

The Railway General Strike

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PREFACE

The present booklet dealing with the Railway General Strike of May 1974, is mostly a compilation of all relevant documents and informations in connection with the strike.

It traces, in brief, the background events, the sectional skirmishes that converged into a total general strike on the entire railway system and the zig zag course of unity of all railwaymen which ultimately consummated in the formation of the united platform, the NCCRS. The railwaymen fought a heroic battle for long 20 days as never before. There is a general review of the strike, the role of different political tendencies in the NCCRS, and not an exhaustive review.

It ends with the post-strike meeting of 26 June of the NCCRS, the first meeting after the meeting on 15th April that announced the strike date.

(16 August 1974)

Events Leading to the Railway Strike

Even before the submission of the Third Pay Commission Report, railway workers' agitation on the demands of bonus, wage increase was gaining momentum.

The high-water-mark of the agitation was the united massive demonstration in Delhi on 15 December 1972 of railwaymen and other sections of the Central Government employees. The rally was addressed by Parliament members of all political parties including the Congress Party.

The NFIR President announced that strike ballot amongst railwaymen will be taken on 15 January 1973. The demand of bonus was highlighted in that rally. Other demands put forward by the railwaymen were the immediate submission of Pay Commission's Report and grant of full interim relief.

AIRF CALLS FOR STRIKE BALLOT BY 31st JANUARY 1973

The meeting of the general council of the All India Railwaymen's Federation which was held in New Delhi from 15-18 December 1972 adopted a resolution which stated that: "The unprecedented and massive demonstration on 15 December 1972 before the parliament by railwaymen and other central government employees of the Government of India has provided for all concerned a meaningful warning against the discrimination which they have suffered at the

hands of the government in the matter of grant of bonus to its industrial employees. This demonstration has unequivocally conveyed to the leadership of the organisations a sanction for action if the Government of India will not grant them bonus.

“This demonstration also took note of the very inordinate and unjustifiable delay in the finalisation of the report of the third pay commission, of the apprehensions that the report may be ultimately framed and tailored to accommodate the financial and labour policies of the Government of India without any reference to either the objective conditions obtaining in the country or for the need to bring about a rationalisation in their pay structure. . .

“This general council meeting of the All India Railwaymen’s Federation meeting in Delhi from 15 December 1972 reiterates the demand of the AIRF that there can be no satisfactory solution of a wage revision if this twin issue of bonus and the principle evolved by the AIRF on which a future revision of wage scale is made, are not adopted by the government. . . .”

The resolution further emphasises that “experience over the past many years has taught railwaymen that the government will not do justice to their just and reasonable demands unless they show a determination to achieve them and forge the necessary sanctions in this respect. To provide for a situation in the very near future in which the government would not concede the demand for bonus and also a revision of the pay scales, based on the need-based minimum wage, this general council meeting of the AIRF decides to call upon all railwaymen and its affiliated unions to make immediate preparations to forge and keep in readiness sanctions for use in any possible contingency. It, therefore, calls upon all the affiliated unions to ascertain from their constituents, through a process of a strike ballot, their decision in respect of applying necessary sanctions, including a strike (withdrawal of labour) in order to win their just demand. The general council directs all the affiliated unions to com-

plete the process of the strike ballot as early as 31 January 1973.”

The resolution ends with a call “In order to achieve the maximum mobilisation for the achievement of bonus and a just and reasonable revision of the pay scales based on the need-based minimum wage, the AIRF invites the National Federation of the Indian Railwaymen (NFIR) and all other unions and federations of the central government employees to coordinate their action so that the achievement of the demands becomes feasible and more easily realised thereby”.

The category unions and the All-India Railway Employees' Confederation held rallies and demonstrations on similar demands during the latter part of 1972 and beginning of 1973. The NER Mazdur Union (AITUC) conducted a strike ballot on the demands of bonus, needbased minimum wage, implementation of Miabhoy Tribunal Award, setting up of fair price shops and the earlier demand for recognition of the Union.

AIRF GIVES STRIKE CALL

The General Council of the AIRF which met in New Delhi to consider the recommendations of the Third Pay Commission adopted a resolution which said that “not only has pay commission shied away from the challenging task that was placed before it in the matter of need-based minimum wage and restructuring of the pay scales in relation thereto, but the commission has also been responsible for many retrograde recommendations which have curtailed the privileges earned by railwaymen through years of hard and sustained struggles.”

The resolution “after taking all factors into consideration and in deference to the massive mandate given through the ballot for strike, calls upon all the railwaymen, to prepare for a total and indefinite strike to commence on and from 27th August 1973.”

“The General Council of the AIRF reiterates its appeal to all railwaymen, other Central Government employees’ organisations for maximum mobilisation for the struggle.”

But unity of all sections of the railwaymen, let alone of other central government employees’ organisations remained a far cry. The strike call therefore did not materialise. The working committee of the Northern Railway Workers’ Union (AITUC) meeting in New Delhi on 21 April 1973, soon after the AIRF’s strike call in course of a resolution said: “taking such isolated decision for strike by any single organisation and then appealing to others for cooperation is not conducive to promotion of united action. As the position stands today, no single organisation commands majority amongst railway workers and also no single organisation is in a position to call a successful strike on the railways. Only a united struggle under the joint command of various unions and associations is a guarantee to a successful struggle.”

August 27 strike decision reversed

In a resolution the AIRF working committee decided to postpone the proposed strike from 27 August in its meeting held in New Delhi in the first week of August 73 at the time of Loco strike.

SPATE OF LOCO STRIKES

Ferment among railway employees further accentuated by a spate of struggles, work-to-rule agitation and strikes of different vital categories of railway workers during 1973 which are all unrecognised and outside the two recognised federations.

The loco running staff of the Delhi Division of Northern Railway launched direct action from 25 May 1973 in the form of “work-to-designation” in accordance with the decision of the All-India Loco Running Staff Association. But it ultimately took the form of strike. The Government immediately retaliated by promulgating an ordinance on 26

May prohibiting strikes in the railways for a period of six months under the DIR.

The strike, instead of being suppressed, spread to other divisions and to some points in the Western Railway. The Railway Administration refused to negotiate with the Loco Running Staff Association on the plea of its non-recognition. The stubbornness of the striking employees forced the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra to hold talks with the leaders of the unrecognised associations and the strike was called off on 31 May on assurances by the Railway Minister.

AITUC PROTESTS AGAINST BANNING OF STRIKES

On 27 May 1973, the secretariat of the AITUC issued the following statement to the press:

“The AITUC views with grave indignation the six-month ban on strikes imposed by the government under the obnoxious defence of India rules, announced on Saturday.

“The railway workers throughout the country through their organisations have brought to the notice of the government through many long months, their outstanding grievances and demands. But these have fallen on deaf ears. Particularly, during the past few weeks, in the wake of the anti-working class recommendations of the pay commission, the workers have been demanding bilateral talks to settle issues. However, the government, the railway minister and the railway board have chosen to ignore the real voice of the railway workers and only talked to the two hitherto recognised federations. It is well known that these federations no longer enjoy the confidence of the vast majority of the railway workers.

“In the background of this bankrupt policy of the administration railway workers have resorted, in some places to direct action.

“Instead of recognising the urgent need to meet all repre-

representatives of the workers to work out the smooth running of the railways, in the context of the present situation in the country, the railway administration and the government have chosen to wield the big stick. The statement of the railway minister, misnamed 'appeal', that 'this ban is meant exclusively to ensure movement of essential items and is not at all intended to be used against the interests of the vast majority of cooperating railwaymen' only illustrates that he is completely divorced from the reality of the situation and the feelings of the vast majority and is an attempt to bolster the recognised federations who cease to enjoy the loyalty and confidence of the vast majority.

"The AITUC secretariat warns the government that this measure will endanger industrial peace on the railways still further. The AITUC secretariat calls upon the government and the railway minister to immediately withdraw the ban on strikes and convene a conference of representatives of all railway workers' unions to settle issues amicably and with utmost speed. This is the only step that can help to overcome the present critical situation."

RAILWAY BOARD SABOTAGES THE UNDERSTANDING

The Railway Board bureaucrats who hand-in-glove with the two recognised federations opposed any negotiation with unrecognised union, successfully sabotaged the May understanding of the Railway Minister and precipitated another Loco strike in August 1973. In mid-June the Railway Board flouting all assurances of the Minister resorted to largescale victimisation on the Northern Railway.

The Central Executive Committee meeting of the All-India Loco Running Staff Association held in Madras on 27-28 June, decided to go on an all-India strike to achieve their demand relating to working hours which have been pending for many years.

LOCO RUNNING STAFF STRIKE IN AUGUST

The strike began at mid-night of 1 August 1973 throughout the railway system, and continued till 12 August.

AITUC SUPPORTS

On 3 August AITUC General Secretary S. A. Dange issued a press statement extending full support to the striking locomen and calling on the Railway Minister to stand by his earlier assurances and hold talks with the genuine representatives of the loco running staff.

On 5 August S. A. Dange, Indrajit Gupta, M.P. and S. M. Banerji M.P. met the Railway Minister and urged on him to open negotiations with the Action Committee of the Loco Running Staff Association.

The Railway Minister agreed to meet the Action Committee and to rescind all victimisation that took place after 24 May, but on condition that the strike would be called-off. S. A. Dange in a statement, noted the "conciliatory and helpful" attitude of the Minister, and pointed out that "our reports show that despite his statement, more arrests are taking place and harassment of the families of the striking workers by the police is continuing. Besides, no leader in jail would agree to call off a strike as a 'precondition' for release. The least the Government could do was to release the leaders and cancel the warrants of arrests against others so that these employee leaders could move freely and decide. The Government should know that negotiations took place even when strikes were on and this was a recognised industrial practice within and without the country."

During the loco strike of August 1973, both the recognised federations, the AIRF and NFIR opposed negotiation by the Railway Board with the unrecognised and category union, the Loco Running Staff Association. The AIRF working committee meeting in New Delhi during those days, asked the

striking Loco running staff Association to call off the strike stating that "it is committed to agitation on their grievances".

(*Times of India*, 6 Aug. 1973)

George Fernandes also, as President of S.P. appealed to the striking locomen (from Hubli) to call off strike and immediately resume duty. (*Times of India*, 8 Aug., 1973)

M. R. Sabapathi, President of AILRSA in a statement from Madras on August 8 said the Association will not be bound by any decision taken by the Railway Administration in consultation with the two recognised federations of railwaymen. (*Times of India*, 9 Aug, 1973)

The strike of locomen and the extensive stoppage of the railway transport system in almost all zones in varying degrees exposed the standing and influence of the two recognised federations on the railwaymen. It should be mentioned that both the federations and also George Fernandes who was yet to become the President of the AIRF, asked the locomen to unconditionally withdraw the strike without having any settlement or assurance on the part of the Railway Ministry.

During the ten day Loco strike in December 1973 for non-implementation of the August agreement, both the recognised federations took the stand of opposition to the strike. A. P. Sharma, President of NFIR said in a meeting of Congress Parliamentary Party held on December 21 that his federation was strongly opposed to the strike and also expressed resentment at the Labour Minister agreeing to hold negotiations with the Loco Staff leaders before they called off the strike.

The AIRF President said in a statement that his organisation supported the demand of Loco men, but would not ask its members to join the strike. (*Hindustan Times*, Dec. 22, 1973)

Two top leaders of the All India Loco Running Staff Association in a statement (*Statesman*, 27 Dec., 1973) charged that the Western Railway had resorted to punitive measures against locomen in collusion with the recognised union—

Western Railway Employees' Union, an affiliate of AIRF. They said: "That is why Mr. Fernandes is issuing statements, sometimes in favour of the locomen, and sometimes against it, instead of restraining his union, the WREU from indulging in disruptive activities."

CALLING OFF OF STRIKE AS PRECONDITION

The attitude of the Government during the Loco strikes and also agitations of other categories is in complete contrast with the attitude shown during the recent General strike of railwaymen. During the loco strikes arrested leaders were released to enable them to participate in negotiations, and the Railway and Labour Ministers negotiated with an unrecognised union when the strike was on. No such precondition that strike has to be called off before any negotiation, was insisted by the Government. Attitude shown during the recent strike is thus a complete reversal of the stand the government took during the loco strikes and work to rule agitations of other sections of the railway employees. While on this occasion negotiaton was subverted by arrests, earlier, arrested people were released to facilitate negotiation without the strike being called off.

The Labour Minister, K. V. Raghunatha Reddy also did his best to meet members of the action committee to use his good offices to bring about a negotiated settlement.

Finally, on 7 August members of the action committee first held a meeting with the labour minister. After some discussions with him they met the railway minister on 10 August. The recognised federations and the Railway Board left no stone unturned to prevent these discussions and meetings. The federations gave desperate calls to the workers to resume work. But their call went un-heeded since they did not command the confidence of the striking locomen, nor the other categories who were showing their solidarity for the striking locomen in every manner possible. It was thus, not only a strike of more than 50,000 of the loco running men for their demands—the strike symbolised the will of the rail-

waymen as a whole to break through the moribund federations.

As a result of the prolonged talks, a settlement was finally reached on the night of Sunday 12 August 1973 between the railway minister and the striking workers' action committee in the presence of the labour minister.

The settlement was a signal victory for the loco running staff—their long standing demand of reduction in hours of work was granted—they will now have only ten hours duty as opposed to 14 hours. The many unfulfilled assurances made to them by one minister after another since 1967 are to be implemented. Break in service—a favourite method of punishment by the Railway Board—is to be condoned. And negotiations will be held with the AILRSA on other issues which have to be settled.

The unity and determination of the loco running staff, the support and solidarity extended to them by every section of the railway workers enabled them to score this signal victory. On 14 August, S. A. Dange, general secretary of the AITUC, issued the following statement on the outcome of the strike:

“The AITUC greets with satisfaction the successful conclusions of the locomen's strike. The locomen have won a significant victory in getting their working hours reduced from 14 to 10 and in getting all penal measures against the striking railwaymen withdrawn as well as securing de facto recognition of their organisation. The AITUC congratulates the loco staff and their leadership on their splendid achievement and on the exemplary unity and determination shown by them.

“The AITUC also highly appreciates the understanding shown by the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra in setting aside all consideration of false prestige and red-tape and negotiating patiently with the leaders of the strikers thereby foiling the bureaucrats and the anti-working class elements who wanted to sabotage a settlement.

“The AITUC also appreciates the part played by the

Labour Minister, K. V. Raghunatha Reddy in paving the way for a settlement”.

Thus, for the first time since independence, railway workers could wrest their just demands from the government—the Railway Minister could act independently of the Railway Board and assert his authority over the hidebound bureaucratic approach of the Board, The Railway Board has always kept the labour ministry out of the picture and no labour dispute in the railways until now could be processed through the labour ministry.

This did not mean the battle was over. The loco running staff have been victorious in achieving the terms of the agreement which were announced by the Railway Minister in parliament on 13 August 1973. But the Railway Board has been trying to scuttle the agreement by delaying in releasing the arrested workers and “provoking” incidents even after the strike was called off. Again, the Railway Minister had to be approached to expedite the releases and enable the striking workers to resume duty.

This victory of the loco running staff opened the road to better relations between railway workers and the Railway Minister. The railway workers then hoped for an overhauling of the whole system of industrial relations in the railway—it is only through a democratic system of industrial relations being achieved that future friction and trouble can be avoided on the railways and the workers enabled to play their rightful role in this vital sector of the nation’s economy.

TERMS OF SETTLEMENT

Mishra’s Statement in Parliament

“I am glad to inform the House that in response to the sage advice of the Rashtrapati and the Prime Minister, the locomen who had abstained from work decided late last night (12 August 1973) to resume duty forthwith.

“The delegation of these loco running staff have had talks

for several days with the Minister for Labour, Shri Raghunath Reddy, and with me.

“In the context of these talks and with a view to restoring order and industrial peace and promoting productivity and prosperity of the national economy certain arrangements have been arrived at today (13 August 1973) which I am enumerating below as specific conclusions.

1. The absentee staff will resume their duties immediately.
2. All those who have been arrested in connection with the agitation (May to August 1973) will be released as soon as the present agitation is called off except those charged under law for acts of sabotage, damage to railway property and violence.

Charge-sheets filed against the persons under the provisions of the DIR for acts which do not involve sabotage, damage to railway property or violence shall be reviewed by the committee and appropriate action will be initiated for getting such chargesheets withdrawn. With respect to acts of sabotage, damaging railway property and violence, it would be impressed upon the State Governments to examine all matters on merit and take appropriate action in such cases.

3. All those released from arrest will be taken back on duty.

4. Penal transfers, reversions, suspensions and removals arising out of the agitations will be withdrawn except for those charged with acts of sabotage, damage to railway property and violence.

5. Break-in-service shall be condoned.

6. The period of absence arising out of the present agitation from 1 August 1973 will be adjusted against leave earned and in cases where leave earned is not due shall be adjusted against leave to be earned in the immediate future.

7. Charge-sheets of administrative character directly connected with trade union activities or activities arising out of agitations (May-August 1973) shall be withdrawn.

8. The NFIR and the AIRF had for many years in the permanent negotiating machinery and elsewhere demanded the review of the hours of work. This question of hours of

work was referred to the Miabhoy Tribunal which gave its recommendations in August 1972. After examining international standards and practices and conditions prevailing in this country, the tribunal had accepted in principle that there was a case for reduction of hours of work duty at a stretch for the running staff, namely locomen, guards and brakeman. I accept this position.

During the period of the last ten days, I had a number of meetings with the leaders of the two recognised federations—the National Federation of Indian Railwaymen and the All India Railwaymen's Federation—also and I have had the benefit of their views on this complicated matter.

After giving considerable thought to this question and in response to the demand of the workers, I have agreed to a revision which is defined in precise terms as under:

Members of the loco running staff will not be required to work for more than ten hours at a stretch from signing on to signing off. Details and mode and manner of the implementation of 10 hours of work will be discussed and finalised by the committee to be appointed and held between the representatives of the loco running staff and the government within six weeks from the withdrawal of this agitation.

9. All the assurances given by the government from the period commencing July 1967 to date that have remained unimplemented shall be implemented as expeditiously as possible.

RAILWAY BOARD DELAYS IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCO RUNNING STAFF AGREEMENT

The railway minister, L. N. Mishra announced in the Lok Sabha on 29 November 1973 that the ten-hour duty system for locomen would be introduced on the entire network of railways from 1 December 1973. He added, however, that hundred per cent implementation of the scheme would take nearly three to four years. In other words, the minister made a statement to underline the claim of the Railway Board that

the scheme would take as long as four years. This is hardly what were the claims of the workers when they went on strike in August that year. Prior to this statement, M. R. Sabapathy, president of the All India Loco Running Staff Association had made clear in his statement that the locomen would not be satisfied with anything less than implementation of the scheme in 90 days. Such concrete proposals as were necessary in this regard had already been submitted by the workers' representatives on the negotiating committee. The statement made by M. R. Sabapathy is as follows:

“Despite the fact that three months have gone by since the strike by locomen throughout the country leading to an agreement to set up a committee for implementing 10 hours work rule and withdrawal of all victimisation cases and to discuss and settle other demands within a period of six weeks from 13 August 1973, the Railway authorities are placing one hurdle after another in settling issues.

“The main excuse put forward by them is that it would take as long as four years to bring in the ten-hour duty schedule. The AILRSA has already submitted concrete proposals to the committee by which the scheme can be implemented within a period of 90 days.

