

**Labour Movement in the Railways 1920—1946:
A Study of the Movements in South Indian
Railway and the Madras & South
Mahratha Railway.**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the award of the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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1988

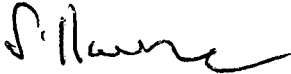
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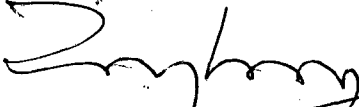
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"LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE RAILWAYS (1920-46): A STUDY OF
THE MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH INDIAN AND THE MADRAS AND SOUTH
MAHRATHA RAILWAY" submitted by Mr. V. KRISHNA ANANTH
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award
of the Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) degree of this
University, has not been previously submitted for any
degree of this or any other University and this is his
own work.



We recommend this dissertation be placed before the
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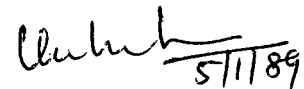
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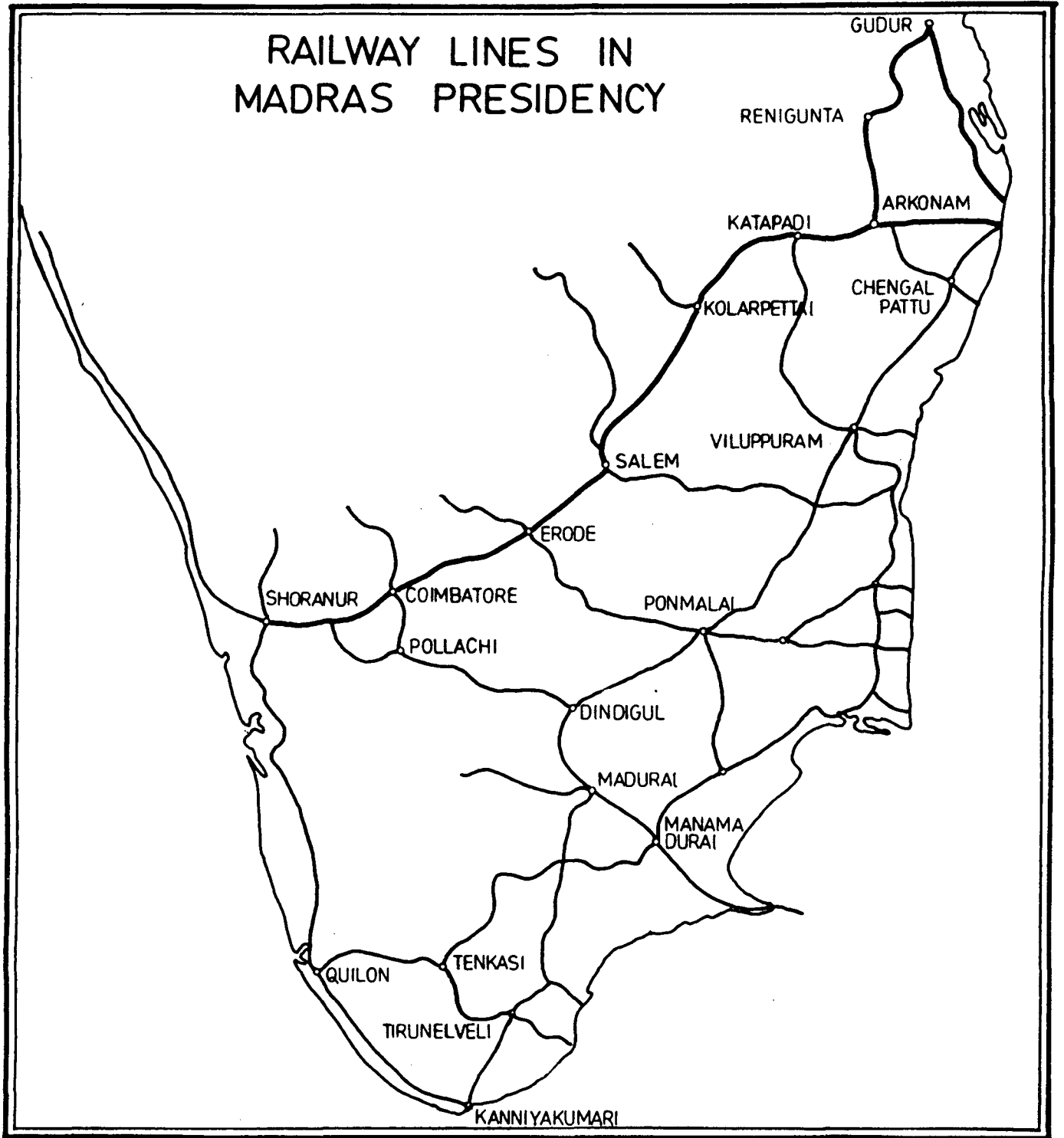
All of whom were workers at the Railway workshop at Golden Rock who had laid their lives to the cause of the Working Class on 5th November, 1946 during the firing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the outset, I would like to register my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. S. Bhattacharya, whose interest in labour history had opened up the avenues for the concretisation of my desires to study the history of the working class. Apart from this, he had also taken time off from his busy schedule to check my drafts meticulously within the least possible time. Secondly I would express my thanks to Subho Basu, a fellow researcher with whom I have had a lot of fruitful discussions on labour history; his co-operation at every stage of this dissertation has helped me very much. I am grateful to my other friends and comrades like Kandarpa Das, Jawahar, Saumyajit, Vinayak Rao, Amechi Moma and Firoz for having helped and encouraged me in several ways. My thanks are due to Mr. Om Prakash, who had typed out this dissertation. I need not mention another constant source of inspiration: my parents, my sister and those who had taught me till now. The financial assistance I have had from ICHR is also to be acknowledged.


5/11/89

V. KRISHNA ANANTH



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INTRODUCTION

The rise and growth of Nationalism in India was accompanied by a simultaneous process of 'de-mystification' of the History of British rule in India through a new approach, a nationalist approach to Indian history. ^{But} Conventional nationalist historiography failed to recognise the anti-imperialist objective in the various actions of the Indian Working Class in the period between 1920-47, the period when the Indian National Movement entered the phase of mass mobilisation and movements. The working class movement incidentally is treated by the Nationalist School as a mere appendage to the agitation and actions sponsored by the Indian National Congress. One of the aims of the following chapters will be to look into the role of the Indian Working Class in the anti-imperialist movement.

We select the period, 1920-1946, for the following reasons. The year 1920 saw a significant change in the Indian National Movement. Influenced by the experiences of the past, specifically the struggle against the partition of Bengal, the Nationalist intelligentsia entered a new phase of struggle broadening the mass base of the movement. Appraising the contribution of Champaran Struggle to the development of Nationalism, E.M.S. Namboodiripad writes, "This therefore may be said to

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be first dress rehearsal of that type of national struggle which Gandhiji was subsequently to lead on more than one occasion. Here was a movement in which a band of selfless individuals from the middle and upper classes identified themselves with and roused the common people against the powers-that-be in order to secure some well defined demands."¹

It was in this historical juncture and among other things in the backdrop of the Rowlatt Act leading to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and a score of other repressive actions of British rule in India that the Indian National Movement entered a qualitatively different phase, where Lajpat Rai, in his presidential address to the Calcutta Special Session of the Congress in September, 1920 stated that "It is no use blinking the fact that we are passing through a revolutionary period... We are by instinct and tradition averse to revolutions. Traditionally, we are a slow going people; but when we decide to move, we do move quickly and by rapid strides. No living organism can altogether escape revolutions in the course of its existence."²

1. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, The Mahatma and the Ism (PPH, 1958), pp. 20-21.

2. Cited in R.P. Dut, India Today (Calcutta, 1986), p. 339.

We may note that by now, the Indian National Movement had entered a definite phase where its paradigm was set. At the annual session of the Congress at Nagpur in 1920, with the passing of the programme for launching the Non-Cooperation Movement and in the words of R.P. Dutt, "... The new programme and policy inaugurated by Gandhi marked a giant's advance for the National Congress. The Congress now stood out as a political party leading the masses in struggle, against the Government for the realisation of national freedom..."³

Apart from the above mentioned change in the qualitative aspect of India's struggle for Independence, internal contradictions of the movement also began to take a concrete shape and it was the internal contradiction that had shaped and specified the dynamics of India's struggle for freedom. The Indian Working Class was emerging as a constituent element of the Indian masses as early as the second half of the nineteenth century. The general price rise and the dislocation in the Industrial Economy of India caused by the First World War paved the way for the emergence and growth of a working class. It was in this period that the All India Trade Union Congress was founded in October, 1920. The formation of the All

3. Ibid., p.341.

India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was both the culmination of a process of the formation of local trade unions in various parts of the country,⁴ as well the starting point of a qualitatively different phase in the Working Class History of India. It is to be noted here that though the main impetus to the founding of the AITUC was provided by the necessity to secure a nominating body for representation at the International Labour Conference at Geneva, the future activities of the AITUC, was to be otherwise; this internal dynamics can be explained by going into two important aspects of the period, viz. the nationalist upsurge and the condition of the Indian Working Class, both of which played an integral role in shaping the direction of the Indian Working Class Movement.

The foundation of the AITUC was accompanied with the development of a struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists, a feature that continued during the whole period of study and which had exerted its influence over the Working Class Movement of India. For instance, the manifesto of the newly born Communist Party in

4. It is noticed that the economic crisis after the I World War led to the formation of Strike Committees at the industry level and these localised attempts at organising the workers formed the first step in the making of the Indian Working Class.

India,⁵ to the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress in 1921, said, "If the Congress would lead the revolution, which is shaking India to the very foundation, let it not put faith in mere demonstrations and temporary wild enthusiasm. Let it make the immediate demands of the Trade Unions its own demands; ...and the time will soon come when the Congress will not stop before any obstacle; it will be backed by the irresistible strength of the entire population consciously fighting for their material interests."⁶ This Call of the Communists about a popular upsurge in the offing was partly true in a limited sense, which will be evident from the following Statistics on the Industrial Disputes during the period of study.

Details of Strikes & Lockouts between 1921-1945⁷

Year	No. of strikes & lockouts	No. of working people involved (in '000)	No. of working days (in '000)
1921	396	600	6,984
1922	278	433	3,927
1923	213	301	5,051
1924	133	312	8,730

contd...

5. The date with regard to the formation of the CPI is debated and though 1924 is accepted as the date of the formation there were some Indian Communists who began organising inside the Congress from 1920 onwards - G. Adhikari, Documents of the CPI (New Delhi, 1971).
6. Manifesto of the CPI to the Ahmedabad National Congress (JNU Archives).
7. see next page.

contd...

1925	134	270	12,578
1926	128	186	1,097
1927	129	131	2,019
1928	203	506	31,647
1929	141	532	12,165
1930	148	196	2,261
1931	166	233	2,408
1932	118	128	1,922
1933	146	164	2,168
1934	159	220	4,775
1935	145	114	973
1936	157	169	2,358
1937	379	647	8,982
1938	359	401	9,198
1939	406	409	4,992
1940	322	452	7,557
1941	359	391	3,330
1942	694	772	5,779
1943	716	525	2,342
1944	658	550	3,447
1945	848	782	3,340

A causal explanation to this increasing spurt in labour agitation can be in terms of the rising of the anti-imperialist Movement and the worsening condition of the Indian Working Class. This will be the subject

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7. R.P. Dutt, op. cit., pp.410-11. Also see Sukomal Sen, Working Class of India (Calcutta, 1978), p.14. V.B. Karnik, Strikes in India (Bombay, 1971).

of the next chapter of this dissertation. However, it is necessary at this stage to look into the theoretical aspects of the Subaltern ideology, in general, and the concept of the "working class", in specific, to set the paradigms clear for the subject of research and then relate these broader generalisations to the specificity of Indian Working Class movement.

The "Working Class" in specific and the 'wretched on earth' in general were opened up for historical research, by the historians of Western Europe, such as Ladurie & Rude on the French Revolution, Christopher Hill, E.J. Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, John Foster and a score of others in England, who were commenting, more specifically, on the socio-economic aspects of the Industrial Revolution. The 'Working Class' however has been the 'subject of History'⁸ for the liberal bourgeois historians, apart from the adherents of Marxist historiography mentioned above.

