

Stop Railway Privatisation – Save Nation

Railways are the most important means of the public transport system. Indian Railways are rendering a great service to the nation by serving 3 crore passengers to reach their destinations every day. The first train in India was operated by the British from Bombay to Thane in 1853. Between 1947 to 1951 there were a total of 42 Railway Companies in the country. In 1951, Government of India merged all these companies to form the largest rail networking system in the world. The total distance of today's railway line is 1,14,500 km with 7500 railway stations and 8702 passenger trains. Indian Railways has been providing public transport to passengers of 29 states and 3 Union Territories.

It is incorrect on the part of central govt. to hand over Railways to the big corporates which is providing safe and affordable public transport service to the people. This is a testament to the fecklessness of the govt.

In accord to the Bibek Debroy Committee appointed in 2016 which recommended for complete privatisation of Indian Railways, the Central Government has decided to give free hand for private trains in 12 clusters within the jurisdiction of major railway stations of Secunderabad, Delhi, Bangalore, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Mumbai, Howrah and Chennai and even allow private operators to decide passenger fare and other charges. Tejas private trains are already operating from Lucknow to Delhi and from Mumbai to Ahmadabad.

The Central Govt. is gearing up to permit private trains using government's own 'Railway Track, Signal System, Loco Pilots and Guards' from April 2023. Twenty private corporate companies from Adani, Tata, Essel Group to Bombardier India showed interest to run these private trains. The Govt. invites bid for 100 per cent foreign direct investment and allows 151 private passenger trains on 109 routes. This would be a big blow to the sovereignty of the country. Privatization will increase the charges enormously. Passenger and Express trains will be out of reach to the general public. There will be no concessions for students, the disabled, journalists, the elderly. Indian Railways, which serves a large number of workers is going to be futile to working class.

The number of Indian Railway employees has already been reduced from 17 lakh to 13 lakhs. That means almost 5 lakh jobs were lost. Railways have reservations of 15, 7.5, 27 per cent for SC, ST and OBC. These reservations will be abolished if the railways are privatized. Many SC, ST and OBC students remain unemployed. This leads to big inequality in society.

The Indian Railway workers movement has a glorious history. In May 1974, the NCCRS (National Coordination Committee for Railway Men's Struggle) was formed by the Railway Trade Unions and lead the historic Railway Strike though for economic demands, but it is very sad to state that the Trade Unions today are not in unison to fight against the privatisation with honesty. The trade unions should sincerely unite and defeat privatization by re-establishing NCCRS at the national level and organise at zonal and divisional level and save the nation. Trade unions should work along with the people. No struggle can be successful without the solidarity of the people. Public support and solidarity is required to struggle and stop the privatization of Railways. Today's BJP and NDA government are moving forward with a false theory that privatization is for the development of the country. Trade unions and

political parties must oppose this and fight against the privatization of railways, and campaign about public sector organisations importance and their key role in nation building and struggle against Railway Privatisation. Privatization should be stopped.

Experience of privatisation of British rail in this context shows how it affects both rail workers and the passengers.

Privatisation of British Railways

Railways were privatized in Britain in 1995. Trains began to operate under the auspices of several private rail companies. When accidents occur, there would be blame game on one another over accountability. As the track maintenance, signaling system and other departments are run by different private operators, there are many instances where the blame is thrown on one another and the passengers safety is completely ignored.

On February 23, 2007, 84-year-old Margaret Mason was killed when a train running from London to Glasgow derailed by faulty set of points with poor maintenance. 86 people were injured and 28 of them were seriously injured. The train is operated by a private railway company called Network Rail (NR). The company told the court that the track supervisor, David Louis, had forgotten to inspect the tracks. In fact five days prior to the accident, Louis had repeatedly stated in his emails to his employer that track is in poor condition. The company, however, ignored his plea and made him a scapegoat with false charges in the court. Under no circumstances the company allows the workers to repair the track because that would hinder the fast movement of trains and would affect its profits and moreover quality of work is compromised with limited staff working under a lot of pressure under a different maintenance contract, out cried the workers. This is a proof to the fact that private companies look only for their profits but least bothered for the lives and safety of the people.

The government 'Railway Regulation' organisation, which is supposed to look after all this, and resolve the contradictions arising between the companies profits and security and safety of public are shamelessly supporting the private companies. Union leader Babcow says this is the outcome of privatization.

In 2002, seven people were killed in a train crash at Potters' Bar. Two school girls were killed in a train accident in Essex in 2005. The court imposed a fine of three million pounds in the first case. In the second, court imposed a fine of one million pounds. Both of these accidents were caused by poor maintenance of points. This means that despite the imposition of millions of pounds as fines, it is clear that the negligence of private companies will continue. It is a well-known fact that though the fine is levied on companies they finally grab it from the people only.

Judge Swift, who heard the 2007 accident case, stated that it is not the negligence of an individual but a "serious systemic error" and the company was fined 4 million pounds for not improving the system that caused the accident in 2002 and not implementing the recommendations even after accidents in 2005 or 2007. It is needless to say, if the privatization effects are so erroneous in developed countries, its unimaginable to assess the situation in countries like ours that are deeply submerged in corruption, which can be catastrophic.

Railways is public property, a network that is established to cater to the travel needs of crores of people. Our rulers who work for the profits of imperialists do not have the right to privatize it. The railway workers, who waged many great struggles and stood as role models for the Indian working class, must confront, struggle and stop the menace of privatization.

In this context, lets remind the words of Engels from the book "Condition of the working class in England" "...as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social conditions ought to yield to them as human beings; because silence on their part would be a recognition of these social conditions, an admission of the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit the workers in good times and let them to starve in bad times. Against this the working -men must rebel so long as they have not lost all human feeling...."
(pg 153 chapter: labour movements)