“The statement of Shri Md. Gureshi in Parliament that negotiations have reached a “critical stage” is surprising to everyone of the loco running staff, particularly the members of the negotiating committee. The Honourable Minister might have given this statement based on the adverse proposals advanced by the Railway Board officials in the committee whose main aim is to sabotage the agreement and to suppress the Loco Running Staff.

“Besides, the package deal advanced by the official side of the committee proves that in withholding the accepted decisions on victimisation can pressurise the Loco Running Staff to accept their scheme of implementation of the ten-hour work.

“It is strange to see that those who violently opposed the action of the loco running staff now coming forward to claim that they are the spokesmen of the loco running staff. We

call upon the AILRSA members not to be misled by slogan mongering of such elements.

“The AILRSA would warn all concerned that if the issues are not settled without further delay, and if the dilatoriness of the officials continues, the loco running staff will be left no alternative except to take firm action. In the interests of industrial peace on the railways we look forward to settle.”

LOCO RUNNING STAFF STRIKE AGAIN IN DECEMBER

Once again in the month of December 1973, a strike action flared up in the railway led by the All India Loco Running Staff Association. While efforts were being made to implement the agreement arising out of the strike in August 1973, the railway authorities on the various railways, under the directives of the Railway Board took to victimisation of locomen on the Western and other railways. The authorities also failed to implement the agreement in regard negotiation facilities.

The action was triggered off first at Gandhidham on the Western Railway when the authorities refused to accept a memorandum from the Western zone branch of the AILRSA. It then spread to the Northern and other railways.

On the 16 December it was known that the strike was on again.

On 17 December Railway Minister L. N. Mishra announced in parliament that he was prepared to talk with the representatives of the striking locomen. He also announced that he was of the opinion that “Something has got to be done. The whole industrial relations in the railways has got to be thoroughly discussed. I have been thinking about it. I, sometime in January, propose to convene a conference of the two federations, ourselves and other people representing labour, and I would also invite the labour minister to come to that conference and discuss this question thoroughly be-

cause the time has come when we cannot afford to take any risk about the industrial relations in the railways...”

EMERGENCE OF GEORGE FERNANDES

The AIRF Convention was held in Secunderabad from 15 to 19 October 1973. In that Convention George Fernandes defeated Peter Alvares by 277 votes to 210 votes and was elected President of the AIRF.

The Convention adopted a resolution putting forth 7-point demands and called upon railway workers to go into strike action from 27 February 1974.

The Resolution reads as follows:

“This Annual Convention of the All India Railwaymen’s Federation (AIRF) held in Secunderabad from 15 to 19 October 1973, having given careful and serious consideration of Government’s decision announced last week is fully and finally convinced that Government had no serious intention of making any substantial improvement in the recommendations of the pay commission so as to satisfy the minimum and legitimate demands and aspirations of railwaymen. The AIRF had, with constraint, agreed to negotiate with government through the forum of the joint consultative machinery (JCM), so as to provide one more opportunity to government to gauge the severe frustration and discontentment prevailing in their ranks over the inadequate, irrational and retrograde recommendations of the commission, and to take appropriate measures to remedy them. Instead, government utilised this opportunity for buying time, delaying its decision and to put forth a totally unacceptable proposal. . . . The convention notes with serious concern the embittered feelings amongst railwaymen over this episode and government’s decision thereon.

The convention categorically rejects government’s decision on the recommendations of the pay commission. The AIRF makes it clear and unequivocal that no quantification which is not based on the 15th I.L.C. formula will be accepted by it. The recent settlement of wage disputes in the Bharat

Heavy Electricals (Public Sector) and the cement industry (Private Sector) which have been arrived at the instance of government, provided for a minimum wage of Rs 294 and Rs 318 respectively. Similar wage settlement and awards have been made in Banks, MMTC, again on government's intervention and guidance. This dual policy of government, one aimed at encouragement to the public and private sectors and the other of restraint and denial to railwaymen is aimed at a purposeful discrimination against railwaymen. The AIRF having abandoned all hopes of a settlement on the basis of government's promises and policies decides to resort to strike action for achievement of the following demands on 27 February 1974 from 6.00 p.m.

1. Re-structuring of the pay scales providing need-based minimum wage in accordance with the principles of the 15th Indian Labour Conference formula.

2. Provision of subsidised grain shops.

3. Payment of bonus to all railwaymen.

4. Full neutralisation of dearness allowance after a periodic review of 6 months on a rise of 4 points in the All India average consumer price index.

5. Point to point fixation so as to ensure reflection (of the weightage) of service in the new scales of pay.

6. Retrospective effect of the recommendations of the third pay commission from 1-3-1970 for all purposes including the payment of arrears.

7. Speedy settlement of all other outstanding demands and disputes of railwaymen pending at various levels viz. PNM, JCM, Tribunal etc.

“The convention invites the attention of railwaymen particularly that the achievement of the above concretised demands calls for the firm determination and maximum mobilisation of all their energies and efforts. Government has been accustomed to take railwaymen for granted. This attitude must now cease and government must be made to realise that railwaymen will not permit any such situation to con-

tinue any longer which subjects them to injustice and discrimination.

“This meeting also decides to hold a convention of all trade union organisations of railwaymen (excluding NFIR) and other central government employees and central trade unions organisations by November 1973 to bring about co-ordination of action for the success of the strike.

“This convention directs its affiliated unions to collect a struggle fund of rupees two lakhs (Rs 2 lakhs) each by the 31 December 1973 so as to ensure the success of an indefinite strike action.

“In order to review the situation and decide the future course of action in consonance with the date of strike i.e., 27 February 1974, this Convention directs the working committee to meet not later than the first week of January 1974”.

IDEA OF CONVENTION OF ALL RAILWAY UNIONS MOOTED

The Secunderabad Convention of the AIRF also decided “to hold a Convention of all trade union organisations of railwaymen (excluding NFIR) and other Central Government employees and Central trade union organisations by November 1973 to bring about coordination of action for the success of the strike.”

But the idea was still of a joint front of railwaymen with all government and semi-government employees, at the central and state levels.

MOVE BY AITUC RAILWAY UNIONS

The Railway Unions affiliated to AITUC, but unrecognised, in a statement called for mutual discussion and consultation on joint mass action on the railways. The statement reads as follows:

“The All India Railwaymen’s Federation has given a call for a countrywide strike on the railways from 27 February 1974 on the demands such as interim increase in wages to bring emoluments at least on par with those in the public sector, in the meanwhile reclassification of railway employees, point to point adjustment in dearness allowance, bonus, setting up of subsidised grain shops, etc. Prices continue to shoot up day by day causing further erosion in the real value of wages. There is an acute scarcity of particularly all the essential commodities of life which are in the grip of black-market causing untold misery and suffering to the working people. Government has totally failed in solving these key problems.

“In this critical situation the anti-people and anti-labour policies and practices of the government can be checked and modified by powerful and united mass actions of the organised working class. Obviously, a united nationwide action on the railways at the present juncture could be an effective expression of the tremendous discontent not only of railwaymen but of all the central government employees and indeed of the toiling people as a whole. Such an action could have its impact and desired results only if it is conducted under conditions of all-in unity and discipline.

“Events in the last few years have established the fact that lakhs of railwaymen are no longer under the influence of the AIRF. They have organised themselves in several industrial and categorywise unions. Further, in view of the past experience regarding the several calls for strikes issued by the AIRF on its own, lakhs of workers view the present ‘strike call’ with scepticism. On the other hand, several unions and category-wise associations, albeit technically ‘unrecognised’, have firmly established through dogged and militant struggles the fact that they command the confidence of substantial sections of railwaymen.

“In such a situation, if a strike action is to be effective and successful it should be a really broad-based and united action. This alone can confront the railway administration with the

combined strength of all the railway workers. For this purpose it is necessary to take steps for mutual consultations among all other railway unions and categorywise associations and other confederation with the object of organising and conducting joint all-India action on agreed demands and on an agreed date.

“We note that the president of the AIRF is on record to the effect that 27 February is not a ‘sacrosanct’ date. Hence, there should be no objection to free and frank mutual discussions on this issue.

“We hope that the AIRF will not stand on any false sense of prestige or sectarian, political considerations, but will come forward for joint consultations and joint action. We, on our part, are ready to cooperate in every manner in all steps taken to achieve this end. This is the only way in which the real interests of the railwaymen could be served.”

The signatories to the statement were: Shrikrishna, general secretary, Northern Railway Workers’ Union, V. P. Sinha, general secretary, North Eastern Railway Mazdoor Union, J. M. Biswas, general secretary, North Frontier Railway Workers’ Union, Ram Balak Singh, general secretary, Eastern Railway Workers’ Union, J. Satyanarayana, general secretary, South Central Railway Workers’ Union, K. Gopinathan, general secretary, Railway Labour Union, Southern Railway, Ramjilal Sharma, general secretary, Western Railway Workers’ Union and R. Dakshinamoorthy, general secretary, Integral Coach Factory Workers’ Union, Perambur.

DEMANDS DAY OBSERVED BY AITUC RAILWAY UNIONS

The AITUC Unions in different Railways, outside the AIRF observed throughout the country Demands Day on 31 January 1974 for popularising the 7-point demands of the railwaymen.

RAILWAY MINISTER CALLS CONFERENCE

On 4 February the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra called a Conference on Labour Relations on the Indian Railways of the Central Trade Unions and the two recognised Federations. The NFIR vehemently attacked the category unions and also criticised the Railway and Labour Ministers for entering into discussions with such unions.

The AITUC representatives held the Railway Board and the Zonal administrations responsible for unrest among the railway workers.

UNITY WAS A DIFFICULT TASK

It was evident that the dominant leadership of the AIRF due to its method of functioning, jobbery and opportunism arising out of its privileged status of recognition, its hostile attitude akin to that of the Railway Board towards the category unions and other unrecognised unions and their struggles on genuine demands, had lost the faith and confidence of the mass of the railwaymen. AIRF on its own cannot draw the railwaymen to any movement. Hence, it decided thrice on a strike, but had to postpone. It ultimately dawned on the leadership particularly after George Fernandez became President that unless the AIRF sheds its prejudices and hostility towards other unions, and also illusions about its own influence and strength amongst the railway workers, no mass trade union action on the railway is feasible.

On the other hand, discontent was growing with varying intensity among different sections of the railway workers. Besides the general issues of wages and bonus, anomalies and irrationality of wages and working conditions on various counts were agitating the minds of the vast sections of the railwaymen.

According to the booklet *Spare the nation's life* published by the Ministry of Railways during the May, '73 strike of Locomen, the 12-day strike of locomen in May was signal of a

spate of agitations by other categories of employees like the loco maintenance staff, carriage and wagon employees, train examiners, signals and telecommunication employees, etc.

“On a rough calculation the Railways lost during April to October, 1973, 4,50,000 mandays—nearly twice the number of mandays lost in the two preceding years taken together. In 1971-72, the total number of mandays lost was 1,23,742 and 1,25,000 in 1972-73”.

The work to rule agitations of station masters and lately in March 1974 of guards were a part of category employees' movements that swept through the railway system in recent years. The agitation of 20,000 employees of Kharagpur in December last year ultimately forced the Railways and the state government authorities to arrange regular supply of foodgrains to that railway centre.

On the one hand was the bureaucratic attitude of the Railway Board, and on the other the ineffectiveness of the two recognised federations who in the eyes of the railwaymen were acquiescing with the bureaucrats of the Board resulted in sporadic actions of the workers of different categories and sections. The Miabhoy Tribunal Award with regard to the working hours of some sections of the railway workers which was submitted in 1972 has been gathering dust at the Rail Bhavan for the last two years.

The AIRF and the NFIR were equally vociferous along with the Railway Board in disowning and denouncing any sectional action by any category union on their long neglected genuine demands. In that way a relation of bitter hostility developed between the recognised federations on the one hand and the category unions and unrecognised unions, on the other.

The unity that was achieved in the subsequent period symbolised by the NCCRS was therefore not an easy one.

AIRF REVERSES ITS EARLIER STRIKE DECISION

The Secunderabad Convention of the AIRF held in October 1973 which elected George Fernandes as President re-

placing Peter Alvares, in course of its resolution took the decision of strike to commence from 27 February 1974.

The General Council of the AIRF meeting in Nagpur on 6-7 February 1974 reversed the decision and instead called for a national Convention of all railway unions including category unions.

The AIRF General Council also decided to hold a Convention of all government employees including those of state governments on 28 February 1974.

The AIRF General Council resolution is reproduced below:

The General Council of the AIRF heard the representatives of the affiliates on the state of the organisation and on the preparations for the general strike of railwaymen in support of their demands submitted to the Railway Board on 8 November, 1973 in pursuance to the decision of the Secunderabad Convention. It considered the report of the Working Committee on the various steps taken by it to implement the strike decision, and it reviewed the overall situation on the Railways and in the country.

The General Council notes that the preparations made so far for the launching of the General Strike are not adequate on several railways. The total strike fund collected and accounted so far amounts to less than Rs 6,00,000 with the Central Railway collecting Rs 2,00,000, Western Railway Rs 1,60,000, Northern Railway Rs 25,000 Eastern Railway Rs 12,000, North East Frontier Railway Rs 30,000, Southern Railway Rs 1,00,000 and South Central Railway Rs 50,000. This amount is far below the minimum target laid down in the Secunderabad resolution.

The General Council has taken note of the suggestions made by various unions of railwaymen affiliated to different central organisations and categorywise unions seeking a change in the date of the strike and for the building of a united forum of railwaymen to launch the action. In deference to the wishes of these organisations and looking at the level of preparations made by the affiliates, the Council resolves

to postpone the strike to a date to be fixed in consultation with other organisations of railwaymen.

The General Council is pleased at the outcome of the two meetings of the representatives of the categorywise unions/associations held in Delhi under the auspices of the AIRF on 26 and 27 December, 1973 and on 24 and 25, January, 1974. It calls upon all its affiliates to ensure the success of the national convention of railwaymen to be convened in Delhi on 27 February, 1974 by the AIRF as per the desire of the meeting of representatives of categorywise organisations expressed in the Declaration adopted at the meeting on 24 and 25 January, 1974. The General Council hereby invites all organisations of railwaymen, irrespective of their status and affiliation, to participate in this convention and make it the biggest ever demonstration of their unity and solidarity and of their determination to win their demands.

While reiterating our position that Railwaymen will not any more accept their wages, service conditions and status to be mixed up with those of civil servants, the General Council, nevertheless, is of the firm opinion that railwaymen cannot keep themselves away from the mainstream of the movement of other working people and particularly of the Central Government employees. To consider ways and means of co-ordinating the ensuing struggle of railwaymen with that of other government employees the General Council, hereby resolves to convene a conference of all central government employees' organisations in the middle of March in New Delhi. Representatives of state government employees and of other public employees will also be invited to this conference.

The General Council has taken note of the various agitations launched by railwaymen all over the country whether through the affiliates of the AIRF or under the auspices of other organisations on the sectional and general demands of railwaymen. All these actions have in their own way steeled the will of railwaymen and reinforced their belief that their problems and demands can be resolved only through determined and united action. While calling upon the rail-

waymen to ready themselves for such action, the Council authorises the Working Committee to take all steps necessary for the conduct of the struggle.

Specifically, the General Council directs its affiliates to immediately set up:

1. Action Committee of the union at all level.
2. Joint Action Committees with all those organisations that are willing to make common cause with our struggle.
3. Women's Committees to bring about total involvement of the women from railwaymen's families in the struggle.
4. Volunteer Corps to meet any situations that may be created by the enemies of the struggle.
5. People's 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 Headquarters to keep liaison with the AIRF Headquarters on the progress made in the preparations for the strike.

Railwaymen are today standing at the threshold of the greatest struggle of their lives. The AIRF is aware of the great responsibility that sets on its shoulders in leading this struggle. We are also aware that this struggle will call for the greatest sacrifices from all sections of railwaymen. We pledge today that we shall leave no stone unturned to lead this struggle to a successful end.

NATIONAL CONVENTION OF RAILWAYMEN

The Convention which took place in New Delhi on 27 February 1974 ushered in a new turn in the railway trade union movement. The national convention convened by

AIRF President George Fernandes united all railway unions, recognised and unrecognised, industrial and category unions with the sole exception of NFIR. They were invited, but kept aloof. All Central Trade Union organisations, viz. AITUC, CITU, HMS, HMP, BMS and UTUC were also invited. All category unions like the All-India Loco Running Staff Association who from their experiences during their recent struggles were opposed and denounced by the AIRF leadership also participated in the national convention to forge for the first time in recent times, an all-in unity of railwaymen irrespective of categories and affiliations.

The Convention adopted an eight-point charter of Demands and formed the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggles (NCCRS). S. A. Dange, K. G. Sriwastava, Y. D. Sharma, Indrajit Gupta are among others who attended the convention. Dange addressed the convention on behalf of AITUC.

The convention adopted the following resolution unanimously:

"The National Convention of Railwaymen is gratified to note the emerging unity of purpose and action among railwaymen as symbolised by this convention and through the many mass actions conducted by railwaymen in recent times in support of their long pending demands.

The Convention would like to emphasise that only through lasting unity and effective action would railwaymen be able to fulfil their role as a vanguard of the working class movement in India, even while securing the over-due improvement in their working and living conditions.

The Convention is concerned at the failure of the Railway Ministry to bring about a settlement of the various general and sectional demands of railwaymen, more particularly, demands relating to wages, dearness allowance, bonus, decasualisation of casual labour and provision of adequate and subsidised foodgrains and other essential commodities to Railwaymen. While the Railwaymen quite justifiably expect the Railway Ministry to concede their demand for a need-

based minimum wage, the least the Railway Ministry should have done was to concede the workers' demand for parity in wages with the public sector undertakings of the Government of India.

The Convention rejects the argument advanced in certain quarters that the Railways cannot afford to meet the workers' demands as that would entail additional financial burden on the railways. While there is tremendous scope to avoid wastage and introduce economies on the Railways and in the process find financial resources to meet the workers' legitimate demands, it is the height of absurdity to suggest that paying to the railwaymen wages equal to those available to workers in other public sector enterprises would mean an increase in the railway fares and freight rates.

The convention would like to point out that the last time the railwaymen's salaries/wages were revised was following the recommendations of the II Pay Commission in 1959, and in the intervening fifteen years, railway fares and freights have been revised upwards at least seventeen times without providing for any revision in the wage structure of railwaymen. If Dearness Allowance has been revised it was only to compensate for the rising prices due to the failure of the Government to hold the price line, and even there, the inadequate neutralisation has resulted in actual reduction of the real wages of railway employees. According to the III Pay Commission, between 1960 and 1972, the real earnings of an LDC on the Railways have come down by 10 per cent, of a UDC by 18 per cent, of an 'A' Grade Railway Driver by 22 per cent. Between 1972 and 1974, there has been a further erosion in the real earnings of railwaymen due to the enormous increase in the prices of all essential goods. The fact is that railwaymen are today poorer than what they were 14 years ago.

The Convention hereby calls upon the Railway Ministry to forthwith concede the following urgent and common demands of railwaymen:

(a) All railwaymen be treated as industrial workers with full trade union rights including the right to negotiate.

(b) The working hours of Railwaymen shall not exceed eight per day.

(c) There shall be job evaluation of all railwaymen through a scientific system to be followed by their reclassification and regradation 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 Undertaking, viz. HMT, BHEL, HSL, HAL, etc.

2. Dearness Allowance linked to the cost of living index with full neutralisation for every rise of 4 points in a six month period.

