

## **M Raghavaiyya, General Secretary, National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (INTUC)**

A short biographical note on M Raghavaiyya (NFIR) interviewed on 14 August, 2004 in Delhi

M Raghavaiyya was born in a middle class family on June 15, 1936 in a small village called Tuggali in Kurnool district. His family was agriculturist but his grandfather as well as father were both employed in the Madras and Southern Maharashtra Railways. After it was named southern railways, his father retired.

Raghavaiyya was a brilliant student in school but had to leave his studies as father could not afford to bear the expenses of collage education. So with bright results, Raghavaiyya left his studies after SSLC. He joined railways in 1959 as material clerk.

Later he became telephone clerk.

Since childhood, he had an urge to serve. As his father was in the railways, he could easily communicate with the workers there. It was at this time, that an incident took place that changed his life. In Dronachalam, where he lived with his family, there was an incident of fire in the slum area oppsite his home in 1961. All the huts were burnt and the families were on the road. Raghavaiyya thought he must take steps to improve the lives of slum dwellers. He started physically rebuilding the houses with his "Shramdaan". Soon support came from all sides and houses came up. Raghavaiyya is remembered every evening when these families light the candle in front of their God.

Raghavaiyya started serving the workers in his own individual capacity. He was writing their applications, complains and also taking up their demand to the authorities. There was INTUC union in these parts and there was elections in the union in 1960. As the leaders came for the meeting, Raghavaiyya asked them openly if they can improve the lives of the grassroot workers and if not, then why they should be in the leadership. The meeting was interrupted and crowds left. Within ten days, the INTUC leaders contacted Raghavaiyya and asked him if he could join the union and work constructively for the workers.

After three months, Raghavaiyya decided to join the INTUC under the leadership of TV Anandam as General Secretary. However, in the general strike of government employees 1960, Raghavaiyya had no role as he had freshly joined. After joining INTUC, Raghavaiyya became very popular. The management was unhappy with him and transferred him to Hubli in Karnataka.

After initial struggles, Raghavaiyya was able to overcome the problems and became his old self. In 1963, there was severe water crisis and Raghavaiyya tried to do everything possible for him. He even resorted to adventurism sometime to resolve the crisis. The INTUC leadership was not happy with

his exploits and the management was also angry with him. But he was supported by the masses at every step that he took. He did not know Kannada language but his commitment and integrity impressed people and they thronged around him. Raghavaiyya realised at this stage that he must restrain himself and act more diplomatically. It was at Hubli only that his life took another turn.

In 1972, George Fernandes was declared elected as president of All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) throwing off Peter Alvares. George started preparations for a strike. However, NFIR decided that it was not a strike for workers but for political gains and hence to keep away from it.

In 1974, when the strike was declared, all the railway unions had joined in. It was a ratio of nine percent to ninetyone percent. But even in such intense situation, Raghavaiyya was able to keep his Hubli unit intact. Despite beatings, acid throwing and arson, the workers here kept attending their duties. Hospet and Tungbhadra dam station units were the only two that had joined the strike and the rest was reporting to duties. Raghavaiyya became an unquestionable leader of his area.

In 1977, Raghavaiyya was elected General Secretary of the South Central zone. He was working in his natural style and was busy with the organisation when a serious crisis cropped up in the central leadership of the NFIR itself in 1993. Raghavaiyya was called to explain his conduct as he was questioning the leadership at every step. There was litigation in the court and parallel general body meetings took place in 1995 simultaneously at Puri and Secunderabad.

In 1995, under the supervision of the Supreme Court, an election was conducted for the post of general secretary. Raghavaiyya got 96 percent votes and was declared elected. Then he started rebuilding the organisation. In 1997, served a notice of general strike to the government but Gujarat Ministry called the union leaders for talks. Joint Coordination Committee (JCM) of Railways with various unions together negotiated with the government and achieved much more than the 1974 strike could have hoped for.

Raghavaiyya is also against downsizing the workforce and has made the railway board to agree to stop it in some sections.

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I was a brilliant student in school but had to leave my studies as father could not afford to bear the expenses of collage education. So with bright results, I left my studies after SSLC. I joined railways in 1959 as material clerk. Later I became telephone clerk.

Since childhood, I had an urge to serve. As my father was in the railways, I could easily communicate with the workers there. It was at this time, that an incident took place that changed my life. In Dronachalam, where I lived with my family, there was an incident of fire in the slum area oppsite my home in 1961. All the huts were burnt and the families were on the road. I thought I must take steps to improve the lives of slum dwellers. I started physically rebuilding the houses with my "Shramdaan". Soon support came from all sides and houses came up. I am remembered every evening when these families light the candle in front of their God.

I started serving the workers in my own individual capacity. I was writing their applications, complains and also taking up their demand to the authorities. There was INTUC union in these parts and there was elections in the union in 1960. As the leaders came for the meeting, I asked them openly if they can improve the lives of the grassroot workers and if not, then why they should be in the leadership. The meeting was disrupted and crowds left. Within ten days, the INTUC leaders contacted me Raghavaiyya and asked me if I could join the union and work constructively for the workers.

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After initial struggles, I was able to overcome the problems and became my old self. In 1963, there was severe water crisis and I tried to do everything possible for me. I even resorted to adventurism sometime to resolve the crisis. The INTUC leadership was not happy with my exploits and the management was also angry with me. But I was supported by the masses at every step that I took. I did not know Kannad language but my committment and integrity impressed people and they thronged around me. I realised at

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