:

George Fernandez	Convenor
J.P Choubey	AIRF
Priya Gupta	AIRF
Parvati Krishnan	AITUC
Sri Krishna	AITUC
N.S Bhangoo	All India Railway Employees' Confederation
K.P Ramaswamy	All India Railway Employees' Confederation
H.S Chowdhury	AILRSA
S.K. Dhar	AILRSA
Samar Mukherjee	CITU
N.N.Chakroborty	CITU
G.S Gokhale	B.M.S
N.M Pathak	B.M.S

[Siddhanta, 1974; p.30]

The Convention had appealed to the Railway Ministry to accept the following demands of the railway men:

1. a) All Railway men should be treated as industrial workers with full trade union rights including the right to negotiate.
- b) The working hours of the Railway men shall not exceed 8 hour.
- c) There shall be job evaluation of all the railway men through a scientific system to be followed by their reclassification and re-gradation with the need based minimum wage for the lowest paid workers.
- d) Pending the completion of job evaluation and reclassification, immediate parity in wages with those of the workers in the central undertakings, viz. H.M.T, BHEL, HSL, HAL etc.

2. Dearness Allowance linked to cost of living index with full neutralisation for every rise of four points in six months period.
3. Bonus at the rate of one month wage for the years 1971-72 and 1972-73.
4. Decasualization of all casual Railway men and their confirmation in service with all benefits given to them with retrospective effect.
5. Adequate and subsidised food grains and other essential commodities through departmentally run shops.
6. All victimization cases should be withdrawn

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

For launching any mass movement Fernandez emphasised on certain issues like fund raising and capacity building of the railway workers. He gave thrust on the building of unity and solidarity of the workers at all levels. Inter union rivalry; lobbying and the hierarchical system were the main constraints in building unity among the trade unions in the railway industry. Fernandez directed all the unions and their affiliates to form Action Committees in all the railway zones to lead the strike. Interestingly, the decision of united struggle brought several differences of opinions among the union leaders at every level. The leaders of the loco running associations were divided on the question of reliance on the national leadership of the AIRF and the unity under the same umbrella. Sabapathy, the President of AILRSA; MewaLal and R.P Sharma of Northern Railway etc. went openly against the decision of united struggle under the banner of NCCRS on the one hand and on the other, S.K. Dhar, the Secretary and H.S.Chowdhury, Joint Secretary of the Association attended all the meetings of the Action Committee. According to S.K Dhar when the preparation for the united struggle was “advancing in full swing”, “a small section of leadership of AILRSA” opposed the movement and “engaged in disruptive activities” simply because of “their anti AIRF stand” (Dhar, 1999; p.20). A section in these category wise associations did however realised the deficiencies and they made strenuous efforts first to stop the category-wise associations to move away from the path of united struggle of railwaymen (Chakroborty, 1987; p.79).

The NCCRS had decided to go on strike from 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1974 and the strike notice was to be served on 23<sup>rd</sup> of April if the Government didn't express its willingness to talk with the trade unions. The Railway Minister showed firmness to deal with the workers and tried to resist any kind of opposition to the government. Interestingly, both the parties – the ruling party and the trade unions aimed at examining their own power and strength. However in the midst of negotiation, treacherously the national leaders like Fernandez, P.K Barua, Srikrishna etc. were arrested on 2<sup>nd</sup> of May. In this situation, on 3<sup>rd</sup> May in Delhi and Bombay a 'bandh' was observed in protest of the arrest. Life in these two cities became standstill as the train in Central and Western Railways didn't move. As a result of this bandh, the establishments like banks, insurance companies, central and state government offices including Post and Telegraph, Port and dock, textile mills etc. had become paralysed. The Action Committee of National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle has in a statement declared that as all attempts for a negotiated settlement of their demands having been frustrated by the 'adamant attitude' of the Government, the strike shall begin at 6.am on May 8 (Hindu, 7<sup>th</sup> May; 1974). NCCRS announced that all the works from the I.R would stop, no wheels would move and the trains would terminate at the next station at 6 a.m. on 8<sup>th</sup> May. All the important leaders of AIRF went underground in order to avoid arrest. The situation became so unfavourable and disagreeable that the railway Trade Unions had no other option but to go on a strike though Mishra warned that the striking workers might lose their jobs if they joined the illegal strike.