3. Bonus at the rate of one month's wages for the years 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 foodgrains and other essential commodities through departmentally-run shops.

6. All victimisation cases should be withdrawn.

The Convention calls upon the Railway Ministry to open negotiations on these demands and arrive at a settlement thereon by April 10, 1974.

The Convention serves an ultimatum on the Railway Ministry that if a settlement on these demands is not forthcoming by that date, the railwaymen will consider themselves free to resort to an indefinite general strike with effect from any date thereafter.

The Convention resolves that for the implementation of this resolution and for achieving the above-mentioned demands a Coordination Committee consisting of representatives of all railwaymen's organisations whether industrial or category-wise be formed with the President of the AIRF as the Convener.

The Convention urges all participating organisations to form Coordination Committees at every possible level and to

observe a Demands Week from 2 to 8 April, 1974, under the joint auspices of these committees.

The Convention calls upon the railwaymen to unite as never before and to forge the necessary sanctions to compel the Railway Ministry to settle the demands of the railwaymen. It warns the railwaymen to beware of forces that may try to sabotage this great effort at united act.

Railwaymen, more than any other section of people, are aware of the implications of a railway strike on the nation's economy. They are also fully conscious of the inconvenience that is caused to the people when the railways grind to a halt.

The Convention wants to emphasise that if railwaymen are compelled to take the decision for a strike, it is only because the Railway Administration has created situation in which no other alternative offer itself for the railwaymen to bring about a settlement of their legitimate demands.

The Convention hopes that the emerging unity of action among railwaymen will open the eyes of the Railway Administration to the realities of the situation and force them to concede the legitimate demands of the workers. Should, however, a strike become inevitable the Convention appeals to the working people, youth, students and the rural masses to support the workers' just struggle and at the same time exert pressure on the government to meet the workers' demands."

13 MEMBER ACTION COMMITTEE

The NCCRS meeting on 28 February formed the 13-Member Action Committee consisting of the following members:

- | | |
|----------------------|------------|
| 1. George Fernandes | — Convenor |
| 2. J. P. Choubey | AIRF |
| 3. Priya Gupta | " |
| 4. Parvathi Krishnan | AITUC |
| 5. Sri Krishna | " |

6. N. S. Bhangoo	-- All-India Railway Employees' Confederation
7. K. P. Ramaswamy	"
8. H. S. Choudhury	-- All-India Loco Running Staff Association
9. S. K. Dhar	"
10. Samar Mukherji	CITU
11. N. N. Chakravarty	"
12. G. S. Gokhale	BMS
13. N. M. Pathak	"

NATIONAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE FOR RAILWAYMEN'S STRUGGLE

The first meeting of the Committee formed at National Convention of Railwaymen held on 27 February, took place on 28th February. The office of the Coordination Committee will be at 125-E, Babar Road, New Relhi-1.

As resolved by the Convention all participating organisations shall form Coordinating Committees at all possible levels.

Each participating organisation will collect its own struggle funds. During the "Demand Week" from 2 to 8 April the programme will be:

(a) All railwaymen will wear badges during the week. The badges will be printed in the name of the Coordination Committee with specimen to be supplied to all the participating organisations.

(b) On 8 April massive demonstration shall be arranged jointly by all the organisations in front of their respective division and/or zonal headquarters.

AITUC FORMS FEDERATION

In order to be able to intervene in the developing situation and to coordinate the activities of AITUC Railway unions,

AITUC convened a conference of all affiliated railway unions outside the AIRF on 14-15 March, 1974 in New Delhi, and formed the Indian Railway Workers' Federation (IRWF). S. A. Dange inaugurating the conference made it clear that this federation is not rival to any of the existing federations and category unions and associations. The IRWF and its affiliated unions will implement the decision adopted at the National Convention of Railwaymen held on 27 February. AITUC and IRWF stand for unity of railwaymen both in the interest of railwaymen and also in the interest of the country and national economy.

The following office-bearers of the IRWF were elected at the conference.

President	— S. A. Dange
Working President	— Parvathi Krishnan, M.P.
Vice-Presidents	— M. Kalyanasundaram, M.P. Sarjoo Pandey, M.P. Ramavatar Shastri, M.P. Sivarama
General Secretary	— P. K. Kumaran
Joint General Secretary	— Sri Krishna
Secretaries	— Roza Deshpande, M.P. J. M. Biswas K. Gopinathan
Treasurer	— B. R. Shivankar

The following unions are affiliated to the IRWF:

1. Northern Railway Workers' Union
2. North Eastern Railway Mazdoor Union
3. Railway Labour Union (Madras), S.Rly.
4. Eastern Railway Workers' Union
5. Western Railway Workers' Union
6. Northeast Frontier Railway Workers' Union
7. South Central Railway Workers' Union
8. I.C.F. Workers' Union, Madras
9. C.L.W. Employees' Union
10. Central Railway Workers' Union

Almost immediately after the Conference, a delegation of IRWF led by S. A. Dange met the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra and submitted the demands adopted at the National Convention of 27 February and urged on the Railway Minister to start negotiations with the Action Committee without further delay. They also met the Union Labour Minister to urge upon him the necessity of taking up the question of negotiations with all concerned.

FERNANDES-DANGE CORRESPONDENCE

Letter of George Fernandes to S. A. Dange

Dear Comrade Dange,

The newspapers report the formation of the AITUC Railwaymen's Federation. Of course, you had mentioned about this to me when we had a meeting on 7 February.

There are only two points that have surprised me, and on which, I hope, you will provide some clarification.

First, you mention that if a general strike should materialise on the railways consequent upon the failure of the government to negotiate and settle on the demands (though you mention that your federation has put forward certain demands with an ultimatum to settle them by 10 April, I take it that you are referring to the 27 February Convention which was convened by the AIRF), the "main stress of (your) federation even during the struggle would be to ensure an uninterrupted flow of supplies like steel and coal, vital to the national economy". I am afraid that this was not visualised by the 27 February Convention where the main stress was on a total general strike on the railways if the government should fail to settle the demands of the railwaymen.

Second, you complain that AIRF has been functioning in a manner which did not meet the needs of the workers.

You are aware that the only union of some following which the AITUC has on the Railways is on the South

Eastern Railway, and this union has been an affiliate of the AIRF, fully participating in all decision making and the implementation of these decisions. So if there have been shortcomings in the AIRF, the AITUC is also a party to them. Therefore, why take the posture of holier than thou while justifying a decision which is a purely political?

A question incidental to the second point is whether in view of the AITUC having its own federation, the AITUC union on the S.E. Railway will disaffiliate itself from the AIRF and seek affiliation to the AITUC federation?

Many other issues arise out of your decision to launch a federation, but they could be discussed, if necessary, on another occasion.

With regards,

17 March, '74

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
(George Fernandes),
President

S. A. Dange's Reply

18 March, 1974

Dear Comrade George Fernandes,

Your letter dated 17th March, 1974, regarding certain points arising out of the formation of a new railway workers' federation under the auspices of the AITUC, has been received.

As we finished our work only on 16th evening (Saturday), I was going to send you the papers of that conference. But you have written to me on 17th morning, obviously basing yourself on what appeared in the newspapers on Sunday morning of 17th.

As I had told you this is a federation of Railway Unions some of which were formed long ago and were affiliates of the AITUC.

The S.E. Railway Union to which you refer and which is an old affiliate of the AIRF, was not invited to this Confer-

ence. In reply to your very relevant query, I might tell you that though the S.E. Rly. Union is an affiliate of the AITUC, it is not going to disaffiliate from your AIRF to join the new AITUC Federation. We have no intention of taking away any unions which are already your affiliates.

I am sending you separately the list of Railway Unions of the AITUC which now form the new IRWF.

The demands and call for action adopted by this Federation are more or less identical with those of the National Convention convened by you and which the AITUC attended.

You have raised the question of a reference in the Press Conference that we are suggesting a line of keeping the flow of certain vital supplies unaffected, even during the general strike, when it materialises.

The reference actually was to food supplies to the people. This is nothing new. In many bundhs and strikes, the trade unions have agreed to exempt such services as milk vans, fire-brigades, hospitals, etc. You are aware of such exemptions as we all have done so in Bombay, in several strikes, and bundhs.

My main reference was to such exemptions first. You may remember that in the proposed All-India General Strike of Railways, called in 1951 or so, by the AIRF, under the leadership of Jaya Prakash Narain, the then President of the AIRF (which did not come off as a settlement was offered), J. P. had assured the Government of India that food movements would be kept going, since Nehru had attacked the proposed strike on that account.

You are also aware, that in coalminers' strike, the world over, the safety servicemen are allowed to enter the mines so that they may not be rendered unworkable due to flooding or explosions.

The reference to iron and coal arose out of this context—that if it is said that coke-ovens and hearth-furnance refractories may be ruined if suddenly coal does not reach them, the matter could be considered. But it did not imply conti-

nuous running of the whole industry during the strike. Since they will get enough notice of action, they should prepare in advance measures to prevent ruination of the vital plants.

Short of such points, which can be discussed, the strike has to be total, if the government does not negotiate and settle.

I shall now take up my reference to the AIRF functioning. The criticism refers both to NFIR and AIRF. You yourself know that the AIRF has been nothing but the handmaid of the Railway Board so far. It attacked militant workers, not only those, who belonged to AITUC line of thinking, but also the militants in the AIRF itself. The P.N.M. machinery of both the NFIR and AIRF was nothing but a vehicle for jobbery and corruption at various levels.

And when workers went into action on their own, in various sectors or categories, the AIRF denounced them and helped the Railway Board to break their struggle, as is on record in many instances.

Even the action of the locomen last August was not supported by the AIRF and the AITUC intervention alone broke the deadlock and opened the way to negotiation.

These are all well known matters of fact and history. My reference, therefore, was not without a basis of truth.

Now, since you became the President and called the wide and broad National Convention to plan the General Strike things do promise to assume a new look in the AIRF. Even then I am not so sure, because the President that is you alone do not make the whole AIRF. Moreover, the whole galaxy of men, who made the old AIRF and against whom you yourself were planning to float new unions and a new federation, still remains where they were. I hope a real change will develop in due course. But one cannot be so sure. Even if you try to do it, there will be many hurdles.

One more point in this connection I would like to mention. Indian trade unionism has come to a stage, where no one or two centres alone can claim to represent the majority or demand exclusive recognition. But in railways, you and the NFIR insist on no one else being "recognised" or

even allowed "to talk" to the Railway Board and government on any of railwaymen's questions. Why this attitude? You know the categories are a fact and cannot be just ruled out of existence. Hence, we should not obstruct their recognition or right to negotiation and talk, if they feel like that and more so because they have developed strong feelings of category—fraternity. During the loco strike and the guards' strike, I was surprised at the AIRF obstructing their recognition or even direct negotiations. Of course you took the guards leader with you (as recognised AIRF leader) to the Railway Board, which then talked to the guards' leader. This almost looks like the God Almighty refusing to talk to his own mortals except through the mouth of a recognised Brahmin! Why this haughty ritual of the Ministry or the Railway Board, we should support, I do not know.

That is perhaps why the Confederation of Category Unions at the National Convention wanted that the Con-
vener should not be only the President of the AIRF but should have their representative also along with you.

On this question, our attitude is different from yours, and I can well understand that you may not agree with it.

On your records as well as in practice, there is a resolution of the NFIR and the AIRF and an agreement with the Railway Board that the board will not "talk or negotiate" with anyone at any level, except through the P.N.M. machinery of your two federations. This was agreed to by the Railway Board in your joint meeting with them, because in some cases the zonal managers had talked to workers, who had gheraoed him or had gone on lightening stoppage and settled the matters on the spot, as the corrupt joint PNM machinery had failed to redress the grievances of the affected workers.

That agreement of the two federations with the Board is now being used by the government and the Board in refusing even to talk to the locomen or the guards or others. I think this line should be amended on the basis of democratic approach.

I have had to write a long letter, because I do not know if you would be in Delhi next week and I am also scheduled to go out. We will of course meet some time and discuss things further.

But let me assure you that the AITUC Federation is not doing things with a view to have a quarrel with the AIRF. We want to build an alround unity of all railwaymen and their organisations in order to defend their interests in all spheres.

The Convention met on 27th February and it is now 10 days since then. I hope you have sent to the government and the Railway Board the demands and the notice contained in the main resolution. Moreover, you should try to open negotiations on the demands both with government and the Board and let the Coordination Committee set up at the Convention know what is happening.

With regards,

Yours fraternally,
Sd/-
(S. A. DANGE)

AITUC GENERAL COUNCIL WELCOMES UNITY MOVE OF RAILWAYMEN

The AITUC General Council in its meeting held in New Delhi on 27-29 March, 1974 adopted the following resolution:

In recent months there have been frequent actions by different categories and sections of railwaymen including stoppage of work in support of their just demands. The Railway Ministry and the Railway Board have failed to meet these demands to the satisfaction of the workers. On the other hand, assurances given by the ministers are openly floated and the railway officials resort to indiscriminate victimisation and other provocative actions.

The officials of the Railway Board have refused at every stage to hold talks with unions representing the workers in action such as the All India Loco Running Staff Association, the Guards' Council, the Loco and Mechanical Staff Association etc. although such refusal has in some cases been overridden by the minister. They have also taken refuge behind a PNM agreement that was arrived at between them and the National Federation of Indian Railwaymen and the All India Railwaymen's Federation, the two hitherto recognised federations on the railways, that the Railway Board will not 'talk or negotiate' with anyone at any level, except through the Permanent Negotiating Machinery consisting of the two federations. The general council of the AITUC calls on the AIRF to write to the Railway Board calling for rescinding of this agreement.

It is in this background of increasing struggles and actions that the Convention of railwaymen's unions was held in Delhi on 27 February 1974. All sections of the railway trade union movement and central TU organisations were represented there except the NFIR. The general council endorses the decision of the AITUC secretariat and unions affiliated to the AITUC to participate in the convention which was a result of the growing urge for united action amongst railwaymen and has served to strengthen unity.

The general council welcomes the formation of the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle and approves the participation of the AITUC and its affiliates in the committee. The AITUC lends its full support to the demands detailed in the resolution adopted unanimously at the convention and calls upon all unions to participate energetically in popularising the same and mobilising the railway workers for a united struggle for their just and long pending demands. The AITUC appeals to the NFIR and its members to come forward and participate in this united struggle.

The General Council of the AITUC calls upon the Railway Ministry to take immediate steps to open negotiations:

with representatives of the National Coordination Committee with a view to settle the long pending grievances and demands of railwaymen and thus ensure industrial peace in this vital sector of the nation's economy.

If the Government, that is the ministry and the Railway Board, fail to bring about a settlement immediately, the AITUC calls upon the railway workers to get ready for an all-India general strike to realise their demands.

II

The General Council of the AITUC hereby approves the steps taken by the secretariat of the AITUC to hold a convention of the railway unions affiliated to the AITUC and the formation of the Indian Railway Workers' Federation.

The general council notes that there has been growing disenchantment with the recognised NFIR and AIRF, who have failed in fighting for the solution of demands of railwaymen. It is this that also led to the formation of category-wise associations.

The general council calls upon the newly formed federation to strengthen its cooperation with the All India Confederation of Railway Employees (the confederation of category-wise associations).

The General Council of the AITUC further demands that the Railway Ministry, grants immediate recognition to the Indian Railway Workers' Federation and the All India Confederation of Railway Employees.

AITUC EFFORTS TOWARDS STARTING NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE NCCRS

Soon after the formation of the IRWF by unions affiliated to AITUC, but outside the AIRF and unrecognised so far, besides meeting the Labour Minister and Railway Minister to urge upon them to start negotiations without delay, the

AITUC and IRWF urged upon them to negotiate with the NCCRS which is by far the most representative organ of the railwaymen encompassing all railway unions including category and unrecognised unions.

The relevant correspondences in this regard are reproduced below :

Dange's Letter to Railway Minister

26 March, 1974.

Dear Mishraji,

1. A convention of representatives from unions in the railways affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress was held on 14-15 March 1974 at New Delhi and a federation was formed on that occasion. The name of the new federation is INDIAN RAILWAY WORKERS' FEDERATION. S. A. Dange was elected president, Parvathi Krishnan working president and P. K. Kumaran general secretary, and the federation has at present ten unions affiliated to the federation covering nine zones and the Integral Coach Factory, Perambur. We enclose copies of the resolutions adopted at the convention and the press conference release of the next day.

We now write you to request you to grant recognition to this federation which, as you will see, comprises a substantial section of railway workers whose representation should not be ruled out on flimsy technical ground.

2. We would also request you to grant recognition to the All India Railway Employees' Confederation. The Confederation has been in existence for some years and represents the employees in major categories of the railwaymen. The AITUC is of the firm opinion that unions of such a representative character should not be left out in the cold but have the right of recognition. To settle the problems and grievances of the railwaymen in these categories without friction and to their satisfaction, recognition of their confederation is indispensable. We are not going here into the historical reasons which led to the inevitable formation of such unions as we have

time and again pointed these out to you and they are well known to you.

3. Thirdly, we wish to take this opportunity to put before you the decision of a convention of railwaymen held in Delhi on 27 February 1974. The convention with representatives of all railwaymen's unions, excluding the NFIR.

The convention has set up a national coordination committee for railwaymen's struggle with George Fernandes, President AIRF, as the convener. A small action committee of representatives of various unions and some national centres has also been formed. The convention adopted a resolution incorporating the main demands of railwaymen. We enclose a copy of the same.

We would request you to take up these demands in seriousness and open negotiations with representatives of the coordination committee as early as possible.

The grievances of railwaymen and demands arising from them are long standing. There is widespread dissatisfaction and unrest among railwaymen throughout the country resulting from the continued refusal of your ministry and the Railway Board to examine the demands and settle issues with railway unions dispassionately and without taking recourse to arguments about recognised unions. The continued disturbances in one area after another, in one category after another, during the past year and a half are ample proof of this sorry state of affairs, where there is no rapport whatsoever between management and labour.

To restore confidence in the minds of railwaymen and to preserve industrial peace on the railways it is urgently necessary and vital that you take immediate steps to hold talks with representatives of the national coordination committee.

We are sure you will appreciate the urgency and seriousness of the matter and take all measures necessary to open such negotiations without further delay.

With kind regards,

Shri L. N. Mishra
Union Minister for Railways
Rail Bhavan, New Delhi-1.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/- (S. A. Dange)
President

*AITUC's Letter to Union Labour Minister
on 28 March 1974*

Dear Shri Reddy,

S. A. Dange, General Secretary, and myself met Shri L. N. Mishra, Union Minister of Railways yesterday and discussed with him the demand of recognition of the Indian Railway Workers' Federation (AITUC) and the All India Railway Employees' Confederation (Federation of category associations).

We also presented to him the resolution of the National Coordination Committee of Railwaymen's struggle. This committee was set up at a Convention of railwaymen's union representatives held in Delhi on 27 February 1974, and George Fernandes, President of AIRF, is the Convener.

The resolution lists the demands which have been agitating railwaymen throughout the country for some time past. It is not the first time that these demands are being put forward. They have been put forward time and again by different unions, different sections of railwaymen. In recent months, as you are personally aware, there have been repeated actions, including stoppage of work by railwaymen throughout the country in support of these demands. You have yourself also been associated in settling some of these disputes.

The AIREC Convention which was held in Madras on 15 and 16 February also adopted a charter of demands on more or less similar lines. They also decided at that convention to resort to a work-to-rule agitation for the demands from 15 April.

