

The Historical All India Railway Strike in 1974 - Some Lessons

-Komarayya

The 1974 All India Railway Strike was one of the huge strikes in the history of Indian Railways department that was a long lasting and effective strike. The railway workers fought a heroic battle for 20 days from May 8th, 1974, as never before. It was one of the most pivotal events in the history of the worker's movement in India.

Even after 50 years, the Indian railway strike of 1974 evokes images of the militancy and the heroism of the ordinary workers, their families, and those who dared support them against the might of the Indian state. It has a long-lasting impact on India.

The worker's movement has to draw many important lessons from this strike and can come out of its present-day lethargy. The strike and its experiences demand an indepth study and efforts to draw correct lessons and to rethink the history of the Indian working-class in the light of such lessons. No doubt certain general and brief reviews of the strike were made by the leadership of some central trade unions and their parent political parties, but sadly those reviews were intended to serve the purpose of supporting and justifying the policies and tactics adopted during the strike period by them, at the same time to criticize the policies adopted by the other central trade union leadership and the political parties to which those central trade unions were affiliated.

However there is relevance to the 1974 railway strike, its experiences and impact on the worker's movement of India even as on today, after a lapse of 50 years; particularly at a time when the worker's movement in India is at its lowest ebb of receding into ineffectiveness.

An indepth study has to be taken up to arrive at a proper and correct conclusions. The experience of 1974 all India railway strike provides a scope to the insight of worker's movement in India after 1947 transfer of power. The study must be based on the understanding on the tenets of scientific socialism and ideology of Marxism and Leninism - the working-class politics. The railway workers acted as a whole as the conscious agents of their class and class interests but not as the members of certain castes and gender. It was their class consciousness and class militancy that made them to wage their heroic battle against the might of the state.

The background situation that led to 1974 railway strike has to be properly understood.

By the time of 1947 transfer of power the 'independence' granted to India by the British colonial rulers, there was already a division among the working-class was created by the ruling party Congress, by forming the central trade union INTUC, a rival trade union centre to AITU denting the existing unity among the working-class. Added to this different political parties, to keep up their identity too had formed their own trade union centres, causing further divisions in the unity of the working-class. HMS was formed by socialists, dividing from AITUC. Some leaders differing with HMS formed UTUC, which again divided and SUIC was formed. In 1955 the Jana Sangh party the representative of Hindu nationalist politics with the purpose of reviving Hindu religion, the precursor of the present day BJP with Hindutva politics, had formed BMS as its central trade union. Thus the trade union movement was divided in to several central trade unions, bringing about many divisions in the unity of workers, which is mostly needed ingredient among working-class to the success of its cause. This division among trade unions led to union rivalry among unions even at the cost of the interests of workers and working-class and its unity.

The Congress party which assumed the governmental power in India after transfer of power under the leadership of Nehru on one hand while claiming to be 'socialist' in its nature, and pretending to be progressive, on the other hand has been adopting the very anti-worker policies of the British rulers in practice. Whenever the workers and employees made justified demands with regards to their wages and working conditions, it opposed them bitterly and ruthlessly suppressed them.

When the Joint Action Committee of Central government employees of all departments of the government presented a demands charter and intended to hold negotiations with the government in 1960, the govt. of India has declined to hold negotiations and to reach to any agreement with the JAC of government (Central) employees. So inevitably the JAC announced a strike from 11th July 1960. The President of India promulgated the ordinance of maintenance of essential services. The intended strike was declared to be an illegal strike. Prime Minister Nehru called this strike as "the revolt of the people" and announced that he would counter attack it. Accordingly several leaders and activists of the strike were arrested. To suppress the strike police intervention was increased. Police, home-guards, border security forces were pressed in to service. At many places the striking employees were lathi-charged. At two places police fired on striking workers. In the police firings at Dahod workshops of Western Railway five workers were killed. In this connection more than 20,000 people were arrested. At least 1,500 employees were dismissed and 10,000 were suspended. 1,500 were convicted and punished with imprisonment. 'Socialist' Nehru as the ruler of India and representative of big-capitalist and big-landlord ruling classes had shown the sample of his original class nature and stance against the employees and workers who were seeking a betterment in their living and working conditions.

