

C S Menon (HMS), General Secretary, Western Railway Employees' Union

A short biographical note on C S Menon (HMS) General Secretary, Western Railway Employees' Union, interviewed on July 29, 2004, in Bombay

C S Menon was born in a agriculturist family in a village called Naradu in Kerala on 14 January, 1932. His father was a Panchayat employee.

C S Menon was a brilliant student and studied upto matriculation in his village school. Since his father could not bear the expenses of his collage studies, C S Menon came to Bombay in search of a job after 1950 since his uncle was employed here.

In the beginning, C S Menon got a job in a mill and later went to Gujarat as a Railway clerk in 1953. He appeared in service examination and became a guard. He was in Gujarat for thirty years.

C S Menon was fluent in spoken English, hence he was asked to organise the union at Bhavnagar, then to Ahmedabad. C S Menon had joined the union in 1954, just after coming to Gujarat.

C S Menon was branch secretary in the beginning at Bhavnagar but soon became General Secretary. He retired in 1990. He became the General Secretary of the Western Railway Employees Union after Umrao Mal Purohit.

In Gujarat, C S Menon was active in various ways and was popular. The senior members of the union soon spotted him and took him in the branch from where he was taken to negotiations. However, C S Menon emphasises that his union remained non-political unlike National Railwaymen's union led by CPI(M).

Clarifying his position, C S says that his union gets involved in politics sometime and yet remains free. In 1960, when there was a major movement launched by Central Government employees in which railwaymen also were active, C S Menon had no major role in it though he was also a participant.

In Gujarat in fact no major movement had taken place in the railways till 1974, as C S Menon says. C S Menon organised the railwaymen for the big event. George Fernandes was the AIRF president and came to Bhavnagar to see the preparations. According to George, there was no possibility of a strike in Gujarat and he came out with some suggestions to C S Menon.

George observed that if some people were paid in advance and beaten up in public, people would get excited and strike would take place easily. C S Menon refused to listen to him. However, now it became a challenge for C S Menon and he accepted it.

C S Menon started visiting the homes of the railway employees and discuss issues with them. The problems were analysed threadbare and need to fight became a generally accepted fact. There was complete strike in Bhavnagar and it was shown even in a BBC programme. In Jamnagar, Sabarmati and

many other places, strike was successful. Later when the employees were arrested and kept in jails, they did not stop their agitation.

In every jail, they fought for quality food, newspapers etc. It was only after these agitations, that for the first time, there were ceiling fans installed for the prisoners. In three months, while they were in jail they got all their demands accepted. C S Menon was a trade unionist wherever he went, organising meetings and giving speeches. In Gujarat alone, 8000 courted arrest.

The strike in 1974 was historic in the sense that nowhere in the world, twelve lakh railwaymen went on strike. Though it was struggle to settle personal and political score for George Fernandes with Indira Gandhi and therefore no invitations for negotiations were accepted, the consequences were faced by the workers alone as they lost their jobs. George Fernandes had promised that he would go on his knees to beg Indira Gandhi for those who would lose jobs, but after the strike he forgot them all. Even when George became Railway Minister, he did not help a single worker.

It was the union alone who fought for the worker. Out of 2000 drivers, only 80 were taken back by Supreme Court orders.

There have been attempts to disrupt the union by forming category wise unions like locodriver's association, Guard council, photographers' association that has only 24 members. However, the union has remained intact. Every two years, a movement is launched. The attitude of the government has also changed after they experienced the strength of the railway workers in 1974.

Through struggles, the workers got their various demands met. Nowhere in the world, pensioners get a hike but in Indian railways, these pensions are revised twice a year. D A is based on variable rating. There is a permanent negotiating machinery that negotiates with the management every two months and the possibilities of a strike is never ruled out.

With modern technology, many workers are losing their jobs that cannot be resisted through any struggle. Manpower is reduced everywhere. The government is taking loan from the World Bank that advises them to privatise the units like Chittaranjan factory that was producing steam, diesel as well as electric engines and were exported too. Employees Federation has opposed it strongly and for sometime the government has backed out.

In the leadership of C S Menon, the railway workers are involved in social work too. They are the top blood donors in Bombay now for three years. They organise tutorial classes for the employees to study further. Even in riots, the railway employees have played an exemplary role.

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I was branch secretary in the beginning at Bhavnagar but soon became General Secretary. I retired in 1990. I became the General Secretary of the Western Railway Employees Union after Umrao Mal Purohit.

In Gujarat, I was active in various ways and was popular. The senior members of the union soon spotted me and took me in the branch from where I was taken to negotiations. However, our union remained non-political unlike National Railwaymen's union led by CPI(M).

My union gets involved in politics sometime and yet remains free. In 1960, when there was a major movement launched by Central Government employees in which railwaymen also were active, I had no major role in it though he was also a participant.

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George observed that if some people were paid in advance to get beaten up in public, people would get excited and strike would take place easily. I refused to listen to him. However, now it became a challenge for I and I had accepted it.

I started visiting the homes of the railway employees and discuss issues with them. The problems were analysed threadbare and need to fight became a generally accepted fact. There was complete strike in Bhavnagar and it was shown even in a BBC programme. In Jamnagar, Sabarmati and many other places, strike was successful. Later when the employees were arrested and kept in jails, they did not stop their agitation.

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