The National Coordination Committee in its resolution states its intention to resort to direct action after 10 April if no action is taken on the demands.

You will see that the need to open negotiations with the parties to these decisions is of extreme urgency. I would therefore request you to use your good offices to bring about such negotiations. The question of recognition should not be allowed to stand in the way of opening such negotiations.

It is only if these negotiations are commenced with a view to settling the grievances and justified demands of the railwaymen that sense of confidence that they will not be continued to be ignored, can be aroused.

With regards,

Shri K. V. Raghunatha Reddy,
Minister for Labour & Employment,
Government of India,
New Delhi.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
(Parvathi Krishnan)

AITUC's Another Letter on 15 April 1974

Dear Shri Reddy,

In continuation of the telephone conversation we had with you I write to confirm the same.

As we informed you the talks that were held today by the action committee of the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle and the NFIR with Shri Warriar Member (Staff) of the Railway Board which were fixed at the joint meeting held on 12 April when you were also present were infructuous. To say the least they were no negotiations—only a mockery of them. Shri Warriar informed us that his brief did not go beyond informing the workers' representatives the stand and policy of government on each of the demands in the resolution of the NCCRS. This is what he did and we only sought clarification on one or two items.

At the end of this time-wasting exercise, since all of us were already aware of the governmental policy on these issues, and it is precisely that which has led to the notice of going on action, Shri George Fernandes, Convener, of the action committee, raised the point that Shri L. N. Mishra had promised that he would again meet the action committee if the meeting with Member staff did not yield any tangible results. Therefore Mr. Warriar contacted the Minister and conveyed to us the message that as he was

unwell he could not meet us immediately but would let us know when he would meet us.

A letter has been addressed to the Minister, Shri Mishra, asking him to convey a firm date and time by 3 p.m. in view of the fact that a full meeting of all members of the National Coordination Committee has been called at that time and we would like to be in a position to report to them on this.

As you will see the whole effect of this morning's meeting is totally negative and the hopes that were raised in the meeting held with you 11 April have been totally belied. There was no intention on the part of the employing ministry to enter into negotiations. The meeting was only a futile exercise where Mr. Warriar repeated already known facts.

We would therefore request you to use your good offices to see that steps are taken for meaningful negotiations where matters can be discussed thoroughly on the basis of the demands and not on the basis of government policy as it exists today.

With regards,

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
(T. N. Siddhanta)
Secretary

JOINT CIRCULAR OF AITUC AND IRWF

On 9 April, 1974 the AITUC and IRWF issued a joint circular to all affiliates of IRWF and to all other railway unions affiliated to AITUC giving therein the efforts being made by the AITUC towards starting of negotiations with the Action Committee. The circular further stated to say: "However, though it will be our endeavour to bring about a settlement and avoid a strike, one cannot predict the outcome of the talks," and then gives detailed instructions as to our conduct in case the strike is forced on the workers.

The circular is reproduced below in full:

Dear Comrades,

The AITUC, which had participated in the National Convention of Railwaymen along with the other national TU centres and railway federations and unions, had forwarded to the railway ministry; the demands adopted by the National Convention of 27 February 1974.

Soon after, when the Indian Railway Workers' Federation was formed, they also forwarded the demands adopted by the National Convention to the Railway Ministry and also the Labour Ministry of the Government of India.

Since then the AITUC and the IRWF leadership had meetings with the Railway Minister and the Labour Minister with a view to impressing upon them the need to urgently take up the question of negotiations on the railwaymen's demands with all concerned, that is, with the AIRF, the NFIR, the IRWF and the All India Railway Employees' Confederation (of the category-wise unions) as also those category unions who may not be in the confederation.

The stand of the government spokesmen as reported in the Press that the railwaymen should talk only through the outmoded PNM machinery or only through the two federations and their recognised unions or through the joint machinery of the central government employees was not calculated to bring out a speedy settlement of the issues and would inevitably lead to a general strike.

The attitude of the AITUC general council, which met in Delhi from 27-29 March and also of the executive members of the IRWF was that if the government and the railway authorities stuck to the dead ritual of who is or is not entitled to speak and negotiate with them, there would be no satisfactory settlement and a strike would be forced on the workers, whether by total stoppage or by work to rule. The confederation of category unions and some categories who are not in it, viz. the locomen, have already announced their decision to "work to rule" from 15 April, which in effect leads to a critical position if not a total stoppage of the system.

As a result of efforts of all concerned both from the side of the workers and the government certain steps have been set in motion, in order to open talks and negotiations both in an informal and formal way.

However, though it will be our endeavour to bring about a settlement and avoid a strike, one cannot predict the outcome of the talks.

If a strike is forced on the workers by the bureaucratic attitude of the government and particularly the obstructive postures of the Railway Board, the workers will certainly not hesitate to fight for their just demands.

The press reports say that government is already moving the territorial army or the pensioned-off employees and other agencies to help in running the railways and fight the strike if it materialises.

The unions of the AITUC and the IRWF do not require to be told what to do to put their organisation in trim. Largescale arrests and coercion to drive the workers from their quarters to go to work is bound to take place. And workers are bound to resist such coercion by their solidarity and united strength. Experience of the past is enough to tell them how to defend themselves.

At the same time, looking at some of the new trends that have appeared in the recent period in the strikes and protest actions of the people, the AITUC and the IRWF think it necessary to warn the workers against certain practices, which are used by some "doubtful" elements, which really do not belong to the working class, or the popular forces of the movement. The practices are alien to the working class movement and we should try to avoid them. We may give some directives on this question and the workers should pay close attention to them.

1. We should resist attempts to set fire to railway stations, wagons and coaches.

2. We should not permit sabotage of machinery, of looting of goods, etc .

3. We should not allow tampering with the track, as it may lead to loss of lives, if a train happens to go by it.

4. We should not leave passenger trains half way but reach them to the nearest station, so that passengers, particularly women and children, are not left stranded or forced to walk long distances.

5. All categories should act together and support each other and not leave each one to itself.

A strike is always a serious battle and the government machinery uses all forces to crush the workers. In fact, they treat it almost as a war, in which even women and children of workers are harassed.

But for that reason, the working class cannot give up its principles and code of conduct as a class, which is superior to its moral and behavioural values to that of the exploiting classes and their governmental power.

Some people may argue that the strike as a weapon of class struggle is an incident in a "civil war", in which the government even brings the army into action. Then why should not the workers also use all the tactics of a "class war" or "civil war"?

Anyone can see that this or any big strike anywhere in present conditions of our struggles and the country's political set up, in which there is still scope for democratic processes, we cannot speak of "civil war" conditions and then apply the so-called "revolutionary forms" of resistance as some term the act of station-burning, track lifting, etc.

There are occasions when police provoke clashes even with a peaceful strike or procession or take blacklegs in a lorry, thereby tempting people to resistance by all means. But we are not dealing in this note with such acts and situations or with the question of violence and non-violence or theory or tactics of "peaceful and non-peaceful struggles". We are just limiting ourselves to certain types of actions in a strike.

For instance, in one bandh in Bombay called by a certain organisation (not TU) milk booths supplying milk to the city and hotels were set on fire. On another occasion, where drivers had not responded to call of a total strike, the buses were sought to be stopped in one city by burning a bus and throwing crackers and bombs at passengers.

It is to put us on guard against such things that this circular is being sent. The working class fights in principle against the propertied classes and not property as such, which we, as workers, have to take hold of ultimately and use it for society. It is the lumpen class in bourgeois society that believes in destroying property and is used by the bourgeoisie against our movement.

A strike action is meant to stop the use of an arm of production or service by the exploiters for profit by our going on strike and not against the existence of property as such.

In the recent period, some people have ceased to separate acts of vandalism by the degenerate lumpens let loose by reactionary parties or leaders from the acts of genuine resistance by angry democratic masses.

Hence, to save our action or working people from being used by reactionary or pro-imperialist agencies for their nefarious game, we have felt it necessary to issue this circular. Unions are requested to circulate it, discuss it and act upon it with full political and class understanding on the most crucial TU and economic front.

With greetings.

Yours fraternally,
(PARVATHI KRISHNAN)
Secretary, All India Trade Union
Congress

(P. K. KUMARAN)
General Secretary, Indian Railway
Workers' Federation

GOVERNMENT PREPARES TO BREAK THE STRIKE EVEN BEFORE THE STRIKE DATE WAS ANNOUNCED

Even before the strike date was announced and serious negotiations started get going, the Railway Ministry started victimising railway unions activists by means of

penal transfers, suspensions, dismissals and arrests. The Territorial Army units were moved to various railways Border Security Force and Army were called to duty, prospective strike breakers were offered fat rewards and concessions and the Administration indulged in other unfair labour practices. The propaganda machinery of the government—the radio, T.V., worked in full swing to run down the railwaymen and to drive a wedge between them and the public at large. Newspaper advertisements began to appear throughout the country of different zonal railway administrations against the strike.

It was, therefore, natural that the question of victimisation came up as a priority item of the negotiations that subsequently took place.

STRIKE DATE ANNOUNCED

RESOLUTION ADOPTED AT THE MEETING OF THE NCCRS ON APRIL 15, 1974

The National Convention of Railwaymen held at New Delhi on 27-2-1974 had formulated a 6 point charter of demands and had called upon the Railway Ministry to arrive at a negotiated settlement thereon by April 10, 1974. Through the efforts of the Union Labour Minister who had himself initiated a round of talks with various trade union organisations of railwaymen culminating in a joint meeting on April 11, 1974, a meeting was held with the Railway Minister on April 12, 1974 in which the Labour Minister also was present. The Railway Minister, at this meeting, declared that he favoured a negotiated settlement on the demands submitted by the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle. Consequent on this, the Action Committee of the NCCRS held talks on April 15, 1974 with the Member Staff, Railway Board on the demands

which ended in sixty minutes with the Member Staff declaring on behalf of the Railway Ministry that no demand could be conceded and that he did not have the authority to negotiate. Why the Railway Ministry thought of making a mockery of the negotiating processes is best left to the Ministry to explain. The only conclusion to be drawn from the discussions held so far is that the Railway Ministry is keen on a confrontation with the workers and will concede nothing unless the workers have gone through a struggle.

The intentions of Railway Ministry are clear from the massive repression let loose on the trade union activities on the railways since the February 27 Convention. There have been penal transfers, suspensions, dismissals and arrests of workers on a large scale, especially in the N.F., Eastern, Northern and South Eastern Railways. The Territorial Army units have been moved to various railways, Border Security Force and Army have been called to duty, prospective strike-breakers have been offered fat rewards and concessions and the Administration is indulging in other unfair labour practices. The propaganda machinery of the Government, principally the radio, TV and newspapers, has been working overtime to run down the railwaymen and to drive a wedge between them and the people.

In the circumstances, railwaymen are now left with no alternative but to take a decision to launch an indefinite general strike. The National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle calls upon the railwaymen to go on an *indefinite general strike from 6 hours on 8th May, 1974.*

The railwaymen are fully aware, perhaps more than any other section of the community, of the consequences of a railway strike. They are aware that the railwaymen's role in the economic life of the country is second to that of none, and any disruption in the railway services is bound to deal a crippling blow to the nation's economy. What is shocking is the cavalier attitude of the Railway Ministry to the rail-

waymen's demands and the conscious and deliberate moves taken by it to force a strike on the railwaymen.

While calling upon the railwaymen to launch the *strike from 6 hours on 8th May*, the Committee calls upon the Railway Ministry to reconsider its stand on the railwaymen's demands and bring about an amicable settlement. At the same time the Committee wishes to make it clear that no meaningful talks between the Railway Ministry and the workers' representatives would be possible if the repressive measures let loose by the Railway Administration are not withdrawn forthwith.

The Railwaymen today are at the threshold of the biggest ever struggle of their history. On the outcome of this struggle depends not only the future of the railwaymen, but of the entire working class movement and of the movement of the exploited and downtrodden people in the country. There is no doubt that the new inevitable struggle will be a bitter one. From past experiences, from the attitude shown by the Railway Administration during the negotiations and from the repressive measures already let loose, it is obvious that the government will come down with all its might against the workers. Railwaymen will be called upon to make the greatest of sacrifices before they are able to wrest their just and legitimate demands from the Railway Ministry.

The meeting directs all unions, associations, organisations, which are a part of the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle to serve a 14-day notice of strike on the 6 point demands adopted on 27-2-1974 on their respective zonal railways before April 23, 1974, and send copies of the strike notice to the office of the Co-ordination Committee.

The Committee appeals to the National Federation of Indian Railwaymen which was a party to the infructuous negotiations with the Railway Ministry on 15th April to make common cause with all railwaymen, and join the

strike so that the struggle to win the workers long-pending demands may be quick and decisive.

The Committee calls upon the railwaymen to spare no efforts between now and May 8 to further consolidate their unity so that they can withstand all attempts to disrupt the movement. In a disciplined way they must proceed to act, so that in all eventualities they are able to carry on their struggle till victory is achieved. They must do every thing within their power to keep the struggle peaceful no matter what the provocation. They must strengthen the links with the wider masses and frustrate the efforts of those who are trying to isolate them from the people. The Committee appeals to the working classes and toiling masses, youth, students and women, peasants and landless labourers and the broad masses of our people to extend their support to the railwaymen in their hour of trial.

Coordination Committee's Appeal to All Unions of Railwaymen : Suspend Sectional Agitations

“In view of the decision taken by the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle to launch an indefinite general strike of all railwaymen on their 6 point charter of demands from May 8, 1974, the meeting appeals to all organisations of railwaymen to suspend their sectional agitations already launched or proposed to be launched, and concentrate all their energies and efforts to making the general strike a resounding success.”

But the Railway Minister continued to stick to the formal technical position of negotiation with the recognised federations. The position taken by the Railway Minister and the Railway Board was that the AIRF would be the official representative of railway workers, but they can bring with them anybody they like to. The Action Committee finally clinched the matter and by decision of the Action Committee the Convenor, George Fernandes informed the Railway Minister according to the list submitted, that the members of the Action Committee of the NCCRS will constitute the negotiating body.

Convenor, George Fernandes' letter in this regard is reproduced below:

**NATIONAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE
FOR RAILWAYMEN'S STRUGGLE**

No. NCC/1/74

125E,/ Babar Road,
New Delhi.
April 12, 1974.

My dear Lalit,

Thanks for your letter dated 11th April.

Members of the Negotiating Committee set up by the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle will meet you for discussions on the railwaymen's charter of demands. A list of the members is enclosed herewith.

I do hope our discussions will yield results, and we will be able to arrive at an amicable settlement on the demands.

DA/as above

Mr. Lalit Narain Mishra,
Minister for Railways,
Rail Bhavan, New Delhi.

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
(George Fernandes)

**LIST OF MEMBERS OF NEGOTIATING
COMMITTEE**

1. George Fernandes
2. Shri J. P. Chaubey
3. Shri D. D. Vasisht
4. Shri Samar Mukherjee
5. Shri Nrishinha Chakravarty
6. Mrs. Parvathi Krishnan
7. Shri Sri Krishna
8. Shri N. S. Bhangoo
9. Shri K. P. Ramaswamy
10. Shri S. K. Dhar
11. Shri H. S. Choudhary
12. Shri G. S. Gokhale
13. Shri N. M. Pathak

UNIONS SERVE STRIKE NOTICE

In accordance with the decision of the NCCRS all railway unions served strike notice on the respective General Managers of the Zonal railways on 23 April 1974. In all railway headquarters, and also in other railway centres, huge demonstrations took place on the occasion of submission of strike notice. In all zonal railways, zonal NCCRS consisting of all railway unions were also formed.

According to L. N. Mishra, 200 unions served strike notices by the 23rd April by all unions which are constituents of the NCCRS.

TALKS BEGIN, BUT RAILWAY MINISTRY DRAGS FEET

Through the efforts of the Union Labour Minister who had initiated talks with various trade union organisations of railwaymen's unions, a joint meeting including NFIR was held on 11 April 1974. And on 12 April a meeting was held with the Railway Minister in which the Labour Minister was also present. The Railway Minister, at this meeting, declared that he favoured a negotiated settlement on the demands submitted by the NCCRS.

The Railway Minister deputed Member, Staff, Railway Board, G. P. Warriar to start negotiation with the Action Committee and NFIR on 15 April.

The meeting with the Member Staff turned out to be a futile exercise as he merely reiterated the known Government position on each of the demands. On the failure of this meeting, the Railway Minister met the Action Committee and NFIR on 18 April. The Workers' side made their dissatisfaction known in regard to the manner in which negotiation is proceeding and wanted to know if the Railway Minister at all wants serious negotiations. L. N. Mishra declared that during the pendency of negotiations there will be no victimisation or harassment of the workers. On

18th he deputed the Deputy Railway Minister S. M. Qureshi to continue negotiation with full authority.

On 20th April no sooner than the talks started, the meeting had to be adjourned, without fixing further date due to bereavement in Qureshi's family.

NEGOTIATION DELAYED FOR FULL ONE WEEK

Due to absence of the Deputy Railway Minister Qureshi, the talks were indefinitely postponed. Strangely, the Railway Minister showed no inclination to continue the negotiation. It only betrays the lack of seriousness on the part of the Government for serious negotiations which was evident from the beginning.

AITUC General Secretary, S. A. Dange issued the following statement protesting against the unnecessary delay in continuing the negotiations. The statement issued on 23 April 1974 reads as follows :

“I was rather surprised to learn from the press that the talks on the railwaymen's demands have been postponed to 27th. We sympathise with Mr. Qureshi, the Deputy Minister for Railways not being able to continue the talks himself due to the sad bereavement in his family.

“But the talks could have been continued by the Railway Minister assisted by the Railway Board and the Labour Minister, if necessary.

“Moreover we do not approve of the Railway Board or the Ministry taking our consent for granted by talking things over only with one or two leaders of their own choice or recognition. If this line is continued the AITUC and the IRWF will be free to follow its own course.

“All our unions have served notice of strike of 8th May. The workers will take to meetings and demonstrations from now on in order to wake up the authorities to the realities of the situation. Our unions are asked also to strictly follow

the instructions given in our circular regarding norms of conduct in the agitation and not give room to anarchist elements to sidetrack our struggles.”

RAILWAY BOARD'S PROVOCATIONS

Soon after the strike notices were served on all zonal railway administrations on 23 April, the Railway Board virtually declared partial lockout in the Railways by suspending by the end of April more than 25 per cent of the passenger and goods trains. Out of 10,800 goods and passenger trains, 2950 trains were cancelled. While on the one hand the Government was tinkering with the process of negotiations and on the other the virtual partial lockout of the Railway transport system coupled with other preparations that the Government was making, only prepared the ground for forcing strike on the railway workers and to instigate the public against the railwaymen.

S. A. Dange, President, IRWF and General Secretary, AITUC issued the following statement on 25 April against these provocative actions on the part of the Railway Board:

“The bureaucrats of the Railway Board appear to be determined to provoke a strike on the railways. When negotiations are on and are to resume from 27 April, when the Railway Minister had appealed to the unions not to serve strike notice on the grounds that negotiations have started, the Board has started cancelling passenger trains. This is being done deliberately to incite the travelling public against the railway workers. Cancellation of trains at this time when, on closing of educational institutions, families will be proceeding on summer vacations, is a hardship and harassment for the travelling public.

“The government should take firm steps to stop such provocative actions on the part of the Railway Board. Negotiations should be allowed to proceed in a tension-free atmosphere.

“We, on behalf of the railway workers and our Federation

and the AITUC, assure the passengers that we will do our best not to leave them stranded half-way in their journeys”.

