

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 1973-74.¹ 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
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

1 Sherlock, S., Economic and Political Weekly, 1989; p.2312.

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.² 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 actions taken against them by the authority on small and insignificant matters. Authority resorted to penal transfer, retrenchment, disapproving the promotions etc.³

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

² Interview with Nikhil Bhattacharjee on 22nd December, 2016 in the Office of the Pensioners' Association, Siliguri Town Station at 11.30 am.

³ Interview with Shuvendu Mukherjee on 19th January, 2018 in his Kanchrapara Residence at 2.30 pm).

terminated from their services and got no benefits from the authority.⁴Therefore, 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 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

⁴ 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.

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 24th and 25th 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 27th (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 27th 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 10th 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; Mewa Lal 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 realise 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 8th of May 1974 and the strike notice was to be served on 23rd 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 2nd of May. In this situation, on 3rd 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, 7th 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 8th 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 8th 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 9th 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, 9th 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, 9th 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, 8th 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 11th 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, 11th 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).⁵

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

⁵ B.T. Ranadive had put the following as a foreword in Nrisingha Chakroborty’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).

management demanded that from the mid of second week i.e., 20th 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 19th 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' 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, 20th 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, 21st 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.⁶ 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 28th 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 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, 28th 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

⁶ Interview with Brajesh Prasad Chowdhury on 19.01.18 at 10:30 am at his Muchipara Lane Residence, Sealdah.

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.⁷ 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).

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.

⁷ The railway workers were beaten but they were not broken, their will and determination could not be broken. (Fernandez, 1984; p.31).

References:

Primary Sources

- Biswas, J. M., (1977). "Railway Strike in Retrospect", Indian Railway Workers' Federation, Calcutta.
- Dange, S. A. (1974). "Crisis of Capitalism in India and Wage Freeze". (General Report made to the General Council, AITUC on 22 July 1974), AITUC Publication, New Delhi.
- Chakraborty, Nrisinga, (1971). "Indian Railwaymen Forge Ahead", CITU Publication, New Delhi.
- Chakraborty, Nrisinga, (1975). "The Great Railway Strike and After", CITU Publication, Calcutta.
- Chatterjee, Sankar. Prosad., (1988). "The Historical Railway Strike -1974: Its Directives and Developments Up to Sept. '81", CITU Publication, Calcutta.
- "General Secretary's Report To The Annual Convention", (1975). Railwaymen, AIRF Publication, New Delhi, 26th-29th May.
- Fernandes, George., (1974). (ed.), "The Railway Men", AIRF Publication, New Delhi.
- Krishnan, N. K., Gour, Raj Bahadur, Siddhanta, T. N. (1975). "Working Class and the Emergency", Communist Party Publication, New Delhi.
- Railway Worker, Vol.I, No-3, May-June (1999). New Delhi.
- Rao, C. Rajeswara, Gupta, Bhupesh, Sen, Mohit, (1975). "Communist Party Public Action", CPI Publication, New Delhi.
- Siddhanta T. N. (1974). "The Railway General Strike", AITUC Publication, New Delhi.
- "75 Glorious Years of All India Railwaymen's Federation 1924-1999", (1999). AIRF Publication, New Delhi.

Secondary Sources

- Ananth, V. Krishna., (2016). "Remembering May 1974: The Historic Railway Workers' Strike", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. LI. No. 22, May.
- Anantharaman, S. C., (1974). "Railway Strike Threat: Consequences of A Policy of Drift", The Statesman, Calcutta, 30th April.
- Awasthy, Aruna, (1994), "History and Development of Railways in India", Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi.
- Aitken, Bill, (1994). "Exploring Indian Railways", Oxford, New Delhi.
- Basu, Timir, (1981). "Plight of Railway Construction Casual Labour", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.16, No.7, 14th February
- Basu, timir, (1985). "The Railways' Subalterns", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, Issue No. 8, February. 23rd