For instance, Jonathan Zeitlin defines that the subject (labour historiography) 'should be sought in its redifinition as the history of industrial relations'

8. This phrase is used to mean that the working class being considered as the object for historical research.

and in this context, contests the 'unquestioned identification of trade unions and labour politics with the broader working class'.⁹ At the outset, I would make it clear that the scope of this dissertation is nevertheless to contest the 'deterministic approach to labour institutions and movements by identifying them with the revolutionary consciousness of the working class; the paradigm of the research however is different from that of Zeitlin. The 'working class' will be seen in this research as a historical category, 'largely determined by the productive relation into which men are born or enter involuntarily'.¹⁰ This definition of the class is however very distinct from 'class consciousness' and it is essential to note here that this structural position of the working class in the capitalist production relations is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the generation of its consciousness. Any assumption to the contrary will lead to a deduction of the class consciousness to something which 'ought to be' rather than to analyse what it was. This structural definition of the

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9. Jonathan Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations" in Economic History Review, (Second Series), vol.XL, No.2, 1987.
10. E.P. Thompson, Making of the English Working Class (London, 1971).

working class will help us to study the nature of their consciousness at specific historical junctures. This definition of the working class brings us to the first premise of the paradigm for research, i.e. that the working class is a historical category, positioned in the bourgeois socio-economic structure.

Then we proceed into an analysis of this historical category and its consciousness in terms of its role in history. It is here that the Marxist method breaks with all other approaches to labour history.¹¹ This research will attempt to analyse the role of labour in the two railways in Madras Presidency, in the context of the anti-imperialist movement. The work will attempt to demarcate the perception of anti-imperialism by the two major classes emerging in the colonial structure. The internal contradiction of the anti-imperialist struggle was predominantly determined by the two different class perceptions of the reality; the two classes represented by the Communists (inclusive of the CPI and the WPP) as opposed to the bourgeois led Indian National Congress.

11. The other approaches include that of Zeitlin (op. cit.), the strand of the 'Subaltern historians' (David Arnold, Dipesh Chakravarty, etc.) as well as the method of writing chronicles of labour agitations (V.B. Karnik, G.K. Sharma, etc.).

At the outset, it is to be noted that literature on the Indian Working Class movement is by and large sketchy. They are either chronological accounts or research works consisting primarily of case studies of specific industries, leaving apart a recent systematic study by Sukomal Sen,¹² which attempts to place the history of the Working Class of India in its context.

Any worthwhile study within the limited scope allowed by a thesis of the present sort, has to be delimited to a particular section of the area of labour history discussed above. The choice of the railway workers as a sample for the Indian Working Class is justified by the fact that, "with a total staff of over 8,00,000, the Railway administrations are the largest employers of organised labour in India, and their working policy as regards wages and other terms of employment reacts to some extent on industrial labour conditions throughout the country."¹³

We plan to study the Railway workers in two Company Managed Railways in Madras Presidency, namely the South Indian Railway (S.I.R.) and the Madras and South Mahratha Railway (M&S.M.R.). The nature of labour movement in these two railways offer a contrast in the sense that, while the labour in S.I.R. were characterised by the

12. Sukomal Sen, op. cit.

13. Report of the Royal Commission on Indian Labour (Simla, 1931).

display of militancy, the M&S.M.R. trade union activities were characteristic by passivity and constitutionalism. The causes of this will be dealt with at a later stage in the overall background of the nature of their leadership.

The dissertation will be divided into three chapters as follows.

Chapter I will attempt to locate the 'spheres of conflict' in the conditions of work in the two companies. The aspects of Wages & Prices, hours of work and service agreement will be discussed in the overall context of Railway Policy in India.

Chapter II will deal with the two major strikes in S.I.R. in 1928 and 1946, wherein the causes leading to the strike and the consequence of the strikes will be analysed.

Chapter III will attempt at placing the strikes in their perspective, in the context of the anti-imperialist movement. The ideological differences between the Communists and the Indian National Congress will be analysed in the background of the two strikes in S.I.R. This will also put forward the struggle going on inside the Indian Trade Union movement between the various shades of opinion and thereby put the labour movement in the two railways in the context of Indian Trade Union Movement and the struggle against imperialism.

CHAPTER I
WORKING CONDITIONS AND
THE SPHERES OF CONFLICT

In a broad sense industrial conflict is structured by the over-all 'productive relations into which men are born or enter involuntarily'.¹ While this can explain the overall basis of class contradiction the crux of the problem lies in the particular aspects of productive relations, or the conditions of work: wages of the men employed and other non-monetary income such as housing, medical and other such facilities, hours of work, leave and holiday rules, patterns of recruitment, service agreements, etc. This chapter will deal with these questions, in the context of the two railways in Madras presidency, the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway, (hereafter M&SMR) and the South Indian Railway, (hereafter SIR) based at Perambur and Trichnopoly respectively. Before going into this question it is necessary to trace, very briefly railway development in India, specifically the nature of its development as a colonial enterprise. This, as a matter of fact, had also a role to play in the definition of the spheres of conflict during the period of study.

1. E.P. Thompson, Making of the English Working Class (London, 1971), pp. 9-10.

This chapter will be divided into three sections, mainly dealing with:

(1) The history of Indian Railways, with special reference to the SIR and the M&SMR, which will try to explain the colonial structure of the Indian Railways.

(2) The working conditions of the men in the two railways, including the service agreements.

(3) The interlinkage between the constraints of a colonial railway system and the working condition in acting as a sphere of conflict.

The working conditions of the labouring men especially the issues like wages, housing, etc. as mentioned above are not the determinants of class consciousness in any sense of the term. To put it in other words, a low standard of living can create an explosive situation, but explosions are not created by a deteriorating standard of living alone. In the beginning of our period of study, it was the opinion of the Government of India that:

"The causes of the unrest are primarily economic, the pressure of high prices; wages have risen very considerably, during the last 12 months, but not uniformly and not having kept pace with the prices;..."²

2. Letter from the Government of India to the Secretary of State, in November 1920 - Home Department (B) No. 281, Nov. 1920, (N.A.I.).

BACKGROUND: RAILWAY DEVELOPMENT

Railway enterprise in India may be said to date from 1845, when private corporations were authorised to start the lines from Raniganj to Calcutta, Bombay to Kalyan, and Arakonam to Madras, by the EIR, GIPR and the Madras Railway Company, respectively. The fact that Indian Capital did not participate in railway construction in India and thus Indian railway industry as a whole developed as an enterprise of British private capital had a very serious impact on the nature and scope of the developing of railways in India and also in the providing of the basis and determining the nature of conflict. The provision of a 5% guaranteed return on the capital outlay in railways, payable by the Government of India from the date of subscription at an exchange rate of 22 a rupee, led to a situation, where the Indian Railways was a financial burden on the Government of India rather than a source of income. In addition to the financial commitment on the 5% guaranteed returns, the strategic interests in railway construction, from the military standpoint, was also responsible for imposing a heavy expenditure on the state exchequer. For instance, the expenditure on the Frontier Railways during the Second Afghan War was £ 44,77,000 or one-sixth of the total expenditure on Afghan War, i.e. 23,182,000.³

3. K.T. Shah, Sixty Years of Indian Finance (London, 1927), p. 16.

In the year 1869, there was a shift in the policy of the Government with regard to railway construction towards the construction of new lines by the Government of India from Capital obtained by borrowing or from current revenues. The amount of state investments in the initial years is available in the following table.

Table 1.1: Investment Patterns in Railways⁴

Year	Guaranteed Railways (‘000s Sterling)				State Railways (‘000s Sterling)		
	Capital	Inte- rest	Net Rev.	Net Charges	Capital	Inte- rest	Net. Charges
1868-69	76,168	3,878	1,966	1,912	553	10	1,929
1878-79	96,445	4,705	4,023	740	21,964	918	1,426

It is evident from the above data that there was an increase in Government investments in railway construction by more than four times in the 10 years between 1868-69 and 1878-79. This State enterprise however had also exerted pressure on the finances of the Government due to the increasing interest charges and thereby the net-charges on Railway account. For instance, the total interest charges on the sterling investments on railways alone in the year 1878-79 was around 56,23,000. By around 1879, the railway policy of the Government of India witnessed another change wherein,

4. Ibid., p.334.

Government enterprise shifted from the laying of new lines to the purchase of company owned lines. However after state purchase, these lines were entrusted to private companies for management; in most cases, they were placed with the old companies themselves. These companies were granted contracts which, compared to the old guarantee system, entailed a reduction of the capital held by the companies in the various railways. As a matter of fact, the companies retained the management of the operative part of the railways and the fixed assets of the railways were owned by the state. This system became operative first in 1879 and by 1900, among others, (e.g. the EIR, BNR, GIP, BB&CI) the South Indian and South Mahratta came into this category of the 'state owned-company managed' railways.⁵ Such railways were administered through the Agent, appointed by the Government, who in all operative sense of the term was a General Manager.

This overall background of the growth of Indian Railways, specifically the fact that railways in India were incurring heavy expenditure to the Government of India is necessary in order to study the specificity of railway policy in India during the period between 1920 and 1946. The financial constraints and budgetary problems of the Indian Railways

5. J.N. Westwood, Railways of India (London, 1974), p.55.

during the 1920s forced a heavy retrenchment of expenditure in Indian Railways. This will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage in this chapter, but suffice it to say, at this stage, that the fact that railways in India came to be identified with the Government, either as the sponsor or the owner, had its impact in shaping every important sphere of conflict, and thus guided the railwaymen's role in the struggle against British imperialism as an integral part of their struggle for the day-to-day economic demands.

WORKING CONDITIONS IN SIR AND M&SMR:

Before going into an analysis of the conditions of work in the two railways, selected for the study, a brief introduction of the genesis of these two railway systems will not be out of place. The South Indian Railway (SIR) was formed in 1874 with its headquarters at Trichnopoly when the Great Southern India (opened in 1862 linking the East Coast port of Nagapattam with the prosperous inland centre of Trichnopoly and then ran on to Erode, where it connected with the Madras Railway) was joined with the Carnatic Railway, (emerged from the Indian Tramway Company, started in 1862 by a 20 year subsidy granted by the Government, as a feeder or a branch line but had gone into liquidation).⁶ The Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway was

6. Ibid., p.28.

formed in 1907 with its headquarters at Perambur when the Madras Railway (one of the oldest companies opened in 1868) was taken over by the state in 1907 and attached to the Southern Mahratta Railway (which developed from a famine line into a metre guage system of more than 1,600 miles by the turn of the century).⁷

Labour in railways can be divided for the purpose of analysis, into three major categories:

1. Engineering, predominantly consisting of the gangmen, who were largely unskilled and mainly coming from the agrarian sector. They were engaged by the Permanent Way Inspectors from the local populace and their service conditions were largely irregular.

2. Transportation and Commercial Departments, consisting of the unskilled section like porters, recruited by the Station Masters or Traffic Inspectors and the semi-skilled section of pointsmen, signal men, etc.

3. Mechanical Workshopmen, a section that was very much similar to the industrial working class of India. They were recruited from the local populace by the works manager on the recommendation of the foreman and after a service of 4 to 6 years, they stood a chance to be promoted into the semi-

7. Ibid., pp.54-55.

skilled categories.⁸

The following table provides us with a detailed picture of the numerical distribution as well as the financial implications and nature of the various departments in the railways.

Table 1.2: Employment and Costs in Railways as on March 1929

Department	Total Staff	% of total	Total cost in Rs. for Sept.	% of total	Average monthly cost per worker in Rs.
Engineering	244,310	33	44,31,940	17	18
Transportation	145,558	19	71,11,709	27	49
Commercial	118,657	16	45,46,240	17.5	38
Mechanical Workshops	122,437	17	50,49,155	19	41
Electrical & Signal	22,293	3	8,86,799	3.5	40
Stores, Medical, Accounts etc.	50,273	7	16,53,251	6	33
Office staff (excluding those in work-shops)	38,209	5	26,62,271	10	70

8. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (hereafter RCIL Report), (Simla, 1931), pp.138-39.