What is particularly noteworthy is the cunning nature of the Congress government in branding the rightful agitation of strikes by workers and employees as "revolt of the people" (against government and nation), insinuating that they are not patriotic and as the foes of the nation and people. The ordinance on the maintenance of essential services became a

cs-may-2024-artical-Railway Strike

permanent statutory law. Using police and security forces against agitating workers became a general practice. Victimization of workers who participated in agitations has also become a common practice in various forms. The form of "service break" to victimize the workers and employees also become a common practice and a legalized form of victimisation.

Even at this sample of the attitude of government experienced by the employees/workers the leaderships of central trade unions and federations of employees have not planned to devise any strategy to overcome this anti-worker position of the government and its rulers. It is particularly note-worthy of the leadership of AITUC under the direction of united Communist Party of India, that claims to champion the cause and interests of working-class and workers, could not raise to the occasion to formulate any strategy to effectively resist and defeat the cunning, anti-worker strategies of the government, rulers and ruling classes and protect the fundamental and basic rights of the working-class. On the contrary, it is apparent that it was enamored by Nehru's socialist rhetoric, progressive talk, praise of Soviet Union and its five year plans and of his policy of so-called mixed economy. Otherwise S. Dange, the general secretary of AITUC and other leaders could not have pursued the 'two pillar policy' of "cooperating with the government to strengthen economy for the development of national economy to implement important aspects of five year plans and at the same time protecting the interests of working-class within the very economic system." This is nothing but a class-collaboration policy pure and simple. More over the leadership of AITUC became bureaucratic undermining trade union democracy. The unions under AITUC too started conducting their activities with class-collaborationist policies, compromising with the government and managements. The leaders of AITUC, nominated into various governmental committees and commissions, started acting in a shameful role that is harmful to the interests of the working-class. Thus, a central trade union leadership that was supposed to uphold class politics and class orientation was gradually abandoning its class-role and class task in uniting and strengthening the worker's and working-class movement in India.

On the other hand the severity of economic crisis was worsening the lives and living conditions of working-class without any hope of amelioration though its "democratically" elected government.

Again the AITUC was divided and another clink in the unity of working-class was caused with the formation of CITU in 1970 claiming that a historical need demanded to establish a new trade union to mobilise militant working-class in India behind a democratic trade union centre.

While this has been the general background and situation in India, for the eruption of an all India railway strike in 1974, the specific circumstances that originated the strike are also particularly note-worthy.

The government of India has pursued a policy of recognising trade unions as the bargaining agents of workers of a particular industry in the name of avoiding unwarranted and harmful

disputes and agitations by each and every union and to protect the so called 'industrial peace'. All the central trade unions and federations have succumbed to this policy of union recognition, with the possibility of enhancing the power of their bureaucratic leadership and unions, avoiding (legally) the other unions entering in to the arena of trade unions. With this all the trade union centers including AITUC & CITU defined their goal of achieving the recognition at any cost, including dividing voter-member-workers of the industry on regional, caste, religion and other identity lines and catch their votes. Instead of competing to achieve and secure more and more benefits promoting the interests of the worker-member of the industry, they competed with untold rivalry to push back the other union and even to the extent of defeating the just, necessary agitations of the rival union by compromising with the managements and governments and thus further denting unity among the working-class, making the workers of the same industry in to their perpetual enemies rather than fighting against the eternal exploiting industrial managements and the governments. This policy of industrial peace of recognising trade unions was not only used as an instrument to divide the workers and their unity but also to tame the leadership of recognized unions by providing them with material privileges.

Two railway unions were recognised by the railway board – All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) and National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFIR). Both these recognized unions were supposed to fight for the rights of railway workers.