#### **4. Situations during the Strike Days and its Impact**

The struggle of the Indian railway workers began from 6 am morning on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1974. But the decisions and measures taken by the Government had ignited the flame of the agitation among the workers. The provocative arrests in the midst of the negotiations throwing to the winds all norms of democratic behaviour incensed the workers (Siddhanta, 1974; p.63). According to the 'Times of India' the arrests 'showed that the Government has made up its mind to have a showdown with the railway unions' and that the timing of the arrests has been somewhat unfortunate (Siddhanta, 1974; p.64).

Before the strike started, the Government deployed armed forces to handle the situation. Day by day the police and paramilitary forces made it difficult for the railway workers to stick to their strike decision. Nevertheless, the largest railway system of the world spreading almost every corner of the country was paralysed. By the united action of the four million ‘hands’, bringing to a halt the life line of the Indian capitalist system, cutting across at the appointed hour all the barriers of geography, state, language, caste, religion and their own internal job competition, has shown to the capitalist - land lord exploiters what working class power is – when it becomes united and acts for its common class interests (Dange, 1974; p.1). During the first few days of the strike in almost all the zones of the IR, the strike was intense and complete. In the main railway centres of the country like Bombay, Central Madras, New Delhi, in Calcutta both the Howrah and Sealdah, Gorakhpur, Mugholsarai, Guwahati etc. no train had moved and services were almost motionless. The entire Southern region had exhibited similar picture. In the railway workshops such as Kanchrapara, Jamalpur, Perumbur, Golden Rock near Tiruchirapally, Chittaranjan locomotives etc. remained deserted. The ‘Times of India’ of 11th May printed the Railways’ claim of “major breakthrough” in running trains through Mugholsarai, while at the same time reporting that the “nerve- centres” of the railway system in the state of Uttarpradesh, Mugholsarai, Izatnagar and Gorakhpur, were “virtually paralysed” and railway workers in the whole state remained “defiant” (Sherlock, 2001; p.365).

The Railway Board Chairman M.N. Berry claimed that normal situation persisted in all the nine zones of the railways throughout the country except minor disruptions in few major stations. ‘Times of India’ of 9<sup>th</sup> May reported that railway officials claimed that there was no impact of the strike on the train services at all, and they released a press notice that only 8% of the total train services were affected. Nearly 70% of the already cancelled passenger trains and 65% of goods trains had been running (Times of India, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1974; p.1). But the fact was not all the same. Workers in Delhi Main station and other offices including the Northern Railway Headquarters, the Divisional Superintendent’s office and the office of the Commercial Superintendent joined the Strike (The Statesman, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1974). Hindustan Times reported that at Tughlakabad Yard ‘A loco inspector’ told that ‘not a single diesel engine had gone to the shed for check or servicing (New Age, 1974; p.4). Mugholsarai which was

considered as the nerve centre of the railways in North India, during the first week of the strike had been deserted and the train movements in the directions towards east-west and north-south have been very much restricted. The areas covered by the railways in Mugholsarai, was near about 15 km. spread, were completely seized by police and Central Police Force. The family members of the striking workers especially the women were threatened and sometimes beaten up badly by the police force. The reason behind this action was to create an indirect pressure on the railway men who fled away from their quarters in order to avoid arrest. The Ananda Bazar Patrika on 27.5.74 calculated that an estimation of rupees of 75 crores was spent on the "running of train by T.A and Patrolling by State Government Police" and the total "expenses to break the strike" was approximately "187 crores". The Statesman reported on 25.7.74 that it used "20 lakhs" as an "advertisement cost on Radio and T.V" and "79 lakhs" as an "advance increment to the Loyal Staff" and 12 crores as a "cash rewards to the Loyal Staff" (Chatterjee, 1988; p.112). Therefore it can be said that the government preferred to exhaust hundreds of crores to crush the railway workers' struggle instead of paying the amount of only "9 crores" to the railway men as the "staff wages".