9. Ibid., p 146.

It is evident from the above table, that the Engineering branch, consisting of 33 per cent of the total staff were paid the lowest wages, i.e. Rs.18 per mensem. The office staff, who had constituted just 5 per cent of the total staff were receiving Rs.70 per mensem as wages. Before we go into the details of wages and their role as a determinant in creating discontent an aspect that needs to be discussed at this stage is the social stratification amongst the railway workers. To put it in the words of Lajpat Jagga, "What existed in the Railways was a highly differentiated structure of labour force - a pyramidal hierarchy - in which the base was essentially constituted by the unskilled and semi-skilled workers - the 'coolies' - who performed the basic tasks in the railways; and accounted for about 70 per cent of the total labour force. At the top of the pyramid of the remaining 30 per cent, the 80 per cent of the highest posts were filled by the Anglo-Indians and Europeans. Before 1920, the recruitment policy was an arbitrary one. It was only after 1921 (after the Acworth Committee Report and the Legislative Assembly Debates) that a uniform regularised system of recruitment for all employees of Indian origin (excluding Anglo-Indians) came to be constituted."¹⁰

10. Lajpat Jagga, Emergence of Labour Movement on the Railways in India (1899-1925) - A Preliminary Study - (M.Phil. Dissertation, J.N.U., 1978), p.21.

There are two major points that has been made in the above contention wherein, the social stratification of labour is interlinked to the racial antagonism that was prevalent among the railwaymen in India. The following table on the gradewise and wagewise break-up of the staff in S.I.R. and M&SMR will guide us on a further discussion on this subject.

Table 1.3: Ethnic and Communal Composition of Workforce
In 1929¹¹



	Europeans	Hindus	Muslims	Anglo-Indians	Others	Total
<u>Staff drawing Rs. 250 & over per month:</u>						
M&SMR	82	40	1	166	16	305
SIR	48	88	4	185	9	334
<u>Less than Rs. 250 per month:</u>						
M&SMR	45	43,430	6,082	2,070	3,296	54,923
SIR	33	29,362	2,124	1,366	3,660	36,545

It is evident now that the income differentiation was related to 'racial identity' or to put it, otherwise, "So far as railways are concerned, the term is generally used to denote discrimination in respect of appointments, pay, promotions and other matters in favour of Europeans or Anglo-Indians."¹²

11. RCIL Evidence, vol.VIII, Part I, pp.192-93.

12. RCIL Report, p.141.



While it is a fact that racial or communal discrimination prevailed in the railway policy towards recruitment of labour, it may be an error to single out this factor as the one that shaped the consciousness of the railway worker, as is done by Jagga when he says that the Indian Railways emerged as an imperial enterprise, where the superior services came to be managed by an 'all-white' set of men where the natives stood discriminated against; the Indian Railwaymen were active participants in the generation of the consciousness of the contradictory nature of the railways given their peculiar nature of wage slaves, functioning in an imperial enterprise, under conditions of colonial submission, discipline and race domination. The first against this imperial system, according to Jagga, thus, manifested in an anti-racial form against the 'supervisory and managerial bureaucracy' and its appendage the 'Anglo-Indian railway labour aristocracy'.¹³

The objection to this generalisation, apart from the use of concepts like 'Labour aristocracy' is at two levels. The fact that, after 1921, the recruitment policy of the railways had changed and racial discrimination had reduced

13. Lajpat Jagga, "Colonial Railwaymen and British Rule" in Bipan Chandra (ed.), Indian Left: Critical appraisals (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 106-7.

progressively and in fact during the same time powerful struggles had been taking place at various instances will justify a position to the effect that the sphere of conflict lay outside the domain of racial discrimination alone. The second problem arises from the fact that, what is important in studying the working class and its making is its transcending from 'prepolitical' notions of struggle.¹⁴ In this effort what is more important to look into are those aspects in the industrial structure that determines the class experience, where the identity of interests and its articulation manifests itself into a class identity. One has to be very clear that racial discrimination could have and historically had generated explosive situations, but the class experience is generated from the issues like wages, statutory provision for rest and holidays, job security, etc., and the extra economic spheres of conflict, such as race, caste, religion, etc. are secondary in occasional conjunctures.

The First World War, had a dual impact on the socio-economic history of India on the whole. On the one hand,

14. This term is used in the context of the discussion carried out in the introduction of this dissertation regarding the 'subaltern historians' and their obsession to the spontaneity of the movements and their pure form of ideology.

it created opportunities for Indian Capital, investment in consumer goods industry, especially textiles, and on the other hand, this was accompanied by a deteriorating condition of life for the wage earning sections of the society due to the unprecedented rise in prices. The cost of living rose by leaps and bounds and reached its highest level in 1920, "when the increase over the pre-war rates was estimated to vary in the several provinces from 35% in the United Provinces to about 78% in Madras, 83% in Bombay and 100% in Punjab."¹⁵

This rise in the cost of living was in stages, as is evident from a note prepared by the Department of Statistics and published in 1919 wherein it is stated that, "the average rise in prices for 75 principal articles of consumption was 12% at the end of the first year of war, 25% at the end of the second year, 42% at the end of the third year, 78% at the end of the fourth year and 88% at the end of December 1918 above the level of the period just before the outbreak of war."¹⁶

Thus we find that the cost of living had increased steeply. It is essential to note at this stage that, this increase was essentially a consequence of the shortage during

15. RCIL Evidences, vol.VIII, Part I, p.122.

16. Ibid.

the war, or to put it in other words, was caused due to a disarray in the 'demand-supply' synchrony and thus, the real or actual effects in terms of prices at the market level would have been compounded due to the fact that the direct consequence of shortage will be hoarding and black-marketing. This again will drive the workers to indebtedness. This contextual understanding of the situation is necessary before we go into any analysis of the movement of wages during this period.

This price rise as an impact of the First World War is important for our study because, the prices rose so steeply perhaps for the first time. However, this does not mean that, in the period prior to the war, the prices were stable. For instance, the famine of 1896-97 resulted in a 21 per cent rise in the general price level as compared to 1890; but this was only of a temporary nature and by 1898-99, the price of cereals had dropped to the level of 1892. The following table will help us to proceed further in this analysis.

It is evident from the table that from 1905 onwards, we witness an era of high prices. While in the earlier phase, the price rise was effected by the failure of monsoon and famines, the post-1905 phase was characterised by the perpetuation of high price levels even after the

Table 1.4: Quinquennial Average Index Numbers for India
of Rupee Prices of different Groups of
Articles for the years 1890-1912¹⁷

Years	Cere- als	Puls- es	Sugar	Tea & Coff- ee	Other arti- cles of food	Oil- seeds	Jute	Cot- ton	Other tex- tiles	Hides & Skins	Met- als	Other manu- fact- ure arti- cles	Buil- ding mate- rials	Gene- ral Aver- age	General Average of Gold Prices
1890-94	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
1891-95	100	100	100	101	99	101	102	100	100	105	101	101	101	101	95
1892-96	102	104	99	101	99	104	104	101	99	108	103	103	102	102	94
1893-97	110	114	100	97	101	106	102	102	97	111	104	104	105	106	98
1894-98	111	117	100	93	103	106	99	99	93	112	105	104	107	107	100
1895-99	112	118	99	85	104	106	97	96	91	115	108	104	109	108	105
1896-1900	120	126	100	79	110	109	98	97	89	114	115	105	111	112	112
1897-01	121	129	101	73	113	111	98	98	87	116	118	105	114	114	117
1898-02	114	120	99	69	113	111	98	98	87	119	120	105	116	112	116
1899-03	112	119	97	67	112	111	101	101	88	124	122	106	118	112	116
1900-04	111	118	97	66	111	110	103	108	88	127	121	108	120	112	116
1901-05	107	113	97	65	110	108	107	109	90	134	116	108	123	111	115
1902-06	110	115	97	65	112	111	118	113	93	143	117	110	125	114	118
1903-07	116	121	98	67	115	116	130	117	96	150	121	114	128	118	123
1904-08	130	136	101	67	119	125	133	120	95	153	122	117	131	125	130
1905-09	139	146	104	68	122	132	134	119	95	155	123	119	133	131	135
1906-10	142	148	105	71	125	138	132	125	95	158	124	122	136	134	139
1907-11	141	144	107	75	127	142	129	130	94	157	122	124	139	135	140
1908-12	142	143	109	77	129	145	131	133	94	159	120	126	142	137	142

natural causes that caused the price rise had faded away, in the sense that, "...since 1905, favourable agricultural conditions have not succeeded in bringing back prices to their old level..."¹⁸ If we calculate the price index average for the five year periods from 1895, we find an increase of 8 per cent in the quinquennium 1895-99, 12 per cent in 1900-04, 31 per cent in 1905-09 and a 36 per cent hike during 1910-12.

Thus we may conclude that, on the whole, the twenty years preceding the World War I had witnessed a steady rise in prices and the war had only speeded up the process. Secondly, from 1905 onwards, apart from the natural factors that influenced the price rise, the very structure of the Indian economy played a role in the price rise. For instance, the conversion of the Indian currency to the silver standard led to an inflation and thus a price rise. A detailed discussion over this, will however be a digression from the scope of this dissertation, but suffice it to say that the colonial structure played a crucial role in determining the living conditions of the working class of this country.

17. K.L. Dutta, Report on the Enquiry into the Rise of (Calcutta, 1915), vol.I, p. 30.

18. Ibid., p. 33.

The various railway companies, in their attempt to meet the price rise, provided the workers with war allowances since 1917 and in a general revision of pay made in 1920, merged these allowances with the wages of the workers. In this pay revision, the increased cost of living in the various provinces traversed by the several railways, taken into consideration and as the lower paid employees were forced to bear the brunt of the increasing prices of essential items of life, the percentage increase in wages were fixed on a sliding scale, giving much larger proportionate increase in the lower scales. Let us now look into the details of the wage rise instituted in 1920.

The following table showing the percentage increase granted to the workshop employees in the general revision of pay scales in or about 1920, will help us to proceed further in this context.

It is evident from the data mentioned in the table 1.4 that apart from only one category of workers in M&SMR (mistries) who gained a 137 per cent increase in their wages in 1920, all the other sections, stood to loose, even at a statistical plane, in terms of their real wages because as we have seen earlier, the percentage increase in the cost of living index stood at 67 in Madras over

Table 1.4: Percentage Increase in villages granted to Workshop Employees in 1920¹⁹

	<u>Mistries</u>						<u>Skilled</u>						<u>Unskilled & Semi-skilled</u>					
	<u>Pre-War</u>		<u>Post-1920</u>		<u>% Increase</u>		<u>Pre-War</u>		<u>Post-1920</u>		<u>% Increase</u>		<u>Pre-War</u>		<u>Post-1920</u>		<u>% Increase</u>	
	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.
M&SMR	30	120	71	136	137	14	26	65	39	82	50	26	8	21	13	29	62	38
SIR	30	75	41	117	37	56	25	52	36	78	44	50	9	20	13	26	44	30

19. Ibid., p.233.

that of the pre-war years.¹⁸ Therefore it can be safely concluded that on an average, there was a fall in real wages by around 20 per cent as far as the railway workers were concerned.

As far as the other sections of the railway workers are concerned (those employed in departments other than the workshops) we have details of their wage hikes for various slabs of pay scales; these details as is provided in the following table will help us to proceed further in exploding the claim of the Railway Board to the RCIL about the 'sliding scale giving much larger proportionate increase in the lower scales'.

Table 1.5: Percentage increase in wages for staff in comparison with that of the Provincial Government in or about 1920²⁰

Pre-war rates of pay in Rs.	M&SMR	SIR	Madras Government
250	15-76%	24%	20%
225	22%	24%	21-24%
200	21-26%	15-47%	12-27%
150	19-49%	12-71%	21-48%
100	15-47%	20-90%	25-44%
75	23-38%	25-68%	25-66%
50	25-28%	8-124%	21-60%

20. Ibid., p. 234.

Apart from this we have the figures for the percentage increase in wages, as instituted in 1920, for those whose monthly income was below Rs.50 and they are as shown below:

Table 1.6: Percentage increase in the wages of those drawing less than Rs.50 per month in 1920 21

Pre-war Monthly rates of pay in Rs.		10	15	20	25	30	35	40
Percentage increase in	Y SIR	50	67	55	44	37	37	35
	X M&SMR	35	47	40	48	40	34	37

Now, on the basis of the data given above if we attempt to calculate the actual increase of wages in monetary terms, we end up with the following data.