The Railway board, under government supervision is practically the management of railway workers. This board of bureaucracy of management 'tamed' the leaders of both the recognised trade unions by luring them with material privileges due to their proximity with the railway board making them to cooperate and to work together with it to 'discipline' the workers. It used the leadership of recognised railway unions to suppress and control militant and independent activity of workers. The unions too had grown in to bureaucratic structures alienated from ordinary workers (the rank and file workers).

During 1960's, unrest grew amongst railway workers on the issue of low wages, harsh working conditions and long hours of work. The negative response of the railway board, the inability of both the recognised railway unions, generated a sense of frustration and alienation among workers. These circumstances led to a sense of collective and independent action to fight for their interests and to the formation of independent category-based unions like the loco-running staff association. The category unions led several industrial actions in 1960, 1967, 1968 and 1970 without the involvement of the recognised unions. These developments were a clear sign of the labour militancy and rudiments of class-consciousness among the railway workers that led towards the all India railway strike in May 1974.

In August 1973, the All India Loco Running Staff Association, after many a struggles in the form of work to rule, work to designation, mass sick leaves etc. was able to make the govt. of India to yield and to conduct negotiations with the JAC of the union, though not a recognised union; despite both AIFR and NFIR opposing negotiations and prevent

discussions and meetings with loco running staff association; and reached in to a settlement by winning its longstanding demand of reduction in hours of work from 14 hrs. to 10 hrs. The 'break in service' punishment imposed on the railway workers by the railway board was to be condoned. The deadlock of the recognised unions as the only bargaining and representative union of railway workers was broken. This success of the "independent" union played an important role in the 1974, because the workers realised that united action insured them against the threat of victimisation by the management and improved their chances of succeeding in their struggles.

Meanwhile in the convention of AIRF held in October 1973, George Fernandez was elected as the president of AIRF. In this convention it was mooted to hold a convention of all trade union organisations of railwaymen and central trade union organisations to bring about coordination of action for the success of a railway strike to realise the demands of railway workers. The National Coordination Committee Railwaymen's Struggle (NCCRS) was formed to bring all the railway unions, the central trade unions and political parties together to prepare for the strike to start on May 8, 1974.

The pro-labour pretending government determined to put down the strike with its obdurate stance on the demands of workers: wage increase, payment of bonus, regularization of casual workers etc.

Even as negotiations were proceeding the government arrested George Fernandez, the president of AIRF and a key member of the negotiating committee of NCCRS. Across the country thousands of railway workers were arrested. The draconian provisions of the Defence of India Rules (DIR) and the Maintenance of Internal Security ACT (MISA) were used against the workers. The government used its repressive machinery and the mass communication media to suppress the strike. Police, security forces, army and navy forces were pressed in to service to destroy strike. The government in reality had waged a war against the striking railway workers. The government adopted brutal methods against the striking workers and their families. The railway colonies were sieged by police, BSF, CRPF and PAC. The water and electricity supply lines to railway colonies were cut off. If the workers were not found at home to arrest, they harassed the families, wife, children etc.; they were thrown out of their homes at mid-night, were abused and cursed. Women were assaulted and harassed. There were also instances of workers forced by police terror to work. Instances of train drivers who were shackled in their cabins were reported at the height of strike. This terror unleashed by the Indira Gandhi regime on railwaymen across the country, was a prelude to follow on a much wider scale during emergency.

On the other hand the government accused the railway strike as a "political strike", to cow down the leadership of the railway strike and the opposition parties supporting the strike. By calling it a political strike, the Indira's government insinuated as if the strikes are anti-national. With such black-mailing tactics, the government chose to defeat and justify its repressive methods on strike.

Even the opposition political parties including communist and socialist parties instead of countering the governments insinuations, they cowered before such insinuations and they along with action committee of NCCRS have repeatedly claimed and declared that “..... our action had no motivation other than securing the just reasonable demands of the railwaymen”. Such inadequacies of political understanding and the political compulsions and limitations being parliamentary political parties, disallowed them to intensify strike against an inhuman, anti-worker government using brutal suppression, the CPI, CPM and socialist parties had taken a keen interest to have quick negotiated settlement rather than a prolonged general strike and to organise a united action in the form of a country wide strike by the entire working class. They even dreaded to think about such an action calling it an ultra-left adventurism.

