



ALL INDIA LOCO RUNNING STAFF ASSOCIATION

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1974 Railway Strike- a glimpse half a century later.

When the strike took place, I was studying in third standard at a village where the nearest Railway station was 50 kms away. So I had no knowledge about the strike till I joined Railways and got engaged with the trade union movement. The leaders of Loco running staff had shared their vast experiences to write volumes, There are many literatures available on the reasons, course and results of the strike. Many warriors of the strike are there to describe the first hand experiences too.

So, my attempt is to examine and compare the events of the strike with the present practices in Trade Union movement.

1. Unparalleled effort and success in forging unity.

All the anti worker policies of the management is always implemented by the administration through another worker. The base of every charge sheet is always a report from another worker often belong to another category. Thus the administration succeed to create an enmity between different categories. The punishments in railways were unjust and disproportionate(as it is today) . Some were punished heavily while some others were let free to magnify the enmity. There were drastic changes in the trade union fora too in immediate past to the strike. Large number of workers left the recognised federations and categorical trade unions were emerged with sectional strikes and agitations. The leaders federations as quite natural found the categorical Associations as their enemies as their members moved to craft unions and they have often taken an inimical stand against such agitations too. For example, federations opposed tooth and nail a negotiated settlement between AILRSA and Railway Board in August 1973 strike. They physically prevented the first meeting of the Loco Running staff Grievance Committee fixed at Chennai in September 1973 as part of the agreement of the strike. In spite of that the leaders and workers could unite on the single agenda of the legitimate rights of the railway workers.

2. Unity and support from trade union fraternity

The unity and co- operation was not limited within Railways. NCCRS was the forum through which support of all sections of workers were sought to the Railway strike. Workers in all sectors too reacted positively. Central Government employees struck work for three days from 8th May as decided, despite the chaotic situation of starting the strike in Railways from 2nd May six days prior to the declared date. State government employees too struck work for a day. One of the martyrs of the 1974 agitation at Madurai Com Ramasamy was an ordinary farm worker came to Madurai Railway station in support of the striking Railwaymen. Electricity workers and auto taxi drivers of Mumbai too struck work for a day in solidarity to the Railway strike on 15 th May on the call of Central trade unions for a national strike to support of the Railway strike. Such a course was decided and successfully implemented when thousands of strikers and those extended support were arrested and remanded in jails and knowing well that they too are liable for a similar attack.

3. Efforts for a total unity

Another point worth to mention is that the strikers were so inclusive to seek the help of all democratic forces, public figures and even cultural Associations for the strike. They could bring all the opposition political parties in the NCCRS. Large number of politicians renowned personalities who associated with NCCRS were also jailed along with the railway workers.

4. Support to the families

As the railway management had stopped payment of loans from provident fund and did not pay the salaries, all railway colonies went in starvation. Whatever little food grains stored in the houses were either looted or spoiled during the police raids. The families of the striking workers were fed from common kitchens organised by workers of other sections. As all male members in the colonies were driven away under threat of arrest, anti social elements in rowdy groups and also in police raided colonies, looted and even misbehaved with the women. In many places local people formed squads to guard the colonies day and night, from those miscreants.

5. Strikers were treated as antinational and threat to Indian sovereignty.

Finally, the generation joined Railway after 1974 did only see abuse of Disciplinary rules to wreck vengeance against trade union workers. In abuse of Disciplinary powers Railways are making new records by extensively invoking 14/(ii)- ordering removal from service without any charge sheet or enquiry.

In 1974 and all other earlier strikes , the workers were declared and treated as threats to national security of India. They were treated a similar way we now deal the so called extremists. "Defense of India Rule" (DIR) ordered during Chinese war, was invoked in all strikes against the workers and their supporters after the Chinese war. Then MISA(Maintenance of Internal Security Act) was enacted. All the arrests in relation with the 1974 strike were under either DIR or MISA, on the charge of offending the internal security of India and all under arrest were denied bail. Resorting to exercise the constitutional right of a worker- the right to strike – was declared and treated as an anti national offence. Patriotic workers turned traitors all of a sudden in the eyes of the government.

6. Present Situation

In absence of a united and decisive agitation for a long period of 50 years, the anti worker policies are implemented in Railways as like a private firm, functioning on the motive of profit. Work load of all sections of workers have become unbearable due to reduction of staff while the number of trains are increasing day by day and technical advancements. Abolition of casual labour was one of the demands of 1974 strike. Now, nearly 8 lakh permanent posts are manned by contract workers/ apprentices. Bonus was the demand in 74, now then existed statutory pension too is taken away. Monetization of Railway assets is aimed at handing over the entire Railway assets for free to private, on commission basis. The result will be unchecked exploitation of workers and general public by the corporates, using the public assets.

7. Lessons to learn

The leadership of Railway trade unions has to learn much from the 1974 strike, in deciding their priorities. There needed objective and determined efforts to build up "unity for struggle", against semi slavery exploitation now going on. Railway trade unions have to learn how the then leadership forged the unity on the single agenda of justified demands while all other differences and grievances remained as it is. The sincere efforts in that direction is the true honour to the warriors of the strike. The failure of Railway trade unions in building the unity to defend disintegration of this public sector giant will also become equally enthusiastic for the future historians as 1974 strike, if we fail to unite the workers and reverse the ongoing anti- worker and anti- people policies. Let us pledge to honestly work for "unity to struggle" in the golden jubilee year of the great movement.



K C James, Secretary General

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