Table 1.7: Monetary values of the percentage increase in wages in 1920

Pre-war wages (Rs.)	Average increase in percentage		Wages after revision (Rs.)		Actual increase (Rs.)	
	M&SMR	SIR	M&SMR	SIR	M&SMR	SIR
10	50	35	15.00	13.50	5.00	3.50
15	67	47	25.05	23.35	5.05	8.35
20	55	40	31.00	28.00	11.00	8.00
25	44	48	36.00	37.00	11.00	12.00
30	37	40	41.10	42.00	11.10	12.00
35	37	34	47.95	46.90	12.95	11.90
40	35	37	54.00	54.80	14.00	14.80
*50	26	66	63.00	83.00	13.00	33.00
*75	30	46	97.50	107.50	22.50	32.50
*100	31	55	131.00	155.00	31.00	55.00
*150	34	41	201.00	211.50	51.00	61.50
*200	23	31	246.00	262.00	46.00	62.00
*250	45	24	362.50	210.00	112.50	60.00

Note: The percentages marked with '*' should be seen keeping in mind the variations in percentage increases as given in Table 5.

It is evident from the above calculations that those workers receiving lower wages, in terms of percentages, had gained only very marginally in terms of actual increase, but on the other hand, those already receiving higher wages could earn a substantial increase. Apart from this increase in 1920, there was another wage-hike instituted in 1928-29. This is evident from the data provided by the Railway Board to the RCIL in terms of the expenditure on wages, as is given below:

Table 1.8: Expenditure incurred on wages in 1913-14, 1920-21 and 1928-29²²

Name of Railways	1913-14	1920-21	1928-29
M&SMR	1,02,45,180	1,75,32,252	2,59,26,027
SIR	73,52,934	1,30,04,503	2,19,41,928

It is evident from the above data that the expenditure on wages had almost doubled with the post war revision of pay in 1920-21 and increased further by 1928-29. (Also see table 5.2 in this chapter on ^{cost} per worker in various ^{categories} and also their numerical distribution). This increase, in turn had definitely effected an

22. RCIL Evidences, vol.VIII, Part I, pp.123-24.

increase in wages too; however the figures shown should be taken with a pinch of salt, since, the figures for 1928-29 (as given in table 8) are inclusive of the bonus contribution of the various railways to the Provident Fund. The Provident Fund Rules, however, exempt the following sections from its scope. Under the State Railways Provident Fund Rules, workshop and shed employees are eligible for membership only if they are entitled to a month's notice of termination of service and have completed three years continuous service. It is worthwhile to cite the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India with this regard; "No menial servant is allowed to subscribe to the State Railway Provident Fund on any terms. Different interpretations of the term menial are found on different railways. Generally it is applied to the lower paid employees... We therefore recommend that, on completion of one year's continuous service, all employees should be eligible, to join a provident fund, membership being optional for those whose emoluments are less than Rs. 20 but compulsory for all drawing Rs. 20 or over, instead of Rs. 30 per month, which is the usual rule."²³

The point now is to analyse the merit of data which claims of a hike in the wages and the extent to which, a

23. RCIL Report, pp. 152-53.

large section of the railway workers benefitted out of it in the context of the increasing prices and also the extent to which the post-retirement benefits like provident fund had percolated downwards to various sections of the railway worker. It has to be noted at this stage that though we do not have data for the two specific railways of research with the statistics available for the whole of Indian Railways, as is given in the following table as well as from Table 2, we can draw certain broad generalisations.

Table 1.9: Data on Staff eligible for Provident Fund²⁴

Railways	All India Railway Employees			Provident Fund Subscribers		
	In receipt of Rs. 20 per month	In receipt of Rs. 20 per month	Total	In receipt of Rs. 20 per month	In receipt of Rs. 20 per month	Total
State	240,011	225,445	465,456	2,109	138,593	140,702
Others	207,054	146,548	353,602	9,308	105,197	114,505
Total	447,065	371,993	819,058	11,417	243,790	255,207

It is evident from the above table that while about 65 per cent of those who received per month were eligible

24. Ibid., p.152.

for Provident Fund subscription, not even three per cent of those drawing less than Rs.20 per month were eligible for the benefit. Further it can be seen from the figures in appendix-A, that out of the 50,299 workers employed in two railways, (SIR and M&SMR) more than 50 per cent were those drawing less than Rs.30 per month as wages and hence, were not eligible for contribution to the Provident Fund.

The point is that, we may safely conclude that the movement of wages, in the various railways in general and the SIR and M&SMR in specific, were,

1. not at par with the rising prices and
2. the low paid employees, were worst affected with the changing economic situation after the World War I.

This fact has to be considered in terms of locating the spheres of conflict, in the sense, that, if not directly and immediately, the long term effects of low wages and worsening conditions of life are not to be lost track of. In fact this aspect had its manifestations during the retrenchment of labour in railways between 1927 and 1931, in the overall context of the World Economic Crisis of 1929-1931.

SPHERES OF CONFLICT:

It is to be noted here that, the explanations given above on the basis of empirical data on declining wages, increasing cost of living, etc., does not define or locate the sphere of conflict, if they are taken in isolation. What is more important in the study of labour history is the sociology of industrialisation in its totality, or to put it in other words, the social effects of industrialisation on the worker. Nevertheless, we can say with certainty, one thing and that is, to put it in the words of E.P. Thompson, "the 'average' working man remained very close to subsistence level at a time when he was surrounded by the evidence of the increase of his national wealth, much of it transparently the product of his own labour and passing by equally transparent means into the hands of his employers."²⁵

It is the exposition of this reality, in concrete terms as in specific instances, that determines as well as appear as the spheres of conflict at specific historical junctures. To put it in other words, a concrete analysis of the concrete situation is the necessary element

25. E.P. Thompson, op. cit., p.318.

in determining the spheres of conflict. A discussion on this will be done in chapter III of this dissertation wherein the concepts of ideology and mobilization will be analysed. The scope of this chapter being limited to the identification of the concrete situation in which the workers in the two railways were developing, we shall now look into the aspect of 'hours of work' and 'periodical rest' in terms of labour mobilisation. These aspects have their merit in terms of the long term dynamics of the labour movement as is pointed out by John Foster in the case of the English working class, when he says, "since at least 1816, the common objective of all Lancashire cotton workers had been to get Parliament/wage bargaining, it was this, which provided the spinners with their one continuing base for organisational unity."²⁶

Hence, let us now look into this aspect with regard to the railway workers in India. The International Labour Convention, relating to hours of work, adopted at Washington in 1919 and ratified by India in 1921, prescribed that the principle of a 60 hour week should be adopted in factories, mines and 'in such branches of Railway work as shall be specified for this purpose by the competent

26. John Foster, Industrial Revolution and Class Struggle (London, 1974), p.108.

authority'.²⁷ Provisions for the 60 hour week were embodied in the Factory Act in 1922 and the Mines Act in 1923.

In 1930, an act was passed, wherein, statutory provisions were framed to regulate the hours of work and periods of rest for the railway servants. This act provided for a 48 hour work per week of 5½ days in the railway workshops and a 48/50 hour a week in the Engineering departments, split into 8/9 hours a day. With regard to the Traffic and Commercial departments, at larger and important stations, where work was continuous, a three shift system of 8 hours each was followed. The section of the railway labour, that could not benefit from the Railway Servants Hours of Employment Rules, 1931 were the Running Staff. In fact, they were excluded from the purview of the rules clearly and on an average, they were made to work for 60 hours a week, but their duty invariably tended to run for more than 8 hours continuously.

The Railway Servants Hours of Employment Rules, 1931, excluded the following categories of railway labour from its purview:²⁸

27. RCIL Report, p.156.

28. Ibid., p.157.

(a) Running Staff: drivers, guards and others who habitually worked on running trains.

(b) Watchmen, watermen, sweepers and gatekeepers whose employment may be declared essentially intermittent and of specially light character.

(c) Persons in positions of supervision and management or in confidential employment.

(d) Persons employed in factories or mines coming within the scope of the Factories and Mines Act.

An estimated calculation of the RCIL, of the percentage of railway workers on whom the above statute did not apply was as follows:

Supervisory work	1%
Light character of work	4%
Employees with an essentially intermittent duty with a maximum of 84 hours/week	15%
Those engaged in continuous work upto a maximum of 60 hours/week	58%
Total	78%

The remaining 22% of the staff on railways were those covered by the Factories and Mines Act. Thus we may conclude that the Railway Servants Hours of Employment Rules, 1931, had only exempted a large section of the railway workers from the conventions of the I.L.O. The situation

remained the same till the end of our period of study as is evident from the Report of the Labour Investigation Committee, in 1946, which in its observations, pointed out to the popular feeling among the railwaymen that the hours of work should be reduced from 84 to 60 per week in the case of intermittent workers and from 60 to 48 per week in the case of continuous workers and made the following recommendations:²⁹

1. There is need for the extension of the benefit of the Hours of Employment Regulations to all railways, both British India and Indian States.
2. That they cover the Running Staff.
3. That penal provisions be made against infringements of the regulations.

While concluding that a large section of the railway servants were not benefited by the I.L.O. convention on hours of work, it will not be out of place to mention, the application of the provisions in other major industries in India during the same period.

While it is evident from the following data that a considerable section of industrial labour in India were

29. Report of the Labour Investigation Committee, 1946,
p.141.

Table 1.10: Hours of work in selected industries after the Factories Act, 1934 ³⁰

Industry	Hours/Day	Hours/Week	Spread-over (in hours)	Holidays
Cotton	7½ to 10	45 to 60	8 to 13	Weekly
Jute	9 to 12	60 to 70	13 to 14	Weekly
Engineering (including Railway works hops	7½ to 12	42 to 72	13 to 14	-
Mines	8 to 10	54	8 to 12	Weekly

While it is evident from the above data that a considerable section of industrial labour in India were better placed in terms of the hours of work than the railwaymen, let us look into the aspect of the provision for a periodical rest among the railwaymen. The I.L.O. convention on weekly rest, accepted at Geneva in 1921 said that, "The whole of staff employed in any industrial undertaking, public or private or in any branch thereof shall, ... enjoy in every period of seven days, a period of rest comprising at least 24 consecutive hours."³¹

30. Ibid., pp.130-36.

31. Article 2 of the International Labour Conference, p.5. (N.A.I.)

The policy of the Railway Board, in this connection was spelt out in its letter to the Industries Department which reads as follows: "...the Railway Board would explain that the following classes of Railway Staff (other than those subjects to the Factories Act) get a weekly rest.

1. Clerical Staff of all departments, subordinates and artisans of the Engineering department generally, goods staff on the Traffic department, Running shed staff of the Loco and Carriage department, ordinarily, Stores staff generally and office menials of all departments.

2. Railway Board do not consider it desirable or practicable to extend the concession to any other class of railway staff.

3. In this connection, the Board would observe that it must not be thought that other classes of the railway employees get no rest. For instance, Station Staff at smaller stations, have frequent intervals of rest, while in large stations, they serve in relays. Guards and Drivers too get a rest at the end of each run and are off duty for 24 hours occasionally, but such 'rest' cannot be described as a regular weekly rest.³²

32. Letter from E.G.S. Bell to the Industries Department, dated 16.2.23, (Railway Board Documents No.16-2-23, NAI).

From the above note, it is evident that, the railway servants in general were denied a weekly rest, unlike the workers in other major industries like cotton, jute and mining. This is an important aspect to be noted while studying the causal aspects of labour protests.