In Bombay on the first day of the strike, the workers of both the Central and Western Railways had immobilised the normal activities of the regions. In the first week, the entire Southern Railways was shut down. Even one day before the strike started the fear of disruption of train services, hundreds of commuters travelled even on the roof of the trains to reach their destination, several hundreds of employees of the Western Railways walked out of their workshops at different places in the city, hours before the scheduled strike; the loco shed staff and the yard staff at Bandra Marshalling Yard conducted their agitation at the noon while the car shed staff at Mahalaxmi began their strike at the mid night last night (Times of India, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1974). In the south, the strike was more intense and the workers' participation was massive. The booking counters both at Madras Central and Egmore were open but only a handful of persons were seen standing there mostly seeking refunds on their tickets (The Hindu, 9th May, 1974). In the agricultural states like Punjab or Haryana or Orissa the problem of disordering of train services did not affect much but in the industrialised areas especially in the south it hampered a lot.

In the Union Parliament the Opposition leaders walked out from the Lok Sabha in protest because the matter had already been discussed and was of “continuing nature” (Times of India, 9th May, 1974). The Opposition asked some clarification from the Government regarding the turmoil circumstances throughout the country created due to railway workers’ agitation. Mr. Berry was very careful in the choice of his words: At Mughalsarai the “recovery” he stated; at Tughlakabad, the yard was getting back to its feet; in Delhi the situation was “back in trains” and at Jolarpet the situation was “getting into swing” (Statesman, 10th May, 74; pp.1). The Action Committee of NCCRS demanded that the strike was to be nearly complete and 98% of railway men participated in the strike all over the country. The suburban train in Kharagpur area came to a halt; coal movement had been affected heavily. Meanwhile the NCCRS convenor George Fernandez has proposed the resumption of the talks of the railwaymen’s demands with the railway minister L.N. Mishra, if necessary in the prison itself (Times of India, 9th May, 1974).

### **5. The State and the Strike: Impact**

On the third day of the strike the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi met the Opposition leaders to discuss the strike issue. The meeting concluded by resolving a three point formula which included:

- release of arrested leaders of NCCRS,
- resumption of negotiations,
- withdrawal of the strike.

She stated that for Government it could not be possible to meet all the demands of the railway workers in the perspective of national economic condition. The Action Committee rejected the proposal of calling off the strike. Amrita Bazar Patrika of 11<sup>th</sup> May 1974 stated that the hope of an early end of three days old nationwide Rail strike “dimmed today” with the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen’s Struggle as well as its Convenor George Fernandez virtually rejecting the three point formula and urging the workers to ‘continue in a peaceful and determined manner their historic strike’ (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1974; p.1). Instead of taking any constructive decision to an early end of the strike, all the parties - the Railway trade unions, Opposition Parties or the Government, tried to take advantage of the situations in their own favour. The Government had well resorted to various kind of

tortures, repressions, arrests, removal from service, suspensions, so that the workers had surrendered unconditionally. A 'reign of terror' existed in almost every railway station, colony, and office throughout the country. Because the authority considered it as an attack on democratic government and an effort to create anarchy over the country. Goray, Member of the Rajya Sabha and Socialist Party, asked how the railway men had become suddenly enemies and unpatriotic when earlier this railway men braved bullets and artillery fire during Indo-Pak War (Chatterjee, 1988; p.74).<sup>5</sup>

The call for all Central Government Employees' general strike on 15th May 1974 received an undeniable industrial solidarity and encouragement throughout the country as they intended to support the striking railwaymen. The All India Defence Employees' Federation called solidarity tools down strike of civilian defence employees in Ordnance factories and elsewhere, the Banks including State Bank, Life Insurance Corporations and General Insurance employees participated in the solidarity strike action (Siddhanta, 1974; pp.76-77).