PROGRESS OF NEGOTIATIONS

The negotiations which were interrupted on 20 April resumed once again on 27 April and continued till 30 April. The Railway Minister L. N. Mishra also participated in the negotiations which covered six of the demands and some gains were achieved which created an optimistic atmosphere. The remaining two demands viz. parity in wages and bonus, were left to be negotiated from 2nd May morning. As decided in the meeting of 30th April, the Minutes of discussions till then held were to have been drawn up to put down in writing whatever commitments have been made by the Government on each of the six items. The minutes were accordingly drawn up by the Railway Board which were examined by representatives of the Action Committee on May 1 and certain discrepancies were found, among others, with regard to the question of grain shops. It was agreed to by the Railway Minister in course of discussions on earlier few days that the government will take upon itself the responsibility of opening and running these shops and for supply of foodgrains. The Minutes did not record it truthfully.

It was decided that the Minutes will be taken up first in the meeting scheduled to be held on 2nd May morning to straighten out the discrepancies still existing in the recording. But that meeting could not take place due to arrests starting from 2nd May early morning.

The enumeration of the demands and the results of negotiations on them given out by the Railway Minister, L. N. Mishra in his speech in the Rajya Sabha on 3 May 1974 are not based on any *agreed* Minute as the Government did not give time to come to an *agreed* Minute of the discussions held till 30 April. The Railway Minister said in his speech:

“I would like to state the position about the demands. There were 8 demands.

“The first demand was that there should be no victimisation. What was the decision? The decision was that no railway worker will be victimised for trade union activities, provided he is within the limits of the law of the land. Cases of alleged victimisation will be scrutinised by the Deputy Minister, Mr. Mohd. Shafi Qureshi, who was having the negotiations.

Demand No. 2 was that working hours should be 8. Justice Miabhoy had gone into the hours of work of the railway employees, and his recommendations have been accepted. That means, we have accepted that demand.

Demand No. 3 was decasualisation. The problem of casual labour was also gone into by the Miabhoy Tribunal, and we have accepted their recommendations.

Demand No. 4(a) was job evaluation. This has been accepted. Demand No. 4(b) was revision of pay and this would have meant Rs. 350 crores. We could not accept this demand.

Demand No. 4(c) was revision of dearness allowance formula.

It could not be accepted since the Pay Commission had given its recommendations, and we are following them.

Demand No. 5 related to bonus. As you know, the Bonus Review Committee is going through this and it would be premature for us to give any decision.

Demand No. 6 was subsidised foodgrains. With regard to this demand, the decision is fair price shops will be opened for the railway workers in any colony where their number is more than 300. I did not accept the supply of subsidised foodgrains. I did take the responsibility for the supply part of the foodgrains on behalf of the Railways. I will do it either through the State Governments or through the Government of India. I have to sort this out with the Chief Ministers and the Union Food Minister. I took the responsibility for the supply. The only thing I said was that it would not be subsidised foodgrains it will be fair price shops as are available for other citizens in the country. The only differ-

ence is that the Railway will make the accommodation available free; they will depute one or two men to these shops, and the salaries will not be charged. Therefore, the establishment part on the shops will go down and they will be able to get the foodgrains at a cheaper price.

We have agreed that foodgrains, that is, rice, wheat, and bajra, etc. will be sent to these shops". (Pages 6 and 7 of the pamphlet issued by the Ministry of Railways).

As such there could not be any agreed minutes of the discussions held till 30 April although some advancement was made and some gains achieved despite tendencies to rundown and underplay whatever advances were made. Had the negotiations been allowed to continue and not interrupted by treacherous arrests, the possibility of coming to an overall settlement cannot be ruled out and the strike perhaps could have been averted. But the government acted in a manner as to sabotage the process of negotiations and force strike on the railwaymen.

GOVERNMENT SABOTAGES NEGOTIATIONS

The elaborate preparations that the Government was making well in advance to meet the strike including the partial lockout and propaganda barrage in the press, radio and TV, culminated in the arrests in the midst of negotiations of George Fernandes and other railway leaders and workers in the early morning of 2 May. On 2 May morning the negotiation was to have resumed after the last meeting of 30 April. AITUC General Secretary in course of a press statement strongly castigated this preemptive action of the Government in subverting the process of negotiations which progressed to a considerable extent and created optimistic atmosphere. The statement issued by AITUC General Secretary, S. A. Dange on 2 May 1974 reads as follows:

"The AITUC strongly condemns the arrest of George Fernandes and other leaders of the National Coordination Committee of the Railwaymen's struggle right in the midst

of negotiations which were taking place between the Action Committee and the Government. During these negotiations agreement on certain important points have already been arrived at. The question of victimisation was more or less resolved on the basis of Government's assurance of not arresting railwaymen during the pendency of the negotiations and also reviewing the cases of victimisation, embracing a period of years. The unions and federations in the Coordination Committee have already submitted lists of victimisation cases to the Ministry. Agreement of an important character, i.e. on the question of decasualisation of over three lakh workers had also been arrived at after a long and serious discussion. The question of applying the norms of industrial wages to the Railway workers was under discussion and it was expected that a committee consisting of workers' side and employing ministries would go into the question of how to find the finances for an industrial wage system if applied to the railwaymen. This would naturally have led to the examination financial policies and functioning of the Railway Board which was not very much to their liking. On the question of working hours, the Government side stated that they have accepted the award of the Miabhoj Tribunal and the same will be implemented. The next important subject was the question of providing foodgrain shops to serve the Railway workers throughout the country. There was serious difference on this question as the State Governments refused to undertake responsibility of providing supplies to the shops from their quota. Hence at one stage this demand was taken as rejected. But when the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra joined the talks, he agreed to get the shops supplied from the central pool and the Food Ministry.

“Thus there was an optimistic atmosphere about this demand too. What finally remained was the crucial question of Bonus. It was decided at this stage to write out the minutes of the discussions, of the points of agreements and disagreements, by joint sittings of the Action Committee representatives and the Railway Board representatives. This was done in the morning of 1st May. During these proceed-

ings it was found that the Railway Board minutes were misleading in many respects, and failed to note the conclusions properly which were agreed to, particularly on the matter of foodgrain shops. The Action Committee was informed by the Railway Ministry on the evening of 1st May by phoning to the members of the Action Committee that the next sitting will be held on 2nd May at 10 a.m. Thus, while on the workers' side serious negotiations were being undertaken and the Ministry also showed their own willingness and seriousness, the arrests of leading Railway workers and particularly of George Fernandes, had already been planned by Government and carried out in the early hours of 2nd May on which day the negotiations were further to be pursued. It seems, therefore, that two conflicting policies were being pursued by the representatives of the Government of India—one trying to negotiate and at least of making a show of conciliation, while the other policy of smashing up the whole thing by launching repression was being put into effect. We do not know whether the negotiations were only a cover for preparations or whether within the Government of India itself and its ruling party there is a virtual shift to the right on the attitude to the working class problems. The arrests and crude manner in which they were effected, right in the midst of negotiations, show that blatantly shameless right wing reactionary policy has come on the top. Hence it is but natural that the Railway workers should answer the treacherous attack and hypocritical manoeuvres by going into protest actions. The Railway workers manning as they do the most vital sector of the economy have become the first victim of this reactionary attacks. The other sections will be under fire very soon. Hence, the AITUC asks all its trade unions to get prepared for resisting this right-wing offensive which not only affects the interests of the working class but will ultimately affect all people and the economic and political situation of the country as a whole.

“The AITUC, therefore, calls upon the workers to unite and organise to resist the new offensive.

“The decision to launch railway strike on 8 May stands as decided by the Action Committee.”

ACTION COMMITTEE WRITES TO L. N. MISHRA

With the arrest of George Fernandes, Convenor and other members of the Action Committee in the midst of negotiations and a crucial phase of the negotiation, a new situation was created. And in that situation the Action Committee with its remaining members cannot continue the negotiation. The Action Committee addressed the following letter on 2 May to the Railway Minister, L. N. Mishra:

“Dear Mr. Mishra,

We have been informed that Mr. George Fernandes, Convenor of the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle, and Mr. H. S. Choudhari, member of the Action Committee, were arrested in the early hours of the morning. A warrant is issued for the arrest of Mr. N. Chakravarty, member of the Action Committee. We are astonished that such a heinous step has been taken in violation of all democratic values. While negotiations to settle the demands of railwaymen with a view to avert the strike are in progress, and we were due to meet at 10 a.m. today, the police swoop down on railway leaders and arrested them. Mr. P. K. Barua, Secretary-General of the All India Loco Running Staff Association and fourteen others in Delhi area alone have been arrested. Reports have started pouring in for widespread arrests in every zone of the Railways. We do not know how many throughout the country have been put behind the bars in just one night.

The Action Committee condemns these gross and blatant, violation of democratic rights. You had yourself given a categorical assurance when negotiations commenced that no arrests or penal actions would take place when negotiations are going on. Do you call these arrests the implementing of your first assurance? What credibility do you think railwaymen will have in your assurances when the actions of the Government during negotiations belie the assurances given?

At every meeting we have held the first issue has always been precisely repressive measures, provocative actions of the railway authorities etc., etc. Now, it appears that you and your Ministry, and the Government have made all arrangements to precipitate a strike.

In these circumstances, no useful purpose has been served by negotiations on the demands and these negotiations were nothing but a sham and eyewash. The Action Committee, therefore, will not participate in the negotiations. There is no alternative before the National Co-ordination Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle but this and the Government bears the full responsibility for breaking the negotiations.

Yours faithfully,

Sd/- Parvathi Krishnan, MP, Priya Gupta, Samar Mukherjee, MP, G. S. Gokhale, K. P. Ramaswamy, N. S. Bhangoo, P. K. Kumaran, D. D. Vasisht, N. M. Pathak, Members of the Action Committee (NCCRS)".

SPORADIC PROTEST ACTIONS FOLLOWING ARRESTS

The provocative arrests in the midst of negotiations throwing to the winds all norms of democratic behaviour incensed the workers. Workers in some railway centres went into strike actions. The strike in fact began on 2 May in the Southern Railway including its workshops and continued after the all-India strike took place from 8 May.

EXCUSES OF THE RAILWAY MINISTER

The excuses given by the Railway Minister, L. N. Mishra in course of his speech in Lok Sabha on 2 May along with his written statement, and his speech in the Rajya Sabha on 3 May are unconvincing and do not justify the arrests in the midst of negotiations when the negotiations were progressing according to him also, and not broken down, nor the Action Committee had come to any such conclusion that there is no possibility of a negotiated settlement. As

such the Railway Minister pre-empted the decision of the Action Committee and took precipitate action to subvert the negotiations and force a strike on the railway workers which might have been avoidable. The Government attack can only be described as perfidious and the Government was pursuing a double faced policy.

Even the bourgeois press could not stomach such perfidy. Birla's *Hindustan Times* writes editorially on 3 May :

"The Government is guilty of crass ineptitude and political misjudgement in arresting George Fernandes, President of AIRF and Convenor of the NCCRS, and other leading railwaymen all over the country. This was a provocative act in the midst of negotiations, and within hours of a crucial round of talks scheduled between the NCCRS and the Railway Minister L. N. Mishra, on Thursday. How then can the Government avoid the charge of breach of faith and rupturing the negotiations even if the Minister had come to the conclusion that further discussions were fruitless.....

"Mishra's explanation in the Lok Sabha for this premature action is unconvincing." Goenka's *Indian Express* called the arrests "Mr. Mishra's strike". In an editorial on 3 May, it writes: "The arrest of George Fernandes and what looks like a general round up of trade union workers in several centres throughout the country is the last and the most flagrant in a long line of provocations ever since the start of what were supposed to be, but never became anything that anyone understands by the term negotiations...."

According to *The Times of India* the arrests "show that the Government has made up its mind to have a show-down with the railway unions", and that "the timing of the arrests has been somewhat unfortunate."

THE STRIKE FORCED ON THE WORKERS

From the debates in both the Houses of the Parliament it became evident that the Government was determined to come to a confrontation with the railwaymen, foresaking the path of negotiated settlement.

Strike thus became inevitable. Due to unprecedented unity achieved of the railwaymen symbolised by the NCCRS after long years of disunity and inertia, the railway strike that began throughout the country at 6.00 hours of 8 May as scheduled assumed a massive proportion paralysing the entire railway transport system.

AITUC General Secretary, S. A. Dange issued the following statement on the first day of the strike on 8 May :

“The AITUC warmly congratulates the railway workers of India in successfully launching a united general strike on all the railways in India. All the arrests and police terror have failed to break their resolve to fight for their just demands. Never before in the history of railwaymen have they ever united so well and acted so determinedly.

“The demands of the railwaymen as formulated by the National Coordination Committee are quite capable of being fulfilled without any damage to the national economy. The crisis in the economy, which is being pleaded by the Government as an excuse for not conceding the demands, is not caused by the wage-demands but by the rapacious exploitation of the economy by the capitalists in India and their handmaids in the ruling party.

“The cash subsidies and aids given to the big sharks of the capitalist world are more than the total wage-bill and bonus bill of the railwaymen. Moreover the cash subsidies only strengthen the black market and the secret foreign accumulations of the big monopolies, while our wages and bonuses help to raise the productivity of our workers and enriches the economy of the country.

“The AITUC calls upon the Government to release all the arrested workers and leaders and resume negotiations. The Government plea that they could not negotiate unless strike notices are withdrawn is ridiculous because they were negotiating for full four days and coming to agreements on many vital points even while strike notices had already been given.

“The AITUC calls upon the Government not to stand on false sense of prestige. Even the British Tory Govern-

ment negotiated while all the coal miners had gone on strike and forced British industry to only three-day a week working. Our Socialist Tories of the Congress Party should certainly behave better than the British Tories towards the Indian working-class which is no longer going to stand the inhuman treatment they get both in the public and private sectors. The old colonial wage and industrial system that still rules in India will have to be destroyed by the action and the unity of the working class and democratic masses, if the national economy is to develop on a better footing.

“The AITUC and all the national trade union centres like the HMS, the CITU and others must meet and think of all-India all-in working-class action to defeat this Government offensive against the claims and rights of the working-class.”

The Article in the New Age of 12 May on the significance of the strike is reproduced below:

HISTORY BEING MADE BY RAILWAY WORKERS

By S. A. DANGE

The all-India railway workers' strike which began on 8 May is an unprecedented event in the history of the trade union and working class movement of India. By the very number of workers involved, the grand spectacle of nearly two million workers ceasing work at the appointed hour of 6 a.m. over sixty thousand kilometres of the largest railway system in Asia, is the most inspiring event for any worker, any trade unionist, any socialist and communist, who believes in the power of the working class. By the united action of four million “hands”, bringing to a halt the lifeline of the Indian capitalist system, cutting across at the appointed hour all the barriers of geography, state, language, caste, religion and even their own internal job competition, has shown to the capitalist-landlord exploiters what working class power is—when it becomes united and acts for its common class interests.

The misdeeds of the Indian capitalist-landlord system, buttressed by the political and moral misdeeds of the ruling Con-

gress Party, have intensely angered the masses. And hence every section of our vast humanity, working with hand or brain, is bursting out in strike actions. Workers in textiles, iron and steel, engineering, mining, in medicine and education are venting forth their protests in all forms possible.

On the railways the thing began with the locomen last year, followed by the guards, station masters, train examiners and others. And finally it brought on the big nationwide May 8 action of all railwaymen.

Today our country is being ruined by the highest rate of capitalist profit, hence the highest rate of corruption, hence the highest rate of jobbery and dullheadedness, in political and economic management of national affairs.

And every mass protest, the protests of the very producers of wealth, of defenders of democracy and thinkers of human good is beaten down by the police bludgeon, until the wielders of the bludgeon also get fed up and themselves go into revolt.

LOGIC OF EXPLOITATION

Hence the railway strike is not someone's conspiracy or clever trick. It is the logic of the parasitic capitalist-landlord system of our day and its special viciousness as sown and grown in our country.

For years the railwaymen were in a stupor. The millions around them, in other industries, who struck for the same cause and had waged dogged battles, had not evoked much response from them.

When the economic crisis deepened and the millions in other industries began their big longdrawn struggles and forced the ruling classes to yield, the railway workers at last began to move. Life for him also now became unbearable. Fourteen hours' work still was the lot of the locoman in 1974! Three lakhs were still "casual lives" though they worked for years. Though 60 per cent increase in productivity was proudly proclaimed by the Railway Board, where had it gone? It had enriched the robber capitalist freightmen and not working men.

But the railwaymen had as yet not evolved the driving force of unity among them or with other trade union men, which had reduced their power to fight.

This lacunae was overcome by the most welcome step taken by George Fernandes, the new president of the AIRF, in calling the conference of February 27 and the establishment of the national coordinating committee of railwaymen which included representatives of all national trade union centres and all railway unions and even some individuals of choice.

Whatever the political views or subjective motives of the participants, this conference became the most significant event that gave the railway workers a mighty new sense of unity, strength and enthusiasm.

Soon, events and the movement gathered momentum. Demands were presented and the strike notices were served. And while the railway workers' leadership were actually invited to negotiate and were coming, step by step, to a settlement, the treacherous henchmen of the capitalist order, in the bureaucracy and the government, arrested the leaders of the national coordination committee right in the midst of negotiations and locked George Fernandes and others in jail. And in order to sow dissension and suspicion in the workers' ranks, some leaders were left free.

This was done particularly to divide the communists from others. But now the total arrests have gone over 15,000, which include communists, socialists and all.

This single episode roused the wrath and anger, not only of the railwaymen but of every decent man in the country. It was not now so much a question of demands. It was a question as to what kind of moral and ethical standards the ruling Congress Party has in its behaviour towards trade unions, their leaders and the working class.

That wild anger that swept the masses at this blatant violation of democracy, decency and morality, in the domain of trade union and industrial relations, by the ruling capitalist junta in the railway board, the home ministry or for that matter in the whole government, it is this which made rail-

waymen go into the general strike action and face all the might of the state.

But it being railways and not just a cashew factory or jute or sugar mill, the first to reel under the blows of the duel is not the working class but the power of the state machine. Whatever noise they may make with the engine whistles or the radio or the ministerial threats, the track and the engines are silent .

The Indian working class stands in proud defiance of the treacherous and death-dealing power of the gangsters and the gunmen of the Indian capitalist order.

The question is not how long they will stand or what they will gain. The question is that a new history is made, a new railway worker is born, a new stage of the class struggle and democratic struggle has been ushered in. That means a new Indian humanity is on the march.

ALL VICTORY TO INDIA'S RAILWAYMEN !

ALL SUCCESSES TO THE INDIAN WORKING CLASS, THE GRAVE-DIGGER OF CAPITALISM AND BUILDER OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM, DEMOCRACY AND CULTURE !

THE STRIKE

Thus the strike which became inevitable as result of preemptive arrests in the midst of negotiations started as scheduled from 6 hours of 8 May 1974. It was indeed the biggest strike action of the Indian working class in the post-independence period. Never before such a gigantic strike of railway workers covering all unions and categories throughout the sixty thousand kilometres of the railway system took place. In recent periods there had been strike in 1960 and one-day strike in 1968. But these were small events compared to the vast sweep of this strike. The long eluding unity established through the NCCRS and economic crisis accompanied by galloping prices and inflation brought the railwaymen in general including in many places the supervisory staff in the 20-day old strike. The unity imparted confidence and hope of victory in the railway workers and drawn in all those who never before went on strike. Even though organisational preparations for the massive strike which would last for about three weeks were indifferent, the strike was a big success. Longdrawn 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.