Another important sphere of conflict in industrial relations is the security of service. The Report of the RCIL stated as follows in this regard: "We have received a great deal of evidence on the subject of disciplinary action and insecurity of service. On the one side it was urged that the existing forms of service agreements were unfair in that the administration was empowered to terminate service without assigning any reasons. It was also urged that on occasions men were dispensed with by discharge instead of dismissal, thereby preventing them, as discharged employees, from exercising rights of appeal, generally accorded to dismissed employees".³³

The reaction of the Railway Board in this regard was as follows: "The Railway Department being a commercial department, service in it must in its nature differ from service in other Government departments... Accordingly, the power which the railway administrations possess of

33. RCIL Report, p. 160.

of discharging railway servants without assigning reasons in accordance with the terms of their agreement or otherwise on reduction of establishment due to fluctuation of traffic, simplification of the methods of work or any other cause, or on grounds of inefficiency must be retained."³⁴

In the context of the above mentioned observations, the commission recommended that all sections of the railway workers enter into a service agreement at the time of entering the service providing for a twelve months probation period, after which termination from service could be possible either on one month's notice or on payment of one month's wage in lieu of notice. In addition to this, the circumstances that could lead to termination of service were laid down as follows:³⁵

1. In consequence to conviction by a criminal court.
2. For serious misconduct.
3. For neglect of duty resulting in, or likely to result in, loss to Government or to a railway administration, or danger to life.
4. In particular branches for indebtedness.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., p.161.

5. For inefficiency or unsatisfactory service.

6. On reduction of establishment.

It is to be noted here that, the recommendations of the commission provided ample grounds for arbitrary dismissals on the whole and this trend had continued at various instances. The last clause in the recommendations, specifically had served the purpose of the colonial railway system and this had as a matter of fact provided for such situations that had cropped up between 1928 and 1931 and also in 1946; the large scale retrenchment of labour all over the railways in general and the workshops in specific. This will be discussed in detail, in terms of the factors necessitating the retrenchment and its influence on the mobilization factor of labour, and manifested itself in the form of massive strikes in 1928 and 1946, in chapters II and III of this dissertation. Suffice it to say now, that the factor of security of service had an important role to play in the struggle of the men in the two railways, specifically on the S.I.R.

To conclude, an analysis of the 'spheres of conflict' should not restrict itself to the purely economic categories such as real wages, but on the other hand, look into the sociological factors of industrial society, notwithstanding the fact that the wage factor acts as an effective basis or a background to the other factors. These factors

are to be studied in the context of the overall historical conjuncture and with regard to our subject matter of research, the role of colonialism as a structure, wherein the policy decisions of the Government of India were determined by and large by the needs of British Capitalism has to be studied. As a matter of fact, the nature of Indian Railways as a colonial enterprise as has been explained in the beginning of this chapter has to be taken as a running thread and the influence of this factor should not be lost sight of. On the whole, the men on SIR and M&SMR were receiving wages which were disproportionate to the cost of living, were subject to arbitrary discharge and dismissals and deprived of the statutory safeguards based upon the I.L.O. conventions on hours of work and weekly rest. The conditions of Housing have not been discussed here due to paucity of sufficient empirical evidences, but with whatever is available, it can be said that the provisions were far below the needs. These in general can be located as the 'spheres of conflict' between the men in the railways and the administration.

CHAPTER II

THE STRIKES IN 1928 AND 1946: AN ANALYSIS

The period after the end of the first World War, as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, witnessed a series of industrial disputes. The factors determining and influencing the disputes have been explained broadly; viz. disproportionately low wages vis-a-vis prices, long hours of work, and absence of security of service. In this chapter, we shall discuss in detail, two major strikes that took place in the South Indian Railway in the years 1928 and 1946, the causes leading to the strikes, and the consequences of these strikes on labour in Railways. Before going into this, it is interesting to note, very briefly, the background to this period in terms of labour movement in general all over British India.

The following data furnished by the Government of India of the reported disputes, involving stoppages of work for the period 1921-45, will provide us with a background to the quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of the Industrial Disputes in India.

It is evident from an earlier table¹ that there was a spurt in strike actions during the periods between 1921-23, 1928 and 1937-45 in the Indian industries. It is interesting here to note that each of the three phases

¹ Refer Introduction to this dissertation, pp.6-7.

had a different cause behind them, though, each of them were structured by the contradiction between labour and capital. For instance, the first wave of unrest was predominantly caused by the effect of war on prices, as had been shown in Chapter I and to put it in the words of the RCIL, "The great outbreak of strike after the war had obvious economic causes; a rise in wage levels was overdue, and the workers awoke to the disabilities from which they suffered in respect of long hours and other matters. By the end of 1922, the position was again more or less stabilised, ..., conditions had improved and wages had risen..."²

In other words, the first phase of the strikes, in our period of study, were the consequences of declining living standards and also the realisation of the potentialities of the instrument of strike by the industrial workers. A detailed discussion, on the percolation of the ideology among the workers, its role in causing the unrest and the nature of the ideology that percolated will be carried out in the next chapter of this dissertation. The workers in SIR and M&SMR, were generally passive during the first phase of industrial unrest in our period of study. However, men in the SIR were the active participants

2. RCIL Report, p. 334.

in the major strikes actions in 1928 and 1946. The scope of this Chapter will be to provide (1) A detailed account of the strikes and (2) A brief analysis of the causes leading to the two strikes.

The period between 1923 and 1927 was more or less characterised by relative industrial peace. But this again was a period when many sources of discontentment were in their dormant stage and also the stage in Indian Working class movement when there was a steady growth of consciousness and cohesion among the workers. It was at this specific historical juncture that the depression in the world capitalist structure had begun to set up. In the words of the Royal Commission on Indian labour, "By the end of this period, prices showed signs of falling again and, although industry did not cease to expand, profits steadily contracted and in a number of cases, disappeared. Endeavours to meet the depression by improved methods of reductions of wages had a large share in the fresh outbreak of strike in 1928".³

Labour Unrest from 1923 onwards must be viewed in the perspective of the long term impact of the First World War as well as the overall crisis of British Capitalism in

3. Ibid., p. 334.

the context of the development of competition faced by British Capitalism from America, Germany and Japan, in the twentieth century; the population explosion in India after the 1921 census and the accompanying stagnation in India's Industrial Growth complimented the crisis and retrenchment of labour in this background resulted in a severe crisis as far as the Indian masses were concerned.

RETRENCHMENT & IMPENDING
STRIKE ACTIONS:

The Railway Workshops Review Committee, which was appointed in 1926, under the chairmanship of Sir Vincent Raven to go into the possibilities of rationalisation in Railways recommended in 1927 a retrenchment of about 75,000 workers⁴ and also for rational utilisation of labour by improved methods of operation in the State Railway Workshops.⁵ Following the recommendations of this report, the South Indian Railway administration decided to close down its workshop at Nagapattam and institute certain technological improvements at the workshop at Golden Rock by the end of 1927. This decision had led to a situation wherein, the service of a section

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4. Sukomal Sen, Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1970 (Calcutta, 1979), p.14.
 5. Railway Board Records, 1926, Finance Branch (NAI). The complete report of the Committee is not available, but this file suggests some of the rationalisation proposals in the state Railway Workshops.

of the staff in the workshop at Nagapattam were at peril and the rest had to go over to Golden Rock near Trichnopoly after undertaking a trade test, to work with the improved instruments in the workshop there.⁶ This situation provided a strong basis for an explosion in 1928 and the Central Committee of the South Indian Railway Labour Union, (SIRLU) met on 10th January, 1928 and demanded

1. Rs. 30/- per month for all unskilled coolies;
2. Implementation of the Government's policy that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of caste and colour in fixing pay scales;
3. Creation of the post of brakeman to carry out jobs like shunting, protecting goods trains from theft and running of Break Down Specials, etc. and also that of a record guard in passenger carrying trains;
4. That engineers of the Permanent Way place their orders for materials immediately to the workshops. The Union pointed out that the failure of this by the engineers has ended up in a situation wherein the workers were being refused work. They anticipated a retrenchment of labour due to this and hence demanded immediate remedy;

6. Fortnightly Reports for the 1st half of June, 1926, from Madras Presidency, (No. 1/28, Home Political, NAI).

5. Since the price index in Tiruchirapalli, was 45-50 per cent higher than that of Nagapattam, an increase of at least 25 per cent in the wages of those workers who have been transferred to Golden Rock.⁷

Apart from these the resolution demanded a representation of the labour in the Roger Committee, which was constituted to go into the question of rationalisation of labour in the workshops and the meeting resolved to hold a labour conference of S.I.R. on the 21st and 22nd January, 1928 at Nagapattam to discuss about the rationalisation/retrenchment proposals of the S.I.R. Company.⁸ While the situation in S.I.R. was brewing up for a 'Trouble'⁹, the overall political scenerio was charged with the boycott proposals to the Simon Commission. The situation in the territories traversed by S.I.R., with its head quarters in Tiruchirapalli can be summarised as follows: "Trouble seems to be brewing again in Tiruchirapalli and the District Magistrate there anticipates a

7. Swadesamitran, 10 January, 1928.

8. Ibid., 13 January, 1928, p.6.

9. This term has to be taken with a pinch of salt, as this is an expression of the police records and it connotes all labour activities against the employees as 'trouble'.

strike in February unless the Government of India Committee declares against retrenchment... Police arrangements have been made in anticipation of trouble."¹⁰

The position of the Government of India at this juncture was to go ahead with the retrenchment proposals and its communique on retrenchment in railways was clarified as follows: "By mid-1925, the arrears of war-time repairs and maintenance had largely been made good and the government came to the conclusion that labour force on the workshops were excessive and ought to be reduced."¹¹

Under these circumstances, and following closely on the heels of the strike by the men of the Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR) at Kharagpur and the struggle launched by the workers of East Indian Railway (EIR) at the Lilloah Workshop, (these were primarily actions against retrenchment and dismissals of Trade Union activists), the staff of SIR, in the workshops situated at Podanur and Nagapatan refused to take the compulsory trade tests in June, 1928 and in return staged a sitin strike at the Nagapattam

10. Fortnightly Reports from Madras Province, IInd half of January, 1928, No.1/28, 1928, Home Political, NAI).

11. K. Singaraveli Murugesan, First Communist in South India (Delhi, 1975), p.48.

Workshop.¹² The demand by the leadership of the SIR Labour Union (SIRLU) to the agent to postpone the retrenchment proposals¹³ was rejected and the agent replied that the retrenchment was the direct result of a Government enquiry and the carriage repair workshop was the first to be affected. Various meetings of the Labour Union urged that if the carriage repair shop was closed, the men in the workshops should either go on strike or do satyagraha in the workshops.¹⁴

Following this, the workshopen at the shops at Nagapattam, Golden Rock, Tiruchirapalli and Podanur began a sit in from the 29th June, 1928 and a hartal was observed in Nagapattam town the next day demanding the following from the SIR administration:

1. All round increase of 25% in wages;
2. Minimum wages for gangmen to be Rs. 30/- month;
3. Withdrawal of the circular No. 202 (the circular dealing with the retrenchment of staff).¹⁵

12. For tnightly Reports, Ist half of June, 1928 (1/28, Home Political, NAI).

13. Labour Monthly, vol. 10, 1928.

14. For tnightly Reports, Ist half of June, 1928 (1/28, Home Political, NAI).

15. Labour Monthly, vol. 10, No. 10, 1928.

The town of Tiruchirapalli observed a hartal on the 6th July, 1928 and resolutions were passed at various centres calling for a general strike all along the lines of SIR, with effect from the 14th of July.¹⁶

SITUATION IN M&SMR:

It is to be noted here that the workers at the M&SMR, had in all these time shown no tendency to be influenced by the agitations in SIR.¹⁷ The character of the leadership of the Union, for instance, men like V.V. Giri, B.P. Wadia, etc. had a role to play in explaining the passivity of the labour in that Railway; nevertheless it is important to take note of the fact that the passivity of the workers of the M&SMR, was a feature during the struggle launched by the men at HNR, EIR in 1927-28 and later on during the initial struggle by the workers of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIRR) in 1930, had a damaging effect on the trade union movement in the Railways and also influenced and strengthened. The crux of the matter was (a) the isolation of the Railway Trade Union movement from the mainstream of the Indian Working Class movement, and (b) the use of strike as an instrument of struggle was

16. Fortnightly Reports, 1st half of July, 1928 (1/28, Home Political, NAI).

17. Ibid.

deprecatd by the conservative leadership, viz. the All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) leadership headed by Mr. V.V. Giri, the General Secretary. We will discuss these matters in detail in the next chapter.