By the end of the first week (from 14th May 1974) of the agitation, Northern Railways claimed that there was an improvement in the passenger traffic and enough staff were resuming their duties in the different departments such as booking counters, yards, loco sheds, and other offices, even in the construction sites and food grains and coal movement by this time had stepped up. Railway management demanded that from the mid of second week i.e., 20<sup>th</sup> May onwards the railway departments offered nearly a pre-strike services. The improvement helped them to withdraw the Territorial Army from several places like Delhi, Kanpur, Baroda etc. Few long distance mail and express trains started moving from Howrah station on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1974. Different Divisions of Eastern Zone reported gradual increase of the staff in their duties and in movement of trains. Coal rakes proceeded towards steel plants, wagon mobility in Dhanbad Division had increased too. In the three metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi the suburban train services began slowly. The 'Times of India'

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<sup>5</sup>B.T. Ranadive had put the following as a foreword in NrisinghaChakroborty's book "The great Railway strike and After" that "the brutalities perpetrated against the Railway workers had become an international scandal and a number of workers' organisations in other countries were realising the real character of the Indira Government" because "the Government dared not allow a delegation of transport workers from abroad to visit the country" (Ranadive, 1975; p.2).

reported that though some long distance trains were running far behind the schedule, the railway strike had become “almost ineffective” in Madhya Pradesh (Times of India, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1974).

The strike started to fizzle out from the beginning of the third week. All the organised actions and unity of the railway working class could not stand before the authoritarian attitude and reaction of the government. The police raided the houses of the railway workers and tortured those who fell into their hands; workers were mercilessly beaten and tortured to go back to their duties, some even at pistol point (Chakroborty, 1975; pp.10-11). A family of a Central Railway employee complained that the police continuously coming and threatening them for the male members who participated in the indefinite strike and as the police were not able to find the workers, they started torturing the families of the striking railway men. Many hundreds of trade unionists and railway workers were arrested and removed from their services which inevitably weakened the strength of the struggle. Hindustan Standard reported that six hundred and sixty five employees of the Eastern and South Eastern Railways had been dismissed from service up to 15th May on the charge of indulging in violence and dereliction of duty (Hindustan Standard, 15th May 1974).

The Action Committee of NCCRS intended to continue the strike with ‘full vigour’. But the trade Union leaders like S.M. Joshi, Socialist leader like Madhu Dandavate, Madhu Limaye expressed their desire to end the strike without causing any mark of bitterness among the workers. At the end of the second week the railway authority agreed that serious inconveniences existed in running the trains - both the passenger and goods. In North- East it had been difficult to maintain uninterrupted goods traffic which actually impeded tea trading in this region especially in Assam. As per Hindustan Standard-news reporters, two goods sheds in Eastern Railways Ultadanga and Chitpur faced a serious problem of congestion and a large number of wagons containing rap seed and other oil seeds, grains, pulses and miscellaneous goods were standing unloaded for many days (Hindustan Standard, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1974). In Calcutta and Bombay the suburban electrical multiple rakes were abandoned and inoperative due to the absence of the maintenance clerk whose duty was to check and repair the coaches in the car sheds. Link reported that prices of edible oil, vegetables, building materials and electrical goods have gone up by thirty percent; cement and sugar have

vanished from market although the sale of cement is regulated by the Government (Link, June, 1974; p.15).