Never before had the Government used its repressive machinery and the mass communication media in such wide a scale to suppress the strike. Arrests continued throughout the strike running into many thousands, both under MISA and DIR. Though to them a new experience, the railwaymen braved the ordeal with courage and determination. Even the family members of the striking workers were not spared, and were subjected to intimidation, harassment by the police. The railway colonies were special targets of the police

and the Government behaved as it were a war against the railway workers.

Strike in the workshops has been spectacular and in many places even chief foreman participated in the strike. Workshop workers held out to the last and despite weakening in other departments and sections, defections in the workshops have been the least. Even temporary and casual workers whose security of job is most vulnerable, plunged in the strike along with others.

The performance of the various key categories whose role is vital to the running of the railway system has not been uniform in all the railways. In fact, their performance varied from one zone to another, even from one division to another on the same zonal railway. This happened despite the fact that most of the key categories are organised in all-India category unions and excepting the Loco Running Staff Association, these are all organised in an all-India Confederation. Even the best organised among them, the Loco Running Staff Association which demonstrated its strength and organisational cohesion during the strikes of 1973, showed visible weaknesses in many places. Various local factors, lack of coordination with the industrial unions and lingering inhibitions against the AIRF leadership were perhaps responsible for this erratic performance of different categories on different zonal railways and centres.

After arrests started on May 2 morning, sporadic strikes took place in some centres and in Southern Railway the strike started from 3rd May instead of the scheduled 8th. The spontaneous strikes in some centres which were allowed and in certain places encouraged, to linger, acted in fact as non-starter for the strike which was scheduled to start on 8 May. In some centres the all-India strike instead of commencing on 8th in fact ended on 8th or before 8th. This isolationist and uncoordinated action due to uncontrolled enthusiasm was a positive factor in the respective places and areas in weakening the morale of the striking workers.

The railwaymen have given a great battle with courage and militancy, despite the entire state repressive machinery

arraigned against them. They exercised their right to strike and held on for sufficiently long period for winning their demands, and not to challenge the authority of the State or dislodge the Government. The railway strike laid bare once again the ugly face of bourgeois democracy which is democracy for the bourgeoisie and dictatorship for the workers. The railwayman has come out of the strike as a new worker with new consciousness and outlook. They had to retreat as in every battle there is such contingency, in face of superior force of the state. They have to regroup and reorganise their forces based on rich experiences of this strike. In the working class movement no strike is the last strike.

DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE STRIKE

Within a week of the strike the 13-member Action Committee of the NCCRS was furthered denuded of its members as a result of continuing arrests and reduced to only 5 members. The section of AIRF leadership which was outside refused to allow replacement of the arrested members of the Action Committee by the respective constituent organisations leaving the question of Convenorship undisturbed.

The Action Committee has been described by V. B. Karnik as a "motely crowd". But the "motely crowd" had definite divergent political trends, outlook and approach.

From the very beginning, even at the time of negotiations two lines were operating—one wanting a deadlock and the other wanting a settlement. The railway bureaucrats and the reactionaries in the Government lent their hands in ultimately sabotaging the process of negotiations and possibilities of a settlement, and forcing the strike on the workers.

THE NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION IN LOK SABHA AND PRIME MINISTER'S REPLY

On the second day of the railway strike on 9 May and penultimate day before the Lok Sabha adjourned, all opposition parties brought in a no-confidence motion which was debated late in the night of 9th May.

In course of her reply to the debate the Prime Minister made some statements on wage rationalisation and accepted in principle the necessity of bringing about rationality in the wages structure. The Prime Minister said: "We know that the wage structure in the country is not what it should be. We know that there is a great deal of injustice in this. It is riddled with anomalies and contradictions and, in the olden days, there was a bias against labourer and worker. We have done a great deal to correct this. It does not mean that we have got rid of this contradiction or that we have come to a satisfactory stage. I do realise that it is absolutely necessary to bring about some rationality. But this is a tremendous task in a matter which cannot be done overnight. Because, it has to be done without causing too much dislocation. At the same time, the matter is under the earnest consideration of the government and I shall certainly welcome any constructive suggestions which the Hon. Members from here or anybody from outside would like to give."

But on the demand of the striking railwaymen of wages parity, she said: "And we cannot even say that 'no' we agree on principle because then it opens the door to doing this for many other sections."

Nonetheless, the necessity of examining the wages structure as a whole, to remove anomalies and contradictions and to bring about rationality was admitted. Many including Madhu Limaye, saw a ray of light in this statement of the Prime Minister giving room for way out of the impasse in regard to one of the major unsettled demands of the NCCRS.

S. A. Dange in his letter of 21 May 1974 to the Prime Minister said: "As regards the argument and settlement on other problems, involved in the dispute, we can take the points made in your speech in Parliament and the points already settled as the new starter for resumption and completion of the negotiations..."

THE THREE POINT FORMULA

The idea of the so-called formula of simultaneous withdrawal of strike, release and resumption of negotiation

emerged non-officially in course of the meeting the opposition parties' leaders had with the Prime Minister and some other Cabinet Ministers on the 10th May morning. The formula was first disowned by the Prime Minister being not a proposal given by the Government. But subsequently, it was owned by the Government. The opposition party leaders in a joint communication intimated the Action Committee of the three point formula. In its meeting held on 11 May the Action Committee rejected the formula, but agreed to resume negotiation without any precondition.

The Resolution of the Action Committee of 11 May is reproduced below :

“The indefinite strike of railwaymen has entered the fourth day. The Action Committee of the NCCRS hails the heroic struggle which the railwaymen are continuing with great determination. The reports received by the Action Committee from various parts of the country show that mad with the unprecedented success of the strike, the governmental machinery has intensified their repressive measures, against the women folks of railwaymen who are being harassed and tortured. Lathi charge on women folk was resorted to in various places. Railwaymen and their families are being evicted from their allotted quarters from railway colonies with the help of police and CRP. Indiscriminate arrests are continuing.

“The Action Committee strongly condemns these repressive measures which have surpassed all previous records. The Action Committee calls upon the railwaymen to continue the strike with greater unity and determination till a just settlement is reached on their demands.

“The Action Committee discussed today a letter received from leaders of various Opposition parties in Parliament who had met the Prime Minister yesterday to discuss the situation arising out of the railway strike.

“The suggestion made by the leaders of Opposition parties in their meeting with the Prime Minister that all the arrested leaders and railwaymen be released and negotiations be re-

sumed at the point they were broken off is in line with the thinking of the Action Committee.

“The leaders have also informed us that from the Government side the proposal made for a solution of the present dead-lock is that there should be a simultaneous implementation of the following three-point formula :

- i) Release of the arrested leaders of the NCCRS;
- ii) Resumption of negotiations; and
- iii) Withdrawal of the strike

“The Action Committee after considering this three-point formula has reached at the following conclusions :

1. The three-point formula is unworkable and hence unacceptable.
2. The Action Committee wants to make it clear that in the present position the withdrawal of strike is out of question;
3. At the same time, the Action Committee is in favour of a negotiated settlement of the dispute and is prepared to participate in any negotiations if there is any offer for the same from the Government.”

Even before the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Political Affairs Committee members and the leaders of opposition parties in both Houses of Parliament took place, George Fernandes issued a statement from jail saying : “Remember there can be no settlement if our demands for parity and bonus are not met. Keep fighting. You must win this fight.”

(Patriot, 11-5-1974)

The rejection of the three point formula further hardened the attitude of the Government. In subsequent periods while the strike gradually began to lose its momentum and apparently weakened, the Government remained totally unmoved to all attempts of getting it agreed to some sort of a formula to end the stalemate and to bring about a settlement of the strike.

According to the evaluation of the Railway strike made by V. B. Karnik (*The Economic Times*, 22 June 1974)

“the leaders of the strike committed a grave blunder when they refused to accept the so-called three point formula. . .”
“The formula”, according to him “provided an honourable method to draw back.”

Another trade union leader of Bombay has characterised the rejection of the three-point formula as losing a “golden opportunity” to settle the strike (*The Economic Times*, 23 June 1974).

It should, however, be remembered that when the three-point formula came, the strike was in high pitch with justified expectations amongst the mass of railwaymen that the Government will ultimately be forced to come to a more favourable settlement.

In the AIRF Working Committee meeting held in New Delhi when Priya Gupta launched a slanderous attack on AITUC in his speech, George Fernandes interrupted him to ask if Priya Gupta received a chit sent from Jail on 12 May from him (George) stating that the 3-point formula should not be rejected, but improved upon to include the question of victimisation. Priya Gupta, however, denied receipt of any such chit.

ALL INDIA SOLIDARITY ACTION

On the 9 May meeting of the Central Trade Union organisations held in New Delhi and participated by AITUC, CITU, HMS, HMP, BMS, UTUC, the decision of All-India General Strike on 15 May was taken as solidarity action in support of the striking railwaymen.

Besides the Central trade union organisations, many other all-India organisations supported the call or took independent programme on that day. The Central Government employees throughout the country observed mass hunger strike and held meetings and demonstrations. The All-India Defence Employees' Federation called for solidarity tools-down strike of civilian defence employees in Ordnance factories and elsewhere. The Banks including State Bank,

Life Insurance and General Insurance employees participated in the solidarity strike action.

The decision of the all-India industrial strike—the first of its kind in post-independence period and highest form of all-India action, evoked great hope and confidence amongst the striking railwaymen. In fact, the strike was at its peak at about that time. It cannot be gainsaid that the industrial workers barring a few centres, did not respond to the extent expected and called for. This was mainly due to repeated bandhs observed in some bigger industrial centres and states more than once during the preceding months which made it difficult to make their all-India action as effective as was expected.

The all-India General strike was the high watermark of both of solidarity action, as well as of the strike of the railwaymen. Both these combining exerted maximum possible pressure on the Government to yield. In spite of the successful mass strike backed by the all-India industrial solidarity action of 15 May, the dead lock continued and the Government attitude remained as stiff as before along with unmitigated strong arm tactics applied against the striking workers. Despite the heroics of a section of the Action Committee outside, the workers began to realise that there was hardly any hope of a settlement and disillusionment gradually spread leading to trek back.

President V. V. Giri returned to the capital on 11 May by cutting short his holiday. When the Prime Minister and two other members of the PAC met him on 15 May, he advised the Government to settle the strike, rather than force it to fizzle out because an embittered railwaymen would be a problem to the Government.

The President was reported to be in favour of sending the bonus issue to the Bonus Review Committee with fresh terms of reference and referring the remaining points on the railwaymen's charter of demands to a one-man Court of Enquiry headed by a Supreme Court Judge. The NCCRS and Action Committee could act as assessors in the inquiry.

(*Patriot* 17 May 1974)

But the President's advice was not apparently given heed to by the Prime Minister and her Cabinet. The President's stand raised high hopes amongst the mass of the railway workers.

CPM OPPORTUNISM

How seriously the CPM took the railway strike will be evident from the trick they wanted to play with their faction amongst the Central Government employees including P&T. The CPM wing called on their own for non-cooperation with Government on 8th and 9th of the May. What it meant no one knows. Then this was to be followed by an indefinite strike from 10th May onwards to demonstrate that the CPM alone is the leader of the P&T and the only the militant champion of the railwaymen's strike. But that was not the real purpose behind this move. Their calculations misfired. Their estimation was that the railway strike will not at all take place. Therefore to see whether the railway strike actually begins as scheduled on 8 May, the CPM faction of the Central Government employees' organisations announced for the first two days i.e. 8th and 9th a programme of "non-cooperation with the Government of India", which as everybody know means nothing. If the railway strike begins, they will be able to come to the stage as the militant defender of the railwaymen. But unfortunately for them, their another calculation also misfired. They chose their programme and the dates very skilfully. 8th and 9th May falls on Wednesday and Thursday and their proposed strike was set for Friday, the 10th. 11th being second Saturday was a holiday for Central Government employees and 12th Sunday. So they thought even if the railway strike at all takes place, it cannot last beyond Sunday and a settlement by that time is certain. And they can in that case go back to work on 13th Monday as heroes. But alas, their programme was checkmated firstly, by the prolongation of the railway strike and secondly, by the utter failure of their strike call itself to evoke any response amongst the Central Government employees even in some

of their known strongholds. Though a section of the bourgeois press which contain pro-CPM staff tried to play it up as a success, the strike call did not click. The unceremonious withdrawal of the strike just when the railway strike was at its peak, had a damaging impact on the mood and morale of the striking railwaymen. And what reason they adduced for the call off? In a statement signed by eight leaders, the action council said it had taken note of the conciliatory approach of the government in Parliament. (*Times of India*, 13 May 1974). They were so enamoured by “conciliatory approach of the Government” that they meekly called off their indefinite general strike.

DIVERGENT TACTICS AND OBJECTIVES

It is now widely known that two lines were working simultaneously from the very beginning, even before the strike. It was not without significance that the demands adopted at the national convention of railwaymen of February 27 which formed the NCCRS were not sent to the Government till 26th March. The Indian Railway Workers' Federation soon after its formation on 15 March, sent those very demands of the NCCRS to the Government—both to the Labour Minister and Railway Minister.

Then came the George-Dange correspondence when George tried to pick up quarrel with and snipe at AITUC. But the matter ended there.

In the process of negotiation too two lines were working simultaneously—one line for wresting concessions, try to come to a settlement with positive gains, and the other line was of no settlement and of underplaying any possibility of a negotiated settlement. The Government upheld as it were, the second line by preemptive arrests and sabotaging any chance of a settlement. A new situation was thus created with initiative passed out of hands of those who were trying for a settlement.

Almost immediately after the rejection of the three-point formula by the Action Committee, Socialist leader Madhu Limaye, MP shot out a long letter on May 12 to S. A. Dange

and in his impetuosity Limaye even without waiting for reply widely publicised his letter through press and radio. The letter and Dange's reply underlined the two divergent trends on the question of tactics to be followed at that phase of that strike and whether the entire Action Committee or the "truncated body" is to negotiate. Limaye tried to insinuate AITUC and Communists about "selective arrests" meaning that AITUC men have been left out.

Both these letters are reproduced below :

MADHU LIMAYE'S LETTER

Dear Shri S. A. Dange,

Reference our discussion at Ajoy Bhavan on 11th May 1974.

From the Press reports, it seems that the Action Committee of the National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen's struggle has rejected the Government formula conveyed to the Committee by some Opposition leaders.

Even before the letter reached the Committee, Mrs. Gandhi made a surprising announcement at the meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party to the effect that this was not a Government formula at all but that it was suggested by "a member" at the meeting of the Prime Minister with the Opposition leaders in Parliament. The repudiation by Mrs. Gandhi of the formula put forward by the Food and Agricultural Minister before the entire Opposition shows how difficult it is to pin down the Government to anything!

You suggested on 11th May that while the Railwaymen's representatives should give up their insistence on the release of arrested people, the Government should also drop its condition that the strike should be withdrawn simultaneously.

To remove all misunderstanding, it is necessary to point out to the Government that negotiations will have to be held with the *entire* Action Committee, including those members of the Committee who are in jail, and not with the truncated Committee. The Government cannot be allowed to choose the negotiators by making selective arrests. The negotiators have been chosen by the National

Convention of Railwaymen already. The unity of Railwaymen is a precious thing and must be preserved at all costs. The Central Trade Union Organisations and Opposition parties must, therefore, make it absolutely clear that all members of the Action Committee have to be brought to the negotiating table. There should be no difficulty in bringing the Convener and members of the NCCRS, who are in detention, to the table to participate in negotiations and in sending them back to custody after adjournment.

Apart from this, the Government will have to modify its position on the substantive issues involved. Mr. L. N. Mishra has declared time and again in Parliament that bonus and parity are non-negotiable.

Since some people felt that the Prime Minister's speech in reply to the No Confidence Motion in the early hours of the morning of 10th May 1974 is a bit more flexible, I asked for the official version of her speech. I am enclosing herewith the relevant excerpts from the Lok Sabha Debates. I have deliberately isolated these portions from the thrusts and repartees which are an inevitable feature of such a debate.

What she has said about rationalisation of the wage structure, I have put in a separate category, and I have put her refusal to concede these points, even in principle, in the category of negative statements.

The discussion amongst us should proceed on the basis of this position of the Government as stated by the Prime Minister.

In regard to bonus, the Government have taken a contradictory stand. On the one hand, they say the bonus demand cannot be considered. At the same time, they keep on mentioning the Bonus Review Committee which is supposed to consider this issue. Mr. A. P. Sharma of the INTUC has been repeatedly saying that the Bonus Review Committee is seized of the question of bringing workers in the industrial and commercial establishments under the Government of India within the purview of the Bonus Act. If that is so, what prevents the Government from formally amending the terms of reference of the Bonus Review

Committee? At least why does not the Government agree to formally write to the Bonus Review Committee asking to consider the question of applying the Bonus Act to the Railway workers also?

In regard to the question of wage revision, in the course of our discussion, we examined the various concepts that have emerged. You said that what we should ask for is the granting of an industrial wage to the Railway workers as distinguished from civil service pay. The National Coordination Committee wants job classification with the need based minimum wage as the bench mark. It has also advanced the concept of parity with public sector undertakings as an interim measure. Mrs. Gandhi herself has admitted that there are anomalies and contradictions in the wage structure and that there is need for rationalising it. But after admitting this, she says that this is a long term affair and that this has to be done without causing dislocation or upward revision of wages. How to achieve these contradictory objectives is a riddle to me. Her statement that there has been no increase in production and productivity is, as far as the Railway workers are concerned, absolutely inapplicable. As you have yourself pointed out in an IRWF-AITUC publication, based on official documents, labour productivity has increased by 64 per cent during 1950-51 to 1972-73. You have also pointed out that according to the Railway authorities the productivity of workers in Railway workshops has gone up by 54 per cent during the same period. On the other hand, the report of the Third Pay Commission has admitted that the real earnings of the Lower Division Clerk have come down by 10 per cent, of an Upper Division Clerk by 18 per cent and of 'A' grade Railway driver by 22 per cent! In the last two years, there has been a further erosion in the real earnings of Railwaymen due to the phenomenal increase in prices. In view of this, the Government cannot take the position that they will not negotiate the question of the approximation of the wage structure in the Railways with the wage structure in the public sector undertakings.

The Opposition parties and the Central Trade Union Organisations cannot merely act as a post office and send to the National Coordination Committee formulae which the Government considered themselves free to repudiate. Unless they are in a position to assure the Railway workers and their representative organisation—National Committee—that the Government have modified their rigid stand in regard to the two substantive issues involved, what is the point in creating an impression that these formulae constitute a substantial advance towards a solution of the problem?

The Central Trade Union Organisations have already given a call for a national general strike on 15th in support of the Railway workers. It is also necessary that political parties should take steps to mobilise public opinion in favour of the just struggle of Railwaymen and against the repressive and reactionary tactics of the Government, its bureaucracy and its police forces.

You are both the General Secretary of the AITUC as well as the Chairman of your party. As Party Chairman and the senior most leader of the working class movement in the country, it is your duty to bring parties and trade unions together for considering what further action the working class organisations can take after 15th May as well as what steps the political parties can take for mobilising public support for the Railwaymen's struggle so that sufficient pressure is generated for achieving a speedy and honourable solution of the dispute.

With good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

Madhu Limaye

Shri S. A. Dange,
Delhi.

DANGE'S REPLY

My dear Madhu Limaye,

I have received your letter, undated but obviously of 12th May.