SIR STRIKE, 1928:

The strike commenced on the 20th of July, 1928 and practically all the skilled and night staff left duty and work was stopped at the central stations completely.¹⁸ The attempts in between this period i.e. the period before the commencement of the strike, by the leadership of the SIRLU, to seek for an arbitration with the agent holding the government as a third party had failed and to put it in the words of Sathyamurti, the Congress member in the Madras Legislative Council: "...the government have remained inactive and indifferent throughout the period proceeding the strike and during the negotiations, which because of their failure terminated in the strike. Secondly the government have identified themselves with the South Indian Railway Company and have helped the company in terminating..."¹⁹

18. Labour Monthly, vol.X, No.X.

19. Adjournment Motion relating to the SIR strike in the Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, 1928, vol.43, dated 4th Sept., 1928, p.184.

This charge was not at all unfounded and in fact, the State Police machinery was geared up and as a matter of fact, its scope and strength was enlarged during the period of the strike. To be precise, before the outbreak of the strike, as per the Government Order, dated 31st August, 1928, there were four points for arbitration by the Government between the company and the workers, (a) payment of lockout wages, (b) absorption of surplus men after voluntary resignation, (c) increasing the wages of the menials and (d) redressing of the grievances of the running staff. The government owned thirteen-fourteenths of the capital in SIR.²¹ But it absolved itself from responsibility and on the other hand let loose repression. It will not be out of place, in this context to briefly describe the nature of repression let loose during the strike.

"An essential preliminary to the collapse of the strike being the restoration of normal, or nearly normal running as soon as possible, a scheme of police patrols in trolleys along the main lines was devised and put into operation. This necessitated the employment of about 1,000 extra police who were found by the I.G. from the

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

districts... The District Magistrates were told also to be on the lookout for inflammatory speeches or other incitements to violence and to make immediate use of the sections of either code. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) or the Criminal Penal Code (CPC) where they considered it advisable... They were further instructed to make special arrangements for the immediate trial of all prosecutions arising out of the strike... The District Magistrate, Tanjore, who records the greatest promptitude in disposing of these cases reports that the spectacle of 43 persons on their way to jail with sentences Rigorous Imprisonment and fine within a day or two of their arrest had a very great effect."²²

While the above mentioned statement provides us with an idea as to how the strike was broken, there is more to be added to the story. Notices were served upon 40 men, prohibiting them from attending public meetings at Qmore and within three days after the commencement of the strike, there were 62 arrests there of which 30 were sent to the Shirjaki Sub Jail. The two communist leaders of the strike Singaravelu Chettair and Mukundalal Sarkar, were arrested on the 23rd July, 1928 and by the

22. Fortnightly Reports for 2nd half of July, 1928.
(I/28, 1928, Home Political, NAI).

27th July, the entire strike committee, except two were under arrest.²³ prominent labour leaders of all shades of opinion, i.e. constitutional and conservative protagonists like N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri and Ernest Kirk as well as the communists like Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukundalal Sarkar were banned from entering the Nagapattam District for a period of two months.²⁴ In addition to this, Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukundalal Sarkar, the two leading communists in the strike committee along with D. Krishnaswamy Pillai, the President of the Strike Committee, were accused in the Railway conspiracy case and awarded with one year rigorous imprisonment. Another worker, by name Perumal, was condemned for life imprisonment and thereafter sent to the Andamans.²⁵ It is to be noted here that the repression let loose during the strike was just a prelude to the one that followed during the boycott of the Simon Commission and the Civil Disobedience Movement. As far as the working class was concerned, the Trades Disputes Act, 1929 and the Meerut Conspiracy Trials were to follow the

23. K. Murugesan, op. cit., p.54.

24. Fortnightly Reports, 1st half of August, 1928 (1/28, Home Political, NAI).

25. K. Murugesan, op. cit., p.56.

repression of 1928. The role of the constitutionalist Trade Unionists during this strike and after, shall be discussed in the next chapter, but suffice it to say now, that the SIR strike in 1928 (which had followed the strikes in BNR and EIR earlier) had set the stage for the future of Indian Working Class movement, for roughly the next two decades.

AFTERMATH OF STRIKE, 1928:

In this background, the Secretary of the Labour Union and its treasurer, Mr. Krishnamachari and Mr. Pillai respectively, who were the only members of the strike committee outside jail, on the 30th of July, 1928, came out with following statement: "We have demonstrated to the public our capacity for organisation and concerted action... (but) we find that the public have suffered in this quarrel between capital and labour and we are very sorry that we were forced to go on strike much against our wishes... Relying on the justice on our cause we are determined to continue our fight by peaceful methods and with the sole aim of sparing the public all inconvenience, we have decided to call off the strike from 6 A.M. on the 30th."²⁶

26. Labour Monthly, vol.X, No.X.

The workshop at Nagapattam was closed down by the end of November and a large section of the workers were disengaged. The SIR administration withdraw its recognition of the South Indian Railway Labour Union (SIRLU) in July, 1928 and the building occupied by the Labour Union Office at Nagapattam was vacated.²⁸ The total number of workers retrenched in SIR alone in 1928 was about 4,000.²⁹ The details of this retrenchment in terms of the causes and its role in the mobilisation of the Railway workers in the broader struggle against British rule will be discussed in the next chapter and in this chapter, we go into the aspect of the revival of labour movement after the withdrawal of the strike in 1928.

The process of revival was slow and it was only in 1937 that the South Indian Railway Labour Union (SIRLU) was registered under the Act of Trade Union and was also affiliated to the All India Railwaymen's Federation.³⁰

27. RCIL, Evidences, vol.VIII, Pt.I, p.163.

28. Fortnightly Reports, for Ist half of August, 1928 (1/28, 1928, Home Political, NAI).

29. Govt. of India Report on the Court of Enquiry to go into retrenchment in Indian Railways, 1932, p.3.

30. Thoghilarasu, (Tamil Monthly), November, 1986.

It should be noted here that the strike by the men in SIR was not an isolated action but only the conclusion of the first phase of labour movement in the Railways as well as the beginning of the second and decisive phase, which had culminated in 1946, on the eve of independence. Before we go into the strike in 1946 in SIR, it is necessary to note the impact of the 1928 strike on Railway Labour in general and in this context, the SIR strike was as much a part of the strike wave in the various Railways. Such as the action of workers of BNR against rationalisation and retrenchment in February 1927, wherein "A serious strike had broken out in BNR workshop at Kharagpur on February 11th, 1927, and it rapidly spread to other branches of the Railway workers. The total number of strikers was about 26,000".³¹

The withdrawal of this strike on 10th March, 1927,³² was followed by a Special Conference of the All India Railwaymen's Federation at Kharagpur on the 29th and 30th of October, which had decided by an overwhelming majority to prepare for a general strike on all the Railways, failing a settlement of the minimum demands of the workers within a week. A telegram sent by the Secretary of AIRF

31. Sukomal Sen, op. cit., p. 246.

32. Ibid., p. 248.

to the other Railway centres asking the Unions to prepare for a final action, for a general strike if necessary was intercepted by the intelligence officials and thus not transmitted.³³ However, this was followed by a strike in the Lilloah Workshop of the East Indian Railway (EIR), against insecure service agreements and retrenchment of labour, in February, 1928, and the SIR strike was the third in succession.

In all these strikes, it should be noticed that the running thread was the struggle against retrenchment of labour and arbitrary dismissal of workers. If we look into the impact of these strikes on the Railwaymen, we may conclude that the aims and objectives of the actions had not failed,³⁴ as will be evident from the following conclusion and recommendation by the RCIL in 1931: "On the question of reduction in establishments, it may be and in certain circumstances should be met by stoppage of recruiting, the operation of normal wastage or the retirement of staff taking their gratuity and Provident

33. Labour Monthly, vol.XIX, No.XII, 1927.

34. Labour Historians like V.B. Karnik conclude that these strikes had failed in their objective and attributes the causes for the failure to the role of the leadership of these movements - the communists - and the workers falling prey to the Communist manipulations and thus losing their interests. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Fund... We would emphasise the necessity of careful preparation in advance of programmes of maintenance and construction in order to ensure stability of employment as far as possible and mitigate the hardships that reductions entail."³⁵

The conclusion of this phase of the strike movement also witnessed the Trades Disputes Act, 1929 and the Meerut Conspiracy Trial, which in effect led to an apparent drop in the intensity of labour agitations and this is evident from Table 2.1 of this chapter. The second wave of struggles did not engulf the Railway industry much as it had happened in 1928, but by 1945-46, the situation was again brewing up for a show-down and as regards to labour, to put it in the words of the Director of the Intelligence Bureau: "... the labour situation is becoming increasingly dangerous and that there are no signs that it may fall, at some future date and with a continued deterioration in the Law and Order Position, heavily, under Communist and Congress Left wing influence."³⁶

35. RCIL Report, p.163.

36. Letter from NPA Smith, Director, Intelligence Bureau (Home Deptt.) to Home Deptt., dt. 9th August, 1946, (12/7/46-Home Political, NAI, 1946).

BACKGROUND TO THE STRIKE OF 1946:

This inflammatory situation was the product of a variety of causes, starting from the widespread anti-British feeling to the immediate effect of the war, accompanied by the explosive situation created by the INA trials all over the country. As a matter of fact the conclusion of the enquiry conducted in the Madras Province about the causes of disturbances from November, 1945, said: "...No evidence of organised promotion of disturbances though communists exploited situation by extolling victims of Police Action as heroes and martyrs in order to strengthen their hold on labouring classes... The real cause of all these disturbances is not organisation by any particular party but the general atmosphere induced by the inflammatory speeches and writings of Congress Leaders particularly their support of INA and all mutivous activities."³⁷

This overall situation of crisis and conflict had its effect on the Railwaymen too and the simmering fire only needed an explosive situation to blow up. The conclusion of the war, as it had happened earlier in the twenties, reduced employment potential again in the Railways

37. Inquiry from Provinces about causes of disturbances from November, 1945 to February 1946 (5/8/46/Home Political, NAI, 1946).

and also forced upon a retrenchment.

In addition to this, the 1930's and the early forties were characterised by a high rise in the cost of living all over the country. The Cost of living Index in Madras Presidency rose steeply during this period as is given in the following table.

Table 2.8: Cost of Living Index During 1936 and 1946 in the Cities/Towns Traversed by the two Railways³⁸

Cities	1936	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946
Madras	100	106	109	114	136	180	207	228	239
Vizagapatnam	100	-	-	116	136	206	223	224	243
Trichnopoly	100	-	-	111	139	189	204	224	257
Madura	100	-	-	111	132	189	201	228	254
Coimbatore	100	-	-	110	139	197	223	229	249
Calicut	100	-	-	119	150	213	232	259	281

It is evident from the above data that on an average, there was a price rise of about 140 per cent in 1946. When prices were rising so steeply, the wages of the inferior staff on the railways, (in fact, nearly 80 per cent of the staff on railways were belonging to this category) remained stagnant. The following table will help us to estimate the situation properly.