- Bedi, P. N. S., (1989). "Railway Management: Strength and Weaknesses", *Mainstream*, April.
- Bhagwati, Jagdish, N. & Desai, Padma, (1970). "Indian Planning for Industrialization and Trade Policies since 1951", Oxford, Great Britain.
- Buchanan, D. H., (1966). "The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India", Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., Great Britain.
- "Central and Western Railways 8,500 Loss Jobs, 1,00,000 To Have Break In Service", (1974), *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 31st May.
- "Centre Restoring To 'Brute Force', says Opposition", (1974), *The Times of India*, 10th May.
- Choudhury, Nabojoyoti., (2004). "Crowning Glory", Nabo Janma Prakashan, Siliguri.
- Crouch, Harold, (1979). "Indian Working Class", Sachin Publications, Ajmer.
- Dhyani, S. N., "Trade Unionism and The Right To Strike: A Comparative Sociological Study In Labour Management Relations", S. Chand & Co. (Pvt.) Ltd., New Delhi.
- "Economy Suffered Loss of Over Rs. 500 Crores". (1974). *The Statesman*, 28th May.
- "Fernandes and Many Other Rail Union Leaders Arrested", (1974). *The Statesman*, 3rd May.
- Fernandes, George., (1968). "For a New Perspective", *Mainstream*, Annual Number.
- Fernandes, George., (1984). "The Rail Strike of 1974 and the Railwaymen's Movement", Sindhu Publications, Bombay.
- Gandhi, Indira., (1976). "Democracy and the Indian People", *Yojana*, 20 (1), January.
- Gandhi, Indira., (1976). "Working Class and the Nation", *Yojana*, 1, January.
- Gangadhara, Rao M. & Subba, Rao. P. (1982). Wage and Salary Levels in Indian Railways", *Indian journal of Industrial Relations*, 17 (3), January.
- Ghosh, S. C., (1924). "Railways Economy", NMML, New Delhi.
- Gopalakrishnan, C. V., (1974). "The Struggle For power", *The Hindu*, Madras, 20th May.
- Gopalakrishnan, C. V., (1974), "Balance Sheet after the Railway Strike", *The Hindu*, Madras, 4th May.
- "In The States: Who's Afraid of the Railway Strike !", (1974). *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 20th May.
- Jain, Girilal., (1974), "Challenge and Response: Government Plays for Big Stakes", *The Times of India*, Bombay, 8th May.
- Jain Girilal., (1974). "Democracy Under Seize Need To Win Respite", *The Times of India*, Bombay, 15th May.
- Karnik, V. B., (1967). "Strikes in India" Manaktalas, Bombay.

- Karnik, V. B., (1974). "Indian Labour: Problems and Prospects", Minerva Associates, KitabMahal, Calcutta.
- Kerr, Ian. J., (1985). "Working Class protest in 19th Century India – Example of Railway Worker", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.-20, Wo-4, January.
- Kerr, Ian. J., (1997). "of Building the Railways the Raj", Oxford, New Delhi.
- Kerr, Ian. J., (ed). (2001). "Railways in Modern India", Oxford, New Delhi.
- Kerr, Ian. J., (2012). "Engines of Change: The Railroads That Made India", Orient Black Swan, New Delhi.
- Kerr, Ian. J., (2012). "27 Down: New Departures in Indian Railway Studies", Orient Longman, New Delhi.
- Khanna, K. C., (1974). "Impeding Railway Strike: Both sides, Overplay Their Hands", The Times of India, Bombay, 3rd May.
- Khanna, K. C., (1974). "Must Railways Run Around? Wheels with Twisted Wheels", The Times of India, Bombay, 9th May.
- Khosla, G. S., (1972). "Railway Management in India", Thacker and Co. Ltd. Bombay.
- Khosla, G. S., (1974). "Railway Strike And After: Workers' Demand in Perspective", The Times of India, Bombay, 29th May.
- Kothari, Rajni., (1974). "The Congress System Revisited: A Decennial Review", Asian Survey, 1.
- Kumaran, P. K., (1974). "Struggle of the Railwaymen", Capital.
- Lieten, Georges. Kristoffel, (1984). "Colonialism Class and Nation: the Confrontation in Bombay Around 1930", K. P. Bagchi and Co., Calcutta.
- Mast, Mahesh. Kumar, (1969). "Trade Union Movement in Indian Railways", Meenakshi Prakashan, Meerut.
- Mathur, P. N., (1982). "The Indian Railways: A Critique", Monthly Commentary on Indian Economic Conditions, 23 (b).
- "Mishra Sees Bid to Paralyse Economy", (1974). The Statesman, 26th April.
- Mukherjee, Dilip., (1974). "After the Rail Strike: A Welter of Uncertainties", The Times of India, Bombay, 18th May.
- Nair, A. V. G., (1979). "DA Question: Employers' Offensive", Mainstream. 18 (19), October.
- "Opposition M. Ps Request Giri To Intervene", (1974). The Statesman, 14th May.
- Padmanabhan, R., (1980). "Growth of Trade Unions In India: 1940-70", Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, 16 (10), July.
- Pattabhiraman, M., (1974). "A Fruitless Exercise", The Hindu, Madras, 4th May.
- "Rail Strike: An appraisal", (1974). Mainstream, 15th June.