You have raised many points in your letter. So it may require a long reply. But I do not just now wish to do so. I will deal with some questions regarding the tactics to be pursued in order to secure a satisfactory settlement of the strike.

At the present moment negotiations as such have come to a dead end. The dead end was brought out by the Government side arresting George Fernandes and others, even while the negotiations had not concluded. That was certainly a provocative and "immoral" act.

Despite those arrests and partly because of them, the railway workers carried out a magnificent General Strike on the whole railway system. There is no question that they deserve congratulations and unreserved support for their just struggle.

At the same time, when workers go on strike, they also want the leadership to find ways of settlement of the strike. In the case of railways it is much more so as they cannot like a factory or workshop remain on strike for months on end. Hence everyone has to exert to find a way to settlement.

The initiative taken by the opposition parties in Parliament to meet the government was a welcome step. But the formula that "unofficially" emerged from the meeting could not provide the solution.

Simultaneous releases, calling off the strike and negotiations to be resumed would mean that once the strike is called off and leaders are released, the negotiations could drag on for months. Hence the Action Committee did well to reject that formula.

But we cannot leave matters in that dead-lock. So we did suggest that both sides resume negotiations without pre-conditions on either side.

It seems from your letter that this point has cut up you and your friends. You think that we want to negotiate and settle over the head of those who are in jail, that we, who are out due to what you call "selective arrests" are "truncated" people, who have no right to negotiate.

If by "selective arrests" you mean that Communists are left out, while your Partymen are arrested, you are totally mistaken. Hundreds of Communist workers and railway leaders are also in prison.

As regards our feeling "truncated", the less said the better.

In fact, there have been hundreds of strikes, in which negotiations have been carried on by strike committees when their leaders have been arrested.

And there are instances when leaders in jail have assumed all powers and even called off strikes from inside jail, without meeting the strikers or their committees as you may remember, you and George once did in Bombay in a Municipal transport strike. We in "the truncated Action Committee" have no such intention.

But I must frankly state that if those who are in jail go on issuing statement of policy or call upon government to come to jail and hold negotiations, it is also overstepping the bounds of leadership and the relations it should have with the "truncated body" outside.

When we proposed that negotiations be resumed by dropping the two pre-conditions by either side, we did mean that those outside would talk with government and if any prospect of settlement come up on the horizon, the final decision would be taken only after full consultation and consent or otherwise with those in jail. This approach was suggested to break the deadlock and not to enter into any kind of settlement only by those who are outside jail. And let me also state that those outside, which includes people like you also are quite capable men to do the job.

I do not want to pick up any quarrel in the present atmosphere. Hence, your statement that "unity of railwaymen is a precious thing and must be preserved at all costs" is absolutely correct. But why should that unity be broken, if some one suggests that talks be resumed, without preconditions? How can there be a final settlement without the release not only of the leaders but the thousands of workers who are in jail?

You must remember railwaymen's unity has not come about so easily. Only last year the AIRF leadership was opposing and denouncing the struggles of Locomen and other categories while we intervened on their behalf. The Conference of 27th February called by the AIRF and George Fernandes was the first step ever towards some united front of all railway organisations. The establishment of the Co-ordination Committee inspired the railwaymen as never before for the first time in history. Let us keep it up. But the way you are pursuing things makes me a little worried.

As regards the question of industrial wage and bonus, I do not go by what the Prime Minister has said in a debate. Let her or her Ministers say what they want to at the negotiating table.

I do not wholly agree on your formulations on the wage question. But we need not argue it here. For example, when during the negotiations, we raised the questions, George agreed to take off the word "Parity" from his formulation. You now speak of "approximation". In my opinion George need not have substituted "Parity" by demanding 75 per cent wage increase. He did it to point out the difference between annual earnings by the workers in Public Sector undertakings, and those in railways. To point out the difference is one thing and demand 75 per cent wage increase is another. That played into the hands of the Government, who said that to grant 75 per cent wage increase is just preposterous. I am just pointing this out as an instance of want of coordination among the leaders at the negotiating table. Any way let me not argue all this in detail.

The point now is how to find a way out of the deadlock. The workers' sacrifices are great, their behaviour is heroic. But the Government is getting adamant. So at this juncture, let us not keep them in the deadlock by arguing on some of our "inner relations." No one wants to settle without consultation with those in jail. But, if there is a possibility, do not prevent even those "truncated" ones outside to make an effort to break the deadlock, about which though I have

no very high hopes. But let us try and not give up the efforts. Even if the Devil intervenes and helps to bring about negotiations, I will have no objection. It is the interests of the lacs that are paramount and not the question as to who brings about the talks and settlement.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

(S. A. DANGE)

P. S. Just when I was sending this to you, I learnt that you have released your letter to the Press. This will cause more harm than good. You leave me no alternative but to release my letter to the Press though it was not written with that view. I feel that you should not have gone to the Press. Any way, it is your choice.

Yours sincerely,

Sd/-

(13 May 1974)

(S. A. DANGE)

The Action Committee took the cue and in its resolution of 14 May said :

“There are some reports in the press regarding the difference of opinion in the modality of negotiations. The Action Committee has already made its position clear that the negotiation should be with the full Committee and not a part of it. The Committee stands as one body and neither the prison walls nor any difference of politicians can break this solid unity.”

But seven days prior to this resolution of the Action Committee with its rhetoric about its “solid unity” and 5 days prior to Madhu Limaye’s letter to Dange seeking to immobilise the “truncated body”, George Fernandes in his two consecutive letters bearing the same date of 7 May to L. N. Mishra repeated :

(a) “I propose that we start the talks at once. If you have objection to releasing us, the talks can be held in Tihar prison. I am sure my colleagues on the Action Committee will have no objection to this”.

(b) "As I suggested in my letter earlier this evening we can meet and talk here in Tihar prison if you have objection to releasing us." Was the Action Committee in Jail "truncated" or full?

Mishra, however, commented that George Fernandes is not a Mahatma that the venue of negotiation should be where the Mahatma is.

While the Action Committee adopted the resolution on 14 May reiterating that negotiation should be with the *full* Action Committee implying thereby that release of those in jail as a precondition for any negotiation, the memorandum submitted by the deputation of opposition party leaders in Parliament which waited on the President, V. V. Giri on 13 May stated that Action Committee has given up the precondition of release before negotiation is resumed. The statement issued by leaders of opposition in Parliament from the Parliament House on 13 May 1974 and signed by N. G. Goray, S. N. Misra, L. K. Advani, Niren Ghosh, S. M. Banerji, Madhu Limaye, Tridib Choudhury, Era Sezhyan and H. M. Patel said: "In spite of the generous offer of the NCCRS to resume negotiations without insisting on the prior release of the arrested leaders and workers, the government have not responded to this appeal in a positive manner."

On this issue Dange in his reply to Madhu Limaye made the position clear thus:

"When we proposed that negotiations be resumed by dropping the two preconditions by either side, we did mean that those outside would talk with Government and if any prospect of settlement come up on the horizon, the final decision would be taken only after full consultation and consent or otherwise with those in jail. This approach was suggested to break the deadlock and not to enter into any kind of settlement only by those who are outside jail."

After 15th May when the Government attitude further stiffened and on the other hand the strike situation started weakening, a new phase of finding suitable formula to save the situation developed.

In search of a formula an informal meeting took place at the residence of R. K. Khadilkar where P. Ramamurthy, S. M. Joshi, D. B. Thengadi, Madhu Limaye, Madhu Dandavate were present. S. A. Dange joined them later. Dange was asked to make a draft on the question of wages which he made. Everybody except Madhu Limaye agreed with that draft. Madhu Limaye made an alternative draft. Both were taken unofficially by R. K. Khadilkar to the Prime Minister while the others waited for her reaction. Both the drafts are reproduced below:

1. That the Government side and the NCCRS should meet and resume negotiations. The points that have been already agreed upon be properly formulated and implemented by common consent.
2. On the question of foodgrains supply, which is one of the points already agreed, the clarification about supply by Government should be properly formulated.
3. The question of Bonus should be given over to the Bonus Review Committee which is already seized of the problem in a general form and this should be taken up after the committee has submitted its report.
4. As regards the question of the pay structure, one of the proposals is as follows: (Draft made by Dange).

A joint Committee of the trade unions and the Railway Ministry presided over by a neutral person should be appointed in order to determine principles and content of the wage structure of workers and employees doing work of industrial nature in what may be broadly termed as industrial and commercial departments of the Government. It is suggested that one of the characteristics of such industrial nature should be that the department so concerned has had the obligation to invest capital and its activities are subject to profit and loss balance-sheets and that it has comparable work and values in the public sector undertakings of the Government. This Committee should report in six months' time.

(Shri Madhu Limaye has made the following suggestion:)

The NCCRS pressed its demand for need-based minimum wage and parity with the public sector undertakings. The Government cannot agree to this. However, the Government agree to negotiate with the NCCRS the question of the revision of the wage structure.

5. All persons arrested in connection with the strike should be set free and cases, not involving violence and sabotage be withdrawn. There should be no victimisation whatsoever for going on strike.

16 May 1974

The Prime Minister rejected both.

DANGE WRITES TO PRIME MINISTER

S. A. Dange in his letter to the Prime Minister on 21 May pleaded for allowing the NCCRS which is the Central Body of Railwaymen "to meet, whether in jail or outside, and take their decision on the question of how to resolve the present deadlock."

The letter is reproduced below:

Dear Madam,

I am, herewith, requesting that Government should permit the NCCRS, that is the Central Body of Railwaymen's which sponsored the strike, to meet, whether in jail or outside, and take their decision on the question of how to resolve the present deadlock.

As you know what is irritating the railwaymen most is the arrest of thousands of railwaymen, the harassment of their womenfolk and the threat that they will not be reinstated.

As regards the argument and settlement on other problems, involved in the dispute, we can take the points made in your speech in Parliament and the points already settled as the new starter for resumption and completion of the negotiations, which, in the opinion of the AITUC will not be a very difficult task.

But this is the opinion of the AITUC. We, however, do not wish to take any unilateral decision without a meeting of the NCCRS, at whose call, the railwaymen have come out.

As majority of the NCCRS members belonging to all parties and trade union organisations are in jail, permission and facilities to hold such a meeting are necessary.

In view of the situation that has arisen in the national economy and peoples lives, the government also should modify its stand without considerations of prestige and expedite the settlement of the dispute.

Yours faithfully,

Sd/-

(S. A. DANGE)

General Secretary

(21 May 1974)

In his statement of 21 May also Dange said:

“Unless all the members of the NCCRS meet immediately and unless all those thousands, who are in prison are assured of release and reinstatement, all formulae for settlement are failing to have any effect. The AITUC has asked the Government to let the members of the NCCRS meet whether inside prison or outside and evolve steps to settle the three main questions now that is, calling off the strike, the release and reinstatement of those imprisoned or dismissed and resumption of negotiations.”

THE STATEMENT OF MAY 21

“The call for observing the ‘Anti-Repression Day’ given by the AITUC and other Central Trade Union Organisations was observed throughout the country. In all places, the people expressed their deep resentment about the arrests of thousands of railway workers and their leaders. The most cruel part of this repression is the barbarous attacks on the families of the railway workers, particularly their womenfolk, who have refused to be cowed down by police terror.

“Today on the fifteenth day of the strike enquiries are being addressed to the AITUC as to the future course. Our answer is that due to the imprisonment of the majority of the members of the NCCRS and the Action Committee, the NCCRS, which is the decision making centre for the railwaymen’s struggle, is unable to meet and take any collective decision. Unless all the members of the NCCRS meet immediately and unless all those thousands, who are in prison are assured of release and reinstatement, all formulae for settlement are failing to have any effect. The AITUC has asked the Government to let the members of the NCCRS meet whether inside prison or outside and evolve steps to settle the three main questions now that is, calling off the strike, the release and reinstatement of those imprisoned or dismissed and resumption of negotiations.

“The AITUC thinks that the Prime Minister’s speech in Parliament and her talks with the opposition leaders can become the basis for the ending of the deadlock, for which it is necessary that the NCCRS as a whole must be allowed to meet immediately”.

In his Open Letter of 22 May to the Political Affairs Committee members of the Cabinet S. A. Dange once again spelt out these proposals and that the question of wages “be given to an Industrial Wage Structure Commission and the question of bonus to the Bonus Review Committee....”

The Open Letter is reproduced below:

“Dear Madam/Sir,

I am sorry to note that the most reasonable proposals made by the AITUC and many of the leaders of the NCCRS to solve the deadlock in the Railway Strike have evoked no favourable response from the Prime Minister and her Cabinet. When the Prime Minister herself admits before the Parliament and the people that there is irrationality in the wage structure of the country and that it has to be changed, why should she recoil from the logic of her own statement and refuse to accept the suggestion that an Industrial Wage Com-

mission be appointed to look into the problem of introducing certain well recognised norms of rationality in the whole wage structure of the country, including the one in Government-run industries and send the seventh demand of the railway workers to such a Commission?

Many people, including the Prime Minister and her learned colleagues may not be aware of the fact that we in the trade union movement including the AITUC, INTUC, CITU and many others have succeeded through strikes and negotiations in introducing economic and industrial wage rationality in many vital sectors such as coal, iron and steel, oil, cement, heavy engineering and so on. And in this process, many of your ministers, private owners and their management and technical men have also lent their help. Even now joint committees of employers and trade unions are successfully working on further improving the structure, where the question is not merely of raising wages but also the whole of the rationality of relationships inside the workshop and the industry as a whole, on a nation-wide scale.

May we know if the Prime Minister is aware of this and if she is, why she is refusing to do the same for railways and other industrial and commercial sections of her Government? The obvious answer could be that she and her government do not know what is happening in the country over which they rule.

But since it is difficult to accuse them of ignorance the other conclusion is that in order to encourage the rapid capitalist development of the country, the government is now carrying out the demand of the big monopolies as made in the Tata Memorandum that a hard line be taken against working class demands.

It is better to remind the government that William Pitt hanged a number of British workers for forming unions and violating his Anti-Combination Laws. Trade unionism was equal to treason in his time. History shows that Pitt failed in his hard hangman's line. The coal miners' strike in Britain the other day overthrew the Tories of Pitt and Heath and won the election and the demands.

The railway strike has become a national issue in the field of industrial relations, democratic rights and a rational wage-structure. The railway workers are neither demanding the resignation of the government nor anything fantastic, beyond the reasonable and normal demands of a trade union.

The unheard of use of police force even against workers' families, the arrest and imprisonment of thousands, the refusal even to negotiate has raised the problems to a national political level of democracy and fundamental rights, and to a national industrial level of rationality of wage-structure in a fast developing country, which has stepped out from a feudal-landlord serf era into an age of a fast developing industrial capitalist relations and the usual crisis that accompanies such development. And the first to feel that and fight it is the working-class and its trade unions. Neither the Prime Minister nor her Cabinet seem to have realised this. Once again our request is that they should look at the railway strike and all the other strikes in a new perspective and save the country from further upheavals, which are avoidable.

Once again we propose that all those who have been arrested or convicted be released and reinstated along with those who are dismissed, that consultations be allowed to be held by the full NCCRS, that the question of wages be given to an Industrial Wage Structure Commission and the question of Bonus to the Bonus Review Committee and a new agreement be entered into properly defining and including the six demands already agreed upon. And finally let the Prime Minister herself welcome back these two million to start the wheels to bring in a better future from the bitter past, for which a new path has to be built.

That is what the AITUC would like to happen and will contribute all its might to make it happen."

The government remained unmoved and the strike situation fast deteriorated despite what the remnant of the Action Committee put out in its press releases or resolutions. The same leaders who agreed with the formulae at R. K. Khadilkar's residence on 16 May, opposed within two-three days.

They publicly repudiated the earlier position they took in course of a statement on 22 May under the signature of P. Ramamurthy, S. M. Joshi, S. M. Banerji, Madhu Limaye, Madhu Dandavate and D. B. Thengadi. Except S. M. Banerji, all others were present on the 16th informal meeting.

The statement stated to say: "We are further convinced that the struggle of the railway employees must continue to compel the government to accept this position."

"Different reports are appearing in the press about some formulae to settle the strike of railway workers.

"We want to make it clear that while talks have been going on amongst us for exploring ways and means for an honourable settlement, we are all united that negotiations should take place on the basis of the charter of demands submitted by the NCCRS."

This statement was directed against AITUC and S. A. Dange and to prevent any initiative to be taken to end the deadlock which was of paramount importance in the fast deteriorating strike situation of gradual fizzling out of the strike as on the spot reports of different zones and areas further confirmed subsequently.

While Madhu Limaye and others harped on the charter of demands of the NCCRS, Limaye told newsmen on 22 May (Patriot, 23 May) that he and S. M. Joshi had made a number of suggestions to the government during what he described as "exploratory talks" they have had with Central Ministers.

"So far the government has not spelt out its position, nor committed itself to anything," he added.

He declined to disclose the "suggestions", saying no useful purpose would be served by such a disclosure at this stage.

If negotiations can only take place "on the basis of the Charter of Demands submitted by the NCCRS", what were those "suggestions" made by them which cannot be disclosed?

Opposition leaders belonging to Congress (O), CPI, CPM, RSP, DMK, J.S., SSP and SP met the Prime Minister and her senior Cabinet colleagues on 18 May and told her that they were not authorised to make any basis for renewed negotiations. They were only making an appeal to the government not to be rigid and to start negotiations. (*Patriot*, 19 May). The Prime Minister made it clear to them that the government refused to start talks before the strike was called off.

In disregard of the realities of the strike situation, CPM, a section of SP and the ultra left members of the Action Committee were trying to pursue an adventurist line and allowing the strike to completely fizzle out and end in complete rout. At the meeting of 24 May of the Central Trade Union organisations CPM representative in fact proposed that the strike be intensified by general strike of Central Government employees, workers of steel plants, coal miners and others. The proposal was opposed by AITUC as being unrealistic and adventurist. The position was fully explained in the AITUC statements of May 25 and May 27.

The CPM wanted the railway strike as a platform of their adventurism to serve their tactical political objectives. This is borne out by the letter of May 21 of P. Ramamurthy and H. S. Surjit to the CPI asking the CPI to come out of the Kerala Coalition Government. They were interested more on Kerala coalition than in the fate of the railway strike.

THE CALLING OFF EPISODE

Excepting in the imagination of ultra left members of the Action Committee outside, the strike was dwindling fast from the week beginning 20th May barring a few pockets, mainly workshops which were still holding out. The question of orderly retreat instead of complete rout was looming large. The Action Committee of the NCCRS was immobilised the major part of it being in jail and was thus not in a position to take a collective decision to save the situation. The AITUC in all its statements including letters to the

PAC and Prime Minister made it clear that AITUC although knowing fully well the obtained situation, cannot take unilateral decision of calling off the strike, which NCCRS alone can take and AITUC is part of the collective body.

The slander campaign launched by the CPM and other professional slanderers against AITUC backed by a large section of the bourgeois press is not surprising as their adventurist plan could not materialise, nor could they meet their tactical political objective for which they tried to utilise the railway strike.

In the statement of May 25 which appeared in the Press on 26th AITUC has reiterated its position that on its own it cannot give any line, nor it can unilaterally call off the strike, as it is part of the NCCRS which alone can take such decision which, however, is not in a position to meet and decide. In course of the statement of May 27, the position has further been clarified. Both the statements are reproduced below :

AITUC STATEMENT OF 25 MAY 1974

The Secretariat of All India Trade Union Congress issued the following statement to the press :

“In the meeting of the Central T.U. organisations called by the Action Committee of the NCCRS on 24th the strike situation was reviewed and proposals were discussed as to how to solve the deadlock created by Government’s adamant attitude and further how to help the railway workers. During the discussion the CITU representatives proposed that the strike be intensified by calling General Strike of the Central Government Employees, and the workers of the Steel plants, the coal miners and others.