In this critical background the senior trade union leaders discussed with the Public Affair Committee of the Parliament to revise the three point formula and to include modification of wage structure of the railwaymen. They also talked with the Bonus Review Committee to consider the question of the bonus. At this juncture all felt that an amicable settlement was necessary. Brajesh Prasad Choudhury, posted at Ranaghat since 1955 as a Chief Commercial Clerk and a member of Eastern Railwaymen's Union and Zonal NCCRS informed that in this situation the Railway Trade Unions, unanimously decided to contribute their one day's salary to the striking railwaymen. They got massive support from most of the trade unions from all over the country even NFIR members who didn't join the strike, contributed to raise the fund.<sup>6</sup> Gradually, it had become difficult for the railwaymen to resist the repression and maintain the same morale and strength to pursue the struggle. A war-like atmosphere existed in the country. J.M. Biswas, the Secretary of Eastern Railway Workers' Federation felt that it was fairly natural and normal railway workers to lose heart and spirit at a time when the avenues for negotiation at the Government level seemed to have disappeared, when the majority of the Action Committee members locked up in jail making thereby the possibility of correct and joint decisions for the railway workers practically impossible, when the strike situation itself had been gradually deteriorating since the 15th May, which could not however be resisted (Biswas, 1977; p.19).

In this situation the rail strike was called off unconditionally, on 28<sup>th</sup> May at 6am in the morning. The decision was taken by the Action Committee unilaterally. The trade unions didn't have any other option other than to withdraw the strike as it was only "on papers". The Defence of India Rule (D.I.R) was designed was applied vengeantly against the railway workers. The use of brute force, immense torture, innumerable repressive measures, terrorisation of the workers and countless cases of victimisation were the factors that led the leaders to take this decision. So far the circumstances were concerned the Action Committee had published a resolution in support of their decision. The resolution said 'The Action Committee having given

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<sup>6</sup>Interview with Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury on 19.01.18 at 10:30 am at his Muchipara Lane Residence, Sealdah.

deep consideration to the strike situation on all the Zonal Railways and in other railway establishments and being aware of the economic consequences of the further prolonging the action and conscious of the responsibility thrust on it in the circumstances, hereby resolves to unilaterally call off the strike (Hindustan Standard, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974; pp.1 & 4).

The news of the termination of the strike had relieved all the sections of people of the Indian society. The daily wage earners, hawkers, vendors, peasants, small traders, daily commuters etc. became glad and relaxed. According to Fernandez the strike was successful but the greater cause of the nation had compelled them to reach this decision. And at the same time he opined that it was most crucial time to stand united. He greeted the workers for their heroic battle and glorious struggle. Assessing the intensity of the strike Fernandez mentioned that out of fourteen lac permanent employees almost twelve lac faced break-in-service and fifty thousands were dismissed from their jobs.<sup>7</sup> There was one factor that the Government and the railway bureaucrats had failed to overlook when they set about on their task of beating the railwaymen that was the indomitable courage and determination of the railway workers (Fernandez, 1988; p.31). He analysed the strike as an incident which had provided strength, solidarity, tolerance and experience for future action.

## **6. Conclusion**

However this movement had suffered from some inherent weaknesses. The first and foremost condition of any successful agitation was the unconditional unity on common demands of all categories of workers. The second was that the railway trade unions must be financially strong. The support base of AIRF should be broad and must be strengthened. The railway workers were potentially an important factor in the country's political scenario but they were ignorant of this fact. Even George Fernandez stated that "a large part of the present day leadership on the railways had no commitment to trade unionism, to speak nothing of militant trade-unionism", they were extremely "opportunist" and sought "privileges" for their own benefits (Fernandez, 1988; p.32).

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<sup>7</sup>The railway workers were beaten but they were not broken, their will and determination could not be broken. (Fernandez, 1984; p.31).

Thus the biggest ever action of the Indian working class - the twenty days long strike by the two million railwaymen ended in an apparent defeat but to many it yielded invaluable insight into the present political situation (Marxist Review; June 1974). It is felt particularly by the leftists that this was the first time the railway workers irrespective of political colours, who were representatives of Indian industrial working class participated in the strike which gave them an extra constitutional strength and self-confidence to face violent repression. Though the withdrawal of the strike marked the victory of the capitalist role of the Congress administration, but the strike shook the root of authoritarianism in India.

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