- “Rail Strike in Perspective”, (1974). Mainstream, 8th June.
- “Railwaymen plan to Strike From May 8th”, (1974). The Statesman, 16th April.
- “Railwaymen Have No Case For Bonus, Says Mrs. Gandhi”, (1974). The Statesman, 30th April.
- “Railway Strike Being Called Off Today: Unilateral Decision By NCCRS Action Committee”, (1974). The Statesman, 28th May.
- Ramamurthy, P., (1979). “Towards Working Class Unity”, Mainstream, January.
- Reddy, D. Narashima, (1979). “Unionization in Indian Railways”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 14, No. 39, September.
- Reddy, D. Narshima, (1980). “Growth and Structure of Unions in Southern Railway” Economic and Political Weekly, Vol-15, No. 39, September.
- Reddy, D. Narasimha, (1981). “Working of the Permanent Negotiating Machinery on the Indian Railways”. Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, 16 (3), January.
- Roy, Biren., (1976). “Communist-led Trade Union Movement In India”, Marxist review, 10 (4 and 5), October-November.
- Roy, Biren., (1983). “Problems and Prospects of Trade Unions Unity”, Marxist Review, 16 (7), January.
- Saha, Panchanan., (1998). “The Working Class in Modern Society”, Mainstream, May.
- Sarma, A. M., (1978). “Comparative Perception of Labour unrest”, Indian Journal of Social Work, 39 (1), April.
- Samaddar, Ranabir., (2015). “Forty Years After: The Great Indian Railway Strike of 1974”, Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 4, January.
- Saxena, K. K., (1963). “Indian Railways: Problems and Prospects”, Asia publishing House, Bombay.
- Sen, Sukomal, (1997). “Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement: 1830 – 1990”, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta.
- Sen, Mohit., (1977). “India’s struggle for Socialism and The working Class”, Secular Democracy, 10 (15).
- Shah, Ghanshyam, (1999). “Social Movements in India”, Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- Sharma, G. K., (1971). Labour Movement In India: its Past and Present, Sterling Publications, New Delhi.
- Sherlock, Stephen., (1989). “Railway Workers and Their Unions Origins of 1974 Indian Railway Strike”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, 14th October.
- Sherlock, Stephen, (2001). “The Indian Railways Strike of 1974: A Study of Power and Organised Labour”, Rupa and Company, New Delhi.
- “Strike Inevitable, Says Fernandes”, (1974). The Statesman, 29th April.
- “The Crisis Year”, (1974). Marxist Review, 7 (7), January.

“The Railway Strike”, (1974). The Marxist Review, 7 (12), June.

“The Shortcomings of The Railways”, (1961). Capital, February.

Thorner, Daniel, (1955). The Pattern of Railway Development in India”, The Far Eastern Quarterly, Vol-14, Wo-2, February.

“National Emergency Proclaimed”, (1975). Link, 17 (46), June.

Amrita Bazar Patrika, (1974). 4th April to 2nd June.

Ananda Bazar Patrika, (1974). 20th April to 31st March.

Assam Tribune, (1974). 31st January to 31st March.

The Hindu, (1974). 20th April to 1st June, 1974.

Hindustan Standard, (1974). 24th February to 30th June.

Times of India, (1974). 28th March to 29th May.