38. The Indian Labour Year Book, 1946 (Delhi, 1948), p. 181.

Table 2.2: Pay Scales of Some Inferior Staff on Class I Railways in 1944³⁹

Category	Maximum (Rs.)	Minimum (Rs.)
Gangmen	18-23 (GIP)	12-14 (SIR)
Keymen	13-25 (GIP)	13 (Bikaner)
Mates	16-24 (GIP)	15-18 (SIR)
Porters	13-24 (GIP)	10-14 (Jodhpur)
Jamadars	21-30 (BB&CI)	12-25 (SIR)
Pointsmen	14-26 (GIP)	11-13 (Bikaner)
Gatemen	11-23 (GIP)	10-12 (Bikaner)

The Railway Board in its attempt to placate the problem of rising prices sanctioned the payment of dearness allowance with effect from 1st September, 1940, at rates which went upto 17½ per cent of the pay, subject to certain minima based on the locality and salary group.⁴⁰

In fact, there had been considerable agitation from 1942-43 among the railwaymen for wage increase and the institution of a dearness allowance to compensate for the drop in real wages due to the war. (Table 2.1 offers evidence of rise in prices what brought about, in the absence of wage revision till 1944, a fall in living standards of

39. Ibid., p.162.

40. Ibid., p.162.

railwaymen.) At the end of the war, the All India Railwaymen's Federation demanded against retrenchment and suggested various measures of reorganisation for the employment of surplus labour. It is to be noted here that the total staff retrenched since the end of the war was 15,000 out of a total of 900,000 railway employees.⁴¹ At this stage, the General Council of the AIRF met in Delhi on the 13th of February, 1946, and passed the following resolution:

"This meeting directs the Secretary of the Federation to address the labour department for immediate intervention by appointment of an adjudicator or court of Inquiry. If no adjudicator or Court of Inquiry is appointed by the 1st March, 1946, the Secretary is directed to instruct all affiliated unions to convene meetings of their respective central executive committees in order to take the necessary steps for holding the strike ballot on the questions of (a) retrenchment, (b) revision of scales of pay and grades, hours of employment and leave rules and (c) adequate compensatory dearness allowances as demanded by the Federation, to be completed by the 25th April, 1946. The Secretary shall call a meeting of the General Council of the Federation on the 1st May, 1946 to survey the situation and authorise all the Unions, which have satisfied the necessary conditions to issue strike notice to their respective administrations..."⁴²

41. Letter from Intelligence Deptt. to Home Deptt., dated 25/4/46. (21/19/46, Home political, 1946, NAI).

42. Ibid.

In the meanwhile, in the month of February, 1946, the District Magistrate of Trichnopoly reported as follows:

"...trouble appears to be developing at the SIR workshop at Golden Rock, where some 5,000 labourers are employed. These workers are agitating for a general increase in wages and for an incremental scale of pay to replace the existing graded scale of pay. The union has now instructed the men to adopt go slow policy and the management find that the daily out turn has become alarmingly low... The General Manager has now given notice of discharge to some of the leaders of the labourers but it is quite likely that there may be a strike or lockout... The more important of the usual Railway Union meetings were two meetings of the SIRLU where speeches were made to the effect that there would be a general strike if any retrenchment should take place."⁴³

In confirmation of the anticipation of the District Magistrate, when seven leaders of the 'Go Slow' agitation were discharged on the 15th of February, 1946, the labourers staged a stayin strike and the General Manager declared a lockout. This strike was called off at the intervention of the regional labour commissioner of

43. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) 1st half of February, 1946. (18/2/46, Home Political, NAI).

Railways with the assurance that there will be no victimisation.⁴⁴ In this atmosphere, charged with overall discontentment, the strike ballots held in the first fortnight of May, 1946, revealed an overwhelming majority in favour of the strike in SIR as well as in M&SMR.⁴⁵ The need for the strike was again the central issue in a rally of the Railwaymen at Bombay on the eve of a meeting of the AIRF.⁴⁶

While preparation for the All India Railway strike was going on, the disciplinary action taken by the management of the South Indian Railway on 14.5.1946, against a few workers of the workshop at Golden Rock, the workers in the wagon shop and Paint shop staged a sit-in-strike which continued till the 22nd of May. This was accompanied by a strike by the revivals including the pointsmen, gatesmen, etc. which was flared up when the Secretary of the SIRLU branch at Villupuram was refused leave and when he absented himself, he was charge-sheeted. These two, 'cat strikes' were withdrawn, when the grievances were redressed

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44. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) IInd half of February, 1946 (18/2/46, Home Political, NAI).
45. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) 1st half of May, 1946 (18/5/46, Home Political, NAI).
46. Fortnightly Reports (Bombay Province) 1st half of May, 1946 (18/5/46, Home Political, NAI).

by the SIR administration.⁴⁷ The workers in both SIR and M&SMR observed the first of June as All India Railwaymen's day and the communist organ in Malayalam Deshabimani, on this day expressed its sympathy and support to the proposed Railway strike and captioned the new item as -

'RAILWAYMEN'S STRUGGLE IS A STRUGGLE AGAINST BRITAIN'⁴⁸.

The All India Railway Strike that was to commence on the 27th of June, 1946 was called off by the AIRF before it had begun and in confirmity with this decision, the Railwaymen's Union of M&SMR and SIR withdrew the strike notices. In fact the SIR, did it only at the very last moment thus keeping the railway authorities in suspense.⁴⁹ The withdrawal of the strike notice by the AIRF was on the basis of an agreement reached between the Railway Board and the Federation in April, 1946 to the effect that an interim relief till the constitution of a Central Pay Commission and other monetary concessions including the payment of the dearness allowance which was introduced in January 1st, 1945 with retrospective effect from July 1944 and

47. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province), IInd half of May, 1946, (18/5/46, Home Political, NAI).

48. Deshabimani (Malayalam Daily) of 1.6.46.

49. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) IInd half of June, 1946 (18/6/46, Home Political, NAI).

assurance by the board. to appoint an adjudicator concerning leave regulations and hours of work.

STRIKE OF 1946:

The resentment by the leadership of SIRLU against withdrawal of the strike was not totally baseless in the sense that the assurance by the administration as not to resort to victimisation was not kept up. In fact, as it was apprehended by them, suspension orders were served on certain individual activists of the Union in the Golden Rock workshop in the 3rd week of July and in reply to this, "About 3,000 workers commenced a stay in strike from 23.7.1946, demanding the cancellation of certain suspension orders, etc.... efforts at conciliation by an officer of the labour department of the Government of India failed. Thereupon the railway authorities announced that from 1.8.46, only loyal workers would be allowed into the workshops."⁵¹

The workshopmen then resorted to picketing at the Armoury Gate of the Workshop and the SIRLU served the

50. Letter from the Intelligence Deptt. to the Home Deptt., dated 25.4.46. (21/19/46-Pol.(1), 1946, Home Political, NAI).

51. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province), IInd half of July, 1946. (18/7/46, Home Political, NAI).

authorities with a notice, threatening a general strike after 15.8.46, unless their various demands were met.⁵²

The general strike commenced on the 25th night and as a preventive measures to avoid the apprehended trouble, the SIR administration cancelled all trains from the evening of the 24th August.⁵³ All passenger trains were cancelled and it was only after the 28th of August, the Railway Administration could run some passenger trains, and on the whole, traffic was restricted to daylight hours only. The strike leaders were arrested one by one and by the second week of September, the entire leadership of the SIRLU was under arrest,⁵⁴ and Mr. S. Guruswamy, of AIRF was accorded all facilities by the Railway administration to contact the strike leaders under arrest and at this juncture, the strike was called off on the 23rd September, 1946 by the leadership of SIRLU.⁵⁵

The above-mentioned explanation of the strike is only one part of the story. While a brief account of the repressive measures undertaken by the Government of India as

52. Ibid.

53. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province), IInd half of August, 1946, (18/8/46, Home Political, NAI).

54. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) Ist half of Sept. 1946, (18/9/46, Home Political, NAI).

55. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province), IInd half of Sept. 1946, (18/9/46, Home Political, NAI).

well as the newly formed Congress Ministry in the Province will explain the importance of the strike in the mainstream of the working class movement in India. The Government of Madras recommended the retention of the following provisions of the Defence of India Rules. After their expiry on 30.9.46 in view of the unheated Railway strike in specific and generally to deal with the industrial disputes arising in the province:⁵⁶

1. Restriction and Detention Ordinance, 1944;
2. Defence of India Rules 56 - Control of procession and meeting, etc.;
3. Defence of India Rule 126 - Power of search;
4. Defence of India Rule 129 - Power of arrest and detention.

Apart from this, repression was let loose during the whole period of the strike. The railway colony at Golden Rock, where the Central Office of SIRLU was located was converted into a parading ground for the police.⁵⁷ Police atrocities reached its height on the 5th September, 1946, the 10th day of the strike when the police entered the

56. Unofficial Memorandum of the Home Deptt., Govt. of India, dated 19th July, 1946. (21/19/46, Pol (1), Home Political, NAI).

57. Thoghilarasu, 5th September 1946.

premises of the SIRLU office at Golden Rock and resorted to a lathi-charge and firing where, "Five people were killed and 14 suffered injuries as a result of police firing. Casualties in the lathicharge were about 180 injured, a number of them seriously. A large number of arrests including about 30 of the strike committee members have been made."⁵⁸

In fact the incident on the 5th September, were only a rehearsal to what was to follow. The houses of the supporters of the strike were raided and the office of the SIRLU was sealed.⁵⁹ It is interesting to note at this juncture that, this firing on the unarmed workers was the first one of its kind after the historic event of the accession to the power of the New Interim Government at Delhi and when the Madras Province was governed by the Congress Ministry with T. Prakasan as the Prime Minister and V.V. Giri, the erstwhile leader of the Railwaymen was the labour Minister in the Prakasam Cabinet. This, however, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

To conclude, we may say now that the strikes of 1928 and 1946, as has been discussed in this chapter, were

58. Fortnightly Reports, (Madras Province), 1st half of Sept., 1946, (18/9/46, Home Political, NAI).

59. Thoghilarasu (Tamil Fortnightly), 5th Sept., 1946.

important events in both the history of Indian Trade Union Movement as well as in the role of Indian Working class in its struggle against imperialism. This conclusion will be explained and defended in the next chapter. However, suffice it to say now that, the strikes of 1928 and 1946 in the SIR determined, as much as it was determined, by the overall politics and development of Indian working class movement and as far as the British State was concerned, both the strikes were considered by them as the important events of the year.

CHAPTER III

LEADERSHIP AND IDEOLOGY IN IN THE RAILWAY LABOUR MOVEMENT, SIR & M&SMR

In the previous chapters, we have looked into aspects of the objective condition of the workers in the two railways under study, as well as to the two major acts of protests, broadly caused and moulded by the conditions of work. However, this does not explain the question fully as to how did these struggles differ, from the struggles by the Railwaymen during the period prior to 1920. The aim of this chapter will be to analyse (1) the issues that were posed as primary points of contention between the workers and the Railway administration and the colonial state, and (2) the role of the leadership of the trade union, Nationalist and the Communist, in the specific context of the SIR strike in 1928 and 1946; and the overall approach to workers' role in the struggle against imperialism.

At the outset, it is to be noted that the period from 1920 to 1946, being one of intense and varied political activity by the various sections of the Indian people, it is not easy to arrive at generalised answers to these questions.

As has been stated elsewhere in this dissertation:
"With a total staff of over 8,00,000, the railway administrations are the largest employers of organised labour in

India, and their policy as regards wages and other terms of employment reacts to some extent on industrial labour conditions throughout the country.*¹

Apart from the fact mentioned above, the trade union movement due to the very nature of the industry, i.e. the railway industry in India being a direct venture of British capital under government auspices both, the workers employed and the trade union movement in the industry were exposed directly to the policies of the Government of India, which in turn was not unresponsive to the interest of British Capital. Hence the objectively anti-imperialist character of the strikes of 1928 and 1946, and generally of the struggles fought by the men in S.I.R.

RETRENCHMENT IN RAILWAYS:

It is to be noted that apart from the other conditions of work that fomented discontentment among the railway workers, retrenchment in itself had served as a major issue on which the strikes in 1928 and 1946 were based upon, as has been evident from the previous chapter. Retrenchment was connected with a financial crisis. The impact of the World War I on the economy of British India,

1. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, p. 136.

began to manifest itself in the form of a severe financial crisis and this was reflected in increasing deficits in the annual budgets, right from the end of the war. This will be evident from the following data on the annual budgets.

Table 3.1: Budget Figures from 1917 to 1923²

Year	Revenue (in Rs. crores)	Expenditure (in Rs. crores)	Surplus/Deficit
1917	168.9	156.7	+12.2 crores
1918	184.0	190.6	-5.7 "
1919	195.6	219.2	-23.6 "
1920	206.1	232.1	-26.0 "
*1921	185.6	222.0	-36.4 "
*1922	197.1	213.6	-16.5 "
*1923	211.7	206.5	+5.2 "

* indicates the sum of the Central and Provincial Budgets.

The overall deficit in the five years between 1918 and 1922, was definitely a large amount and to put it in the words of the Finance Member, Sir Basil Blacket in his budget speech, "For five years in succession, India has had a deficit. The accumulated total of these deficits amounts to no less than 100 crores."³

2. P.J. Thomas, The Growth of Federal Finance in India (London, 1939), p.497.
3. Legislative Assembly Debates, 1923, vol.III, No.48, p.2931.