“This proposal was opposed by the AITUC as being unrealistic and adventurist. So it was not accepted. The Committee then decided on observing a Solidarity Day.

“During the discussions it was also found that the only authority that can call a strike or negotiate or sanction a call

off of the strike is the full NCCRS. Hence the AITUC had asked the Government and the Political Affairs Committee to permit a meeting of the NCCRS with the participation of those who are in jail to decide on future course of action. But Government did not respond.

“The AITUC felt that without some guarantees on the question of victimisation, release of prisoners and reinstatement of all workers, it would be futile to discuss a call off proposal.

“The AITUC unilaterally would not take a call off decision on its own, nor has it made any proposal or “offer” to negotiate on its own with the Government. Being a part of the NCCRS, it has to leave that decision to that body, which, however cannot meet and act.

“Individual fizzling out is demoralising and individual sticking out is also damaging.

“In such a deadlock the only course left is for the workers to take their collective decision group by group or zone by zone.

“The AITUC will stand by the railway workers in whatever decision they take. By itself it cannot give its own line due to its organisational participation in the united front of all railmen as represented by the NCCRS, which today stands immobilised due to government repression.”

AITUC STATEMENT OF 27 MAY

S. A. Dange, General Secretary, All-India Trade Union Congress, issued the following statement to the press :

“The AITUC regrets to find that the Action Committee of the NCCRS and some of its ultra-left members have deliberately misrepresented the AITUC approach to the problem of the strikers at the present stage.

“The Action Committee itself has ruled that no one but the full NCCRS can take any decision about the strike. And since the NCCRS is not able to meet, many of its leaders being in jail, who is to take the decision? What is

wrong in the AITUC stand that in such a deadlock, the democratic collective decisions of the striking workers themselves is the best method. Why should those who talk of trade union democracy be afraid of workers taking their decision?

“The AITUC has only called for such democratic decision and has not unilaterally taken any decision of its own.

“As regards the talk of calling a prolonged general strike of all industries, particularly iron, steel, coal and also Government employees, the slogan has been fully used twice in this month—once on 3rd May at the call of Left Parties and again on 15th May for the railway strike. The CPM called out the P&T and other Central Government employees on its own and failed miserably. The 15th Bandh was a success in some areas only. In such a situation to call for an all-India permanent Bandh till the Government is defeated was considered by the AITUC as unwise and only holding out illusions before the Railway workers.

“The leadership and the railwaymen have fought a great battle. Having fought so well, the generals of the battlefield should show wisdom and skill in saving their forces from total rout and losses. The AITUC proceeds from this standpoint.

“That the Government is not going to mend its ways easily is evident from the arrest of Com. N. S. Bhangoo leader of the All-India Railway Employees' Confederation.

“The AITUC calls upon its units and its railway unions to organise on a large scale the defence of those who are prosecuted, to protect those, who still are out, from victimisation, to collect relief for the families of those who are wounded and harassed and to see that no one is left unattended to.

“The railwaymen's movement is not defeated but strengthened by this great struggle which from now onwards will take new forms in all areas of their work.”

Then came the calling off resolution from the members of the Action Committee in jail including George Fernandes which reached the Action Committee on 26th afternoon. They wanted the strike to be called off from 27th. Even then

the ultras in the Action Committee outside suppressed the resolution for full 24-hours and issued a statement on May 26 stating that: "The Action Committee appeals to the railwaymen to continue the strike with more determination and firmness as the Government has not changed its attitude." But finding that the jail resolution of call off had become known, the two who controlled the office outside issued a call off statement on 27 evening. It is only late on the 27th that the Action Committee adopted the resolution received from jail and formally called-off the strike from 6 hours of 28 May.

The resolution is reproduced below in full :

NCCRS ACTION COMMITTEE RESOLUTION CALLING OFF THE STRIKE

Text of Resolution Received 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 50,000 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 popaganda war against railwaymen 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; 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 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 anti-worker 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 to be recounted here. But even while the railwaymen were fighting that 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.

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 6 a.m. Tuesday May 28. 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 railwaysmen's struggle, Com. V. S. Mhalgi, Comrade Shripal 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

(Member of NCCRS—not a member of the Action Committee—in jail)

Outside:

Sd/- Samar Mukherji, M.P. (disagreed),
G. S. Gokhale, N. M. Phatak,
Priya Gupta (disagreed)

Dated : 27 May, 1974

V. B. Karnik in his review article in the *Economic Times* of 22 June has observed : "But curiously enough at that late hour there were in the Council two members who wanted the strike to continue. If they had their way, the strike would have continued; but it would have continued only in the imagination of the two leaders..."

N. G. Goray, the S. P. leader told newsmen in Kolhapur on 26 May that the only two alternatives to end the stalemate at the railway front were to withdraw the strike unilaterally or to organise a united action in the form of a countrywide strike by the working class. He favoured the first, he said.

It was not generally known that George Fernandes sent from jail his advice on 24 May to call off the strike in the form of a note to Priya Gupta. He specifically asked Priya Gupta interrupting his (Gupta's) speech at the AIRF Working Committee of 8 and 9 June, whether he received George's note of May 24. As there was no response to that, according to George, he alongwith others sent on May 26 an official resolution for call off. George Fernandes after release and in course of his press conference in New Delhi on 29 May and in speeches has made clear his disagreement with the assessment of CITU and ultras in the Action Committee and adequately replied to the professional slanderers of AITUC who tried to make out that the AITUC called off the strike unilaterally which was entirely contrary to facts.

Faced with the organised might of the State with police terror let loose on the railway workers and their families they fought and fought bravely upto a point. They at some stage chose to retreat and call off the strike. This is a time honoured accepted principle of class struggle in the trade union sphere. Perhaps to the CPM and CITU strikes are part of permanent revolution and never to be called off. To them total rout or feudal harakiri is preferable to organised retreat. But this is only tall talk. Their leading cadres went back to work in some areas long before the call off as was stated by J. M. Biswas, Secretary, IRWF in his state-

ment published in the *Patriot* of 29 May 1974. It was also an undeniable fact that wherever the AITUC unions had their strength and following, which were not many, they were holding successfully till the strike was officially called off by the Action Committee.

TASKS IN THE NEXT PHASE

The tasks that confront the railwaymen and their unions after the end of the strike are besides resumption of negotiation (a) to fight against victimisation and to get back every man in his job. Victimisation is a weapon that bureaucracy will wield to behead the militant worker leadership (b) to preserve the unity of NCCRS which united all unions and federations of railwaymen and on whose united call the railwaymen went into action (c) to organise relief and defence of victimised workers (d) to organise and regroup forces for struggle in the new stage in a new way.

The article of S. A. Dange on the tasks in the new phase is reproduced below:

RAILWAYMEN—NEXT PHASE

The all-India railway workers' glorious general strike began on May 8 and ended on May 28. To write the true story of those historic 20 days will require some time. It is too early to assess all the facts and factors that went into the making of that big struggle, in which 20 lakh workers and 50 lakh members of their family were involved.

The only valid and unchallenged conclusion that stands out today is that never before in the history of trade union movement in our country had the railwaymen acted in such unison on an all-India scale, not even in the hectic days of 1946-47. From that point of view alone, the strike must be classified as a successful strike. The strike has made the Indian railwayman of today a new man. He is no longer what

he was before May 8, though he may be on the same engine, station or track as before.

WHY WAS STRIKE CALLED OFF

But it is also a fact that the strike had to be called off unilaterally on the 20th day by the leadership of the NCCRS. That call-off had to be made as an orderly retreat in a battle, which at its start signified the most successful advance, but which in the end had to be a retreat.

What was the decisive reason for this retreat? What force was it that made us retreat?

It was the use of the violence of the State power let loose on the workers that forced them to retreat. The government of the country, ruling in the name of democracy, had unleashed its armed forces against unarmed peaceful workers to compel them to work. It looked like the naked dictatorship of the Roman emperors, letting loose their armed soldiery against their slaves who refused to be mere slaves only to work under the whiplash.

For 20 days in May 1974, India saw peaceful bourgeois democracy, installed in power by the ballot box, forcing the railwaymen to give up their demands and their right to strike to get those demands. This bourgeois democracy which swears by truth, non-violence, peace and the poor and the fundamentals of the Constitution attacked even the families of the railwaymen, further illustrates the truth that when the worker has sold his labour power to the employer he has sold himself into wage-slavery and not only himself but his family and his home also. And that home is expected to carry the sweet sign board "Let there be no bitterness".

The workers were stunned by this unprecedented use of violence. They had come out for a peaceful strike—struggle and not for a war to overthrow the government, though some adventurists may have secretly harboured such a mad idea of the strike in the conditions of India today. Hence the workers had no other alternative but to retreat after a heroic struggle.

The railway workers' strike and the behaviour of the government has brought home to the worker, by his own experience, the eternal truths of Marxism-Leninism, as nothing else would have, that bourgeois democracy is democracy for the bourgeoisie and dictatorship for the working class.

This one single factor, the violence of the state power of the capitalist class, forced the railway workingman to retreat. The railway strike was but an incident in the contemporary class struggle in capitalist India.

It is not starvation that broke them. In 20 days, no striker is starved into submission. It is not just arrests that broke them. Never since the days of the freedom movement has India seen 50,000 workers sent to prison in three or four days. But it is not prisons that broke them. It is the cumulative effect of this total barbarism of the classes in power that made them think that there was no way out except retreat.

And when all the efforts for compromise failed, when all doors for settlement, all formulas for a solution were deadlocked, the workers decided to trek back. The majority of the NCCRS being in jail, they did not expect it could tell them what to do.

It was at this juncture, when thousands had already trekked back that the AITUC once again tried to find a formula for some settlement. But a group of political leaders publicly repudiated it, saying they would have no 'formula', except the full charter of demands. What blindness to reality! So the AITUC had to tell the workers that individual fizzling out was demoralising and not to do it, but to take their own collective decision, zone by zone. The AITUC by itself being a part of the collective NCCRS would not call off the strike unilaterally. But the majority of the NCCRS was immobilised being in prison.

We said this on the 26th. But two days before this, the Action Committee leaders in jail had come to the same conclusion. So they sent their resolution to call off the strike.

The Action Committee members outside held back that resolution for two days because they did not agree with it, until the AITUC statement came out. Then some of them tried to malign the AITUC, instead of facing the reality of the situation.

With that the great strike came to an end from the morning of 28 May.

Instead of seeing the main truths of the great struggle, there are petty political gamblers, whose gambles did not succeed, that want to set the railway workers against each other and against the AITUC and the CPI. But we will not give room for this controversy here and now.

TASK NOW

The task now is to see that the unity of the NCCRS is strengthened. The NCCRS is not a union. It is only a united front platform of all railwaymen. How to reconcile the unity of the NCCRS with the diversity of the various unions, centres and political leaders that sit on it is a delicate and complex problem. It can be solved only if factional and narrow party politics is avoided and a united front of railway trade unions is evolved. As the AIRF continues to be recognised, it may be metamorphosed to assimilate the NCCRS, thus synthesising the two in a new AIRF, with the old name but a new content. But we have doubts whether the old AIRF leadership will like such a development.

Those thousands who are victimised, dismissed or service-terminated, those who are still in prison or under prosecution, those who are thrown out of their homes, require relief and attention.

A mere call for relief funds by the NCCRS or AIRF is not going to help. Its contribution and management will be points of difficulty and even controversy. Hence, a multi-point collective and democratically managed administration with strict and honest supervision and accounting will have to be evolved.

And in the meanwhile, a new movement and public pressure will have to be built to make government resume talks and halt its massacre of the workers, their leaders and union, by victimisation, dismissals, prosecutions and prisons. We must remember that victimisation is the weapon of the bureaucracy to behead the rank and file leadership. It is the potent weapon of capitalism to behead the many-headed shop-floor leadership that guides the workers at all times at its place of work.

The guillotine of the Railway Board is getting busy, while the ministers are immersed in their factional politics and careerism, which also helps the ends and ambitions of the bureaucrats. They have little time to give to people's problems. Hence the people have to be mobilised to save the railwayman. In what forms—the NCCRS and the union and all Central Trade Unions must decide.

We must pledge that every victimised worker will be protected and vow that he shall be back in his place. To strike for legitimate demands and also to go back to work, to his own former place, after the strike is over, is the right of every working man, even in a bourgeois democracy.

And it shall prevail in this free India !

(New Age, 16 June 1974)

The full NCCRS met on 26 June and after reviewing the strike adopted a programme of agitation and laid down the tasks in the post strike situation.

The resolution adopted by the NCCRS is reproduced below :

The NCCRS salutes the railwaymen for successfully fighting the biggest ever struggle in the history of the working class movement in India. The unity, determination and courage displayed by railwaymen and their families in the course of their struggle and against the police brutalities and the coercive weapons used by the government will stand out

as a shining example to workers all over the world in their movement against injustice. The NCCRS greets all those who stood by the railwaymen during their heroic struggle even when the railway strike meant so much inconvenience to them, and pledges that the railwaymen will repay their debt of gratitude by forever staying in the vanguard of peoples' struggles for justice.

Never in the history of the working class struggles in India have workmen faced repression like what was unleashed by the government against railwaymen.

More than 50,000 workers were illegally arrested and detained without trial; nearly 30,000 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 Goebbellian propaganda war against railwaymen 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; a campaign of lies, slander and perfidy of an unprecedentedly low level; use of the Army, Border Security Force, Territorial Army, Special Reserve Police, Central Reserve Police and other organs of State power buttressed 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; non-payment 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 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.

During the strike and immediately after it was called off, the President, the Prime Minister, the Railway Minister and the Home Minister had emphatically declared on more than one occasion, that there would be no victimisation of work-

men for participating in the strike and that negotiations would be resumed with the representatives of the railwaymen in order to arrive at a settlement of their demands.

Though it is now more than four weeks since the Action Committee of the NCCRS unilaterally called off the strike, it is a pity that the railway administration should have chosen to pursue a course that is designed to keep alive the state of confrontation with railwaymen.

In the last four weeks, the railway administration has resorted to victimisation and provocation which is not only in clear breach of its earlier utterances but appears to be in keeping with its behaviour during the strike.

It has given a break-in-service to about 10 lakhs of permanent railwaymen, and all these employees are now being treated as new recruits.

Nearly 30,000 permanent workmen have been either removed or dismissed from service for participating in the strike.

About 50,000 casual and substitute workmen have not been taken back on work, though most of these men have been working for periods ranging from five years to twenty years.

Over 20,000 workmen are being prosecuted under the Defence of India Rules for participating in the strike, and railway and state government authorities are seeking summary trials and criminal conviction of these workmen.

Railwaymen are being transferred from one unit to another and from one division to another, and in the process not only are they being separated from their families, but they are being compelled to run two establishments on the pittance that is their salary. There have been innumerable reversions and forced premature superannuation of railwaymen. Unilateral changes in working conditions have been introduced to harass and brow-beat the workmen.

The so-called loyal workers who are otherwise known as black-legs and scabs have been rewarded with special incre-

ments, irregular promotions, preferential treatment in matters of promotions, appointment of their children, allotment of quarters etc. creating in the process a state of permanent tension between workmen and workmen.

The consequences of the suicidal course followed by the railway administration are there for all to see. Almost a month after the strike was called off, there is still no normalcy in the running of rail services, what to speak of normalcy in management-employee relationships. *The Economic Times* of 25 June was to report that "even nearly one month after the withdrawal of the railwaymen's strike, passenger and goods services on the Northern, Eastern and North Eastern Railways have not come to normal. More than 200 passenger trains—mostly serving the mufasil areas—remain cancelled on these three railways and wagon loading, in general, has been running 20 to 25 per cent lower than what obtained before 27 April, when first cancellation of trains were ordered". What is true of the Northern, Eastern and North Eastern Railways is true in a larger degree of all other zonal railways in the country.

The NCCRS warns the railway administration that there will be no return to normalcy on the railways unless the administration changes its ways and restores normalcy in its relations with the railwaymen. It would do well to realise that the unilateral withdrawal of the strike by the NCCRS Action Committee does not mean that the railwaymen have either given up their demands or have accepted defeat. The localised actions that have taken place during the last four weeks in Bombay, Ajmer, Madras ICF, Narkatiaganj, Samastipur, Tughlakhabad and other centres as also the decision of the Southern Railway NCCRS calling for another strike on any day after 12 July are indicative of the mood and temper of the workers which the railway administration can ignore at its own peril. The meeting hereby demands that the government and the railway administration take immediate steps to release all those arrested in connection with the strike, withdraw all pending warrants and all cases in connection with the strike, and all acts of victimisation and resume negotiations

with the NCCRS on the demands of the railwaymen. Only then will it be possible to restore normalcy and build a new relationship so that the biggest and the most important sector of our national economy functions at optimum efficiency in the larger interests of the nation.

The NCCRS calls upon the railwaymen to preserve and strengthen the unity they have achieved during the days of the great struggle. Railwaymen should particularly guard against the efforts made by their enemies to divide and split their ranks. Most demands of the railwaymen are yet to be won and the problems of victimisation have to be tackled. In such a situation any move from any quarter to sow dissensions in the ranks of railwaymen and undermine their unity will only mean strengthening the hands of the railway administration in its mad desire to suppress the workmen. The NCCRS hereby calls upon all railwaymen to (1) activate the NCCRS at all levels and to constitute its committees where they may not yet have been set up and rid those committees of strike breakers; (2) to hold conventions of railwaymen at all levels under the auspices of the NCCRS; (3) to observe a Protest Week from 22 to 26 July against repression by holding rallies, demonstrations, organising dharnas, wearing badges etc. and to demand a negotiated settlement on the charter of demands; and (4) to take all steps at every level to provide relief to workmen who have become victims of the railway administration's repressive, anti-trade union moves.

The meeting resolves to call a National Convention of Railwaymen on 26 August in New Delhi to decide on the future course of action. In the meanwhile, it calls upon the railwaymen to do all in their power at every level to fight against victimisation in all its forms.

The meeting appeals to the organised trade union movement in India to render financial and other help to the NCCRS to provide much needed relief to the victimised workmen and their families. The NCCRS thanks the International Trade Union organisations for their fraternal support and solidarity during the struggle, and seeks their continued

moral and material support in dealing with the new situation.

In the opinion of the NCCRS the government's ruthlessness in dealing with the railwaymen's dispute on wages, bonus etc. and its breach of faith in the days following the withdrawal of the strike are a challenge to the entire working class movement in India, and it is, therefore, imperative that there is a united response by all organised sections of the working people against this challenge. To plan this united response of the working people against the government's offensive, the meeting resolves to unite all central organisations and national federations of labour to a conference in New Delhi on 20 and 21 July.

With the railwaymen's strike, a new era has opened up before the working class movement in India. The nationwide strike action on 15 May by the trade unions in support of the railwaymen was a demonstration of the new unity of purpose and action that is emerging. It is necessary to consolidate this unity and to move forward, learning from the mistakes of the past and determined to avoid the pitfalls in the future. The NCCRS pledges to do everything within its power to spearhead the movement, to forge the fighting unity of the working classes and the toiling masses in the country, transcending all divisions based on any consideration.

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