By observing a one day national strike on May 15th, by the workers of all other industries they washed their hands, praising that one day as the great day of solidarity for railway strike.

Highlighting the repressive actions of the government they suggested to end the strike and negotiate with the government as was previously proposed by the government.

Thus the strike was suppressed without any immediate gains. The workers were forced back to work without a single concession by the employer – the government of India.

On the other hand the railway-board resorted to victimization of workers for participating in the strike :

It has given a break-in-service to about 10 lakh permanent workers treating them as new recruits.

Nearly 30,000 permanent workers have been either removed or dismissed from service.

About 50,000 casual and substitute workers were not taken back on work, though most of them have been working for periods ranging from 5 years to 20 years.

Over 20,000 workers were prosecuted under DIR seeking summary trials and criminal conviction of these workers.

Many workers transferred from one unit to other, and from one division to the other.

There were innumerable reversions and forced reversions and forced premature superannuation of railway workers.

Unilateral changes in working conditions were introduced to harass and brow-beat the workers.

But in terms of labor history of India the strike was a great success since it was able to coordinate country-wide action across a huge, but geographically scattered industry. The railway workers had given a great battle with courage and militancy, despite the entire state repressive machinery against them. Even temporary and casual workers whose security of job is most vulnerable, plunged in the strike along with others. They acted as conscious agents of their own interests. Solidarity among workers and other sections of the

cs-may-2024-artical-Railway Strike

people was displayed in a remarkable way. The railway strike proved that despite occupational and cultural divisions in an industry spread over the vastness of India, the workers can achieve a sense of solidarity. Workers from other industries and services quickly expressed their solidarity with the striking railway workers.

No doubt after the railway strike many industrialists adopted strict policies by taking the help of government police department. Despite George Fernandez and Dange continuously announcing that the railway strike is only at the union level without any political motive, the strike by its very class-character had exposed that the rule of parliamentary 'democracy' as not the representative democracy of workers and toiling masses. It exposed the rulers are the representatives of the big-capitalist and big-landlord ruling classes. It exposed the hollowness of parliamentary opposition political parties and the futility of their "enlightening discussions" or their protest forms of "no confidence motions" when it comes to the protection of the interests of working-class and serving their welfare. It had raised the question of the necessity of politics (their own class politics) to the working-class in order to fight against exploiting ruling classes and ruling governments and ultimately the necessity to establish their own government in alliance with the other toiling sections.

In the trade union / workers front it clearly explained that the working-class besides fighting against the managements and the government, had to decisively fight against bureaucratic trade union leadership of the trade unions and had to establish trade union democracy in unions. It had also clearly indicated that unity among the workers, and working class can be achieved through issue based united actions, agitations and struggles. It also made clear that the militancy and class-consciousness will be improved among workers, and working-class through united struggle for the cause of working-class. These are the lessons to be drawn from the historical 1974 strike of railway workers.

This is not a comprehensive review of the 1974 All India railway strike. But the essence of the lessons drawn from this strike is as was realised and pledged the resolution of NCCRS to take up the task of "... to do everything within its power to spearhead the movement, to forge fighting unity of working classes and the toiling masses in the country transcending all divisions based on any consideration". In other words it means that task is to "organise workers into a class" – "formation of the proletariat into a class and to overthrow of the bourgeoisie supremacy, conquest of political power of the proletariat as was defined in the Manifesto of the communist party.

Even after an elapse of 50 years, no sincere attempt is being made to practically initiate and fulfill this task. Neither catechism of general Marxist-Leninist principles nor chanting of lofty slogans will bring out the formation of the proletariat in to class nor class-consciousness will be inculcated, unless and otherwise a sincere effort is made, by applying the principles of Marxism -Leninism to the concrete Indian conditions and ground realities without pretending omniscience and assuming political authority in taking up and executing the task!