This deficit was alarming to those who governed the country, and on the 3 February, 1922, a resolution was passed in the Central Assembly:

"This assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to be pleased as to appoint a mixed committee of officials and non-officials to enquire into the cost of the Central Government and report on the possibility of effecting economy therein."⁴

Following closely on the lines of this resolution, a committee was appointed under the chairmanship of Lord Inchcape, and in its report the committee recommended for a retrenchment of expenditure to the tune of Rs.19.5 crores. With regard to the railways the committee made the following observations:

"We are of the opinion that the country cannot afford to subsidise the railways and that steps should be taken to curtail working expenses as necessary in order to ensure that not only will the railways as a whole be on self supporting basis, but that an adequate return should be obtained for the large capital expenditure which has been incurred by the state."⁵

The committee observed an 'unjustifiable increase' in the working expenditure and hence recommended for a major

4. Ibid.

5. Report of the Indian Retrenchment Committee, 1922-23, Calcutta, (hereafter Inchcape Committee), p.91.

cut in this head in the following lines: "There can be no justification for the large increase in administrative and clerical staff... that considerable reduction can be effected... and we recommend that a further savings of at least one crore should be effected in salaries and wages in 1923-24."⁶

In this overall setting the need for retrenchment was placed and insisted upon by the different shades of opinion and it will be interesting to note that N.M. Joshi, representing labour interests in the Central Legislative Assembly spoke as follows: "...the retrenchment committee had recommended that in the civil estimates, there should be a reduction of Rs.9 crores, the Government has proposed only a reduction of Rs.6.5 crores... We all agree to one point that there should be a total retrenchment of Rs.19.5 crores."⁷

There are two major points to be made out from the recommendations of the Indian Retrenchment Committee (hereafter Inchcape Committee) and to the reaction of N.M. Joshi, the constitutionalist labour leader, who represented the interests of the working class in the

6. Ibid., p.107.

7. Legislative Assembly Debates, 1923, vol.III, No.49, p.3078.

Central Legislative Assembly. It is to be noted that the lines on which the retrenchment was to be carried out in the railways were spelt out clearly by the In-charge Committee as is evident from its recommendation,⁸ viz. through reduction in the staff strength. The Indian opinion in the Legislative Assembly was clearly for the same; in fact they were more insistent for its early implementation. The retrenchment proposals in the railways made by the State Railways Workshop Committee (Ravern Committee) was based on the above lines wherein a large scale retrenchment of staff was proposed.

The following statement provided by the Railway Board shall help us in our further analysis of the problem.

Table 3.2: Statement showing Gross receipts, Working expenditure, Interest charges, Net gain or loss and Cost of staff on State owned Railways⁹

Year	Gross Receipts	Working expenditure	Interest charges	Net Gain or loss (+/-)	Cost of staff
1913-14	56,31,92	29,35,91	18,40,15	+8,55,85	13,62,05
1920-21	80,99,06	54,52,95	21,68,04	+4,78,06	25,99,75
1921-22	81,69,27	65,66,78	25,29,79	-9,27,30	28,12,84

contd...

8. Ibid.

9. RCIL Evidences, vol.VIII, Part II, p.126.

Table 3.2...contd...

1922-23	93,22,14	65,96,16	26,03,98	+1,21,99	28,23,77
1923-24	94,65,52	61,05,28	27,44,93	+6,47,31	30,88,41
1924-25	101,04,56	62,90,78	24,97,29	+13,16,49	32,56,82
1925-26	99,70,00	64,41,96	25,99,70	+9,28,34	33,91,52
1926-27	99,03,98	64,39,72	27,14,60	+7,49,66	35,54,14
1927-28	104,23,72	65,25,35	28,14,46	+10,84,91	37,32,76
1928-29	104,33,74	66,82,45	29,70,35	+7,80,94	38,42,61

It is evident from the data that the railways were certainly profit making concerns except for the loss of Rs. 9,27,30,501 in 1921-22. This was attributed by the Railway Board, to

1. Increase in Working expenses due to (a) high price paid for fuel, (b) larger programme of renewal of rails sleepers and bridges and (c) a larger expenditure on repairs;

2. Decrease in imports and exports;

3. Liability for increased rates of interests on Capital expended. Prior to the war, the average rate paid for Capital was 3½ per cent. Since 1916-17, the rate is 6.1038 per cent. The result of the increased rate combined with the necessity for heavy Capital expenditure had raised the Government's liability by over Rs.5 crores since 1913-14 and this extra-liability had to be met from earnings.¹⁰

10. Ibid., p.127.

It was in this context, that with the completion of the war-time arrears, in terms of repairs and renewals, by about 1925, "...the Government came to the conclusion that labour force on the workshops were excessive and ought to be reduced."¹¹

The retrenchment of labour that was carried out in the various railway companies in India between 1927 and 1931, was very widespread, as is evident from the following table, and at the same time aimed mainly at the lower categories.

Table 3.3: Income levels of staff retrenched in some State Managed Railways by the year 1931¹²

Monthly Salary (in Rs.)	GIPR	SIR*	EIR	EBR	BNR
250 and above	3	-	32	6	11
30 to 249	1976	476	4115	512	149
Below 30	14591	924	4203	846	1381

* A retrenchment of about 4,000 workers took place in 1928 in SIR and hence the figures are comparatively less.

The Court of Enquiry that was constituted under the provisions of the Trade Disputes Act, 1929 to look into

11. K. Murugesan, op. cit., p.48.

12. Govt. of India Report of the Court of Enquiry to look into the Retrenchment in Indian Railways, 1932, p.3.

the question of retrenchment in the railways said: "There was a progressive fall in the total of Gross Receipts on all First Class Railways beginning towards the end of 1929. When the budget demands for 1931/32 came to be scrutinized, the Railway Board decided that an all round reduction amounting to Rs.5.5 crores was necessary."¹³

The total staff retrenched during this period during 1930-31 was around 40,500 and the total staff strength decreased from 7,28,821 in 1930 to 6,90,277 in 1931.¹⁴ It is evident from the table 3.3 that, the largest retrenchment was among those staff receiving Rs.30 and below per month and also the next higher income group above. The general observation made by the Court of Enquiry makes this point very clear: "speaking generally, this block retrenchment was of the engineering and the workshop staffs. The foremen was largely entailed by the curtailing of all existing betterment schemes and new works and the latter by decrease in traffic, resulting in less work in the mechanical departments for repairs, overhauls and renewals. The engineering retrenchment was also in part due to the extension of gangmen beats, which was found to be feasible, as well as reduction in the numbers of the members of the gang."¹⁵

13. Ibid., p.2.

14. Ibid., p.2.

15. Ibid., p.10.

Thus an attempted rationalisation of labour in the mechanical and engineering departments, which together constituted more than 60 per cent of the total labour force in the Railways effected an increase in the workload of the staff and/or retrenchment of staff.

THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE LEFT:

The following part of this chapter shall analyse the role of the leadership of the various shades in the Railway Trade Union Movement in handling these issues. Before we go into this concrete discussion the developments in the overall political scenario of the country, especially the growth of the new Trade Union leadership that identified the industrial working class as a revolutionary class.

The worsening economic situation as an aftermath of the World War I and the political fallout after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement was also accompanied by the formation of the Communist party in India in 1924 at Kanpur.¹⁶ The C.P.I. had transformed itself into the Workers and Peasants Party, (hereafter W.P.P.) and by 1928 the Indian Communists had begun to exert influence in some

16. There is a dispute over this date, but the official documents of the Communist party agree with this date. G. Adhikari (ed.), Documents of the Communist Party of India.

of the existing Trade Unions all over the country. In a book titled 'A Call to Action' published by the W.P.P. of Bengal in 1928, the non-militant approach to the Trade Union movement in India was chided at and the strategy of the W.P.P. in that sphere of Indian politics was spelt out as follows: "...the task of the party is to transform the existing organisation so that it will give expression to real working class demands and to make the leadership such that it will give a courageous, militant and correct lead."¹⁷ Thus setting the task ahead, in the Trade Union Front, the document also specified the 'real working class demands' on which they could be rallied around on a national scale. Among other issues affecting the workers, the following problems were considered to be central to the broad struggle to be launched:

1. Eight hour day;
2. Abolition of child labour;
3. Minimum living wage.¹⁸

The programme of the W.P.P. was not restricted to organising the working class for the above mentioned demands, which were essentially economic in nature. It also placed

17. A Review of the Book 'A Call to Action' (F.No.18/ VII K.W. VIII, Home Political, 1928).

18. Ibid.

the working class in the ongoing struggle against imperialism, wherein, "Under the leadership of the industrial workers, the movement of the masses can go forward to abolish foreign exploitation, to establish democracy, and those elementary prerequisites of life which 95% of the peasants of India still lack. By means of strikes, demonstrations, harthals and the more labourious means of organisation and education, the class consciousness and solidarity of the masses will be raised to the level necessary before its tasks can be achieved."¹⁹

To put it in a nutshell, the strategy to be adopted by the W.P.P. in the struggle against imperialism was to put pressure on the leadership of the Indian National Congress, to take up the cause of the working class and thereby hegemonise the Indian National movement by means of organising the working class on the basis of their immediate day-to-day grievances and by putting them in the overall context of colonial exploitation. The passivity of the leadership of the Indian National Congress, in the midst of a widespread discontentment among the masses, gave the W.P.P. an important role. It was at this crucial historical juncture that, "...a warning signal of the situation appeared in the demonstration of 20,000 Calcutta

19. Ibid.

workers (50,000, according to the Official History of the National Congress) who presented themselves to the Calcutta Congress with slogans for the "Independent Socialist Republic of India", and took possession of the pandal for two hours, while the national reformist leaders had to make way for them and here the demand of the working class for irreconcilable struggle for national independence."²⁰

The Jharia session of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) held from the 17th of December 1928, reflected a similar agenda; in one of the resolutions, the aim of the AITUC was declared to be the conversion of India into a Socialist Republic of Workers.²¹

THE STRUGGLE IN MADRAS, 1928:

Thus in effect, the battle lines were drawn for a showdown with the British Indian Government. Let us now look into the happenings during this period in the Madras Province, with special reference to the struggle by the men in S.I.R. in 1928 against retrenchment of labour and its relation to the struggle against imperialism.

20. R.P. Dutt, op. cit., p.360.

21. Events and Developments in the Communist situation in India from September 1928 to January 1929. (F.18/VII K.W.XI, Home Political, 1928).

The Madras Workers and Peasants Party was formed on the 25th January, 1928 after a meeting attended among others by Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukundalal Sarkar held at Naggapattanam.²² It is to be noted that this had happened just two days after the meeting of the Central Committee of SIRLU and the two communists mentioned above had a prominent role to play in the SIR labour movement. The aims of this party was the same as that of the Bengal W.P.P. mentioned earlier. The fact that, while the working conditions of the labouring men were deteriorating and when the threat of retrenchment was looming large, "...an agitation was set on foot by the leaders of the various unions catering to the Railway workers for a general strike, to prevent the proposals (for the retrenchment) being put into operation."²³

The political economy of the retrenchment was explained in very simple terms by the President of the SIRLU in his Presidential address to the conference at Nagapattanam in the following terms: "Rationalisation is not to be implemented in our railway alone. It will be implemented in all the railways... Rationalisation is certainly not a consequence of the decrease in the quantity of work involved in

22. Swadesamithran, (Tamil Daily) of 26th January 1928, (my translation).

23. Labour Monthly, vol.X, No.10, 1928, p.636.

the workshops. It is necessitated because of the import of finished goods from Britain as well as the system of engaging contractors to do the work for railways (especially steel doors and windows for the coaches and concrete sleepers required for the permanent way are imported from Britain), ... Apart from this, the number of supervisory staff has increased by four times in the railways and this has increased the working expenditure considerably. To compensate for this unjustified increase in the strength of the supervisory staff, the company has resorted to the retrenchment of ordinary workers... Rationalisation should be achieved by reducing the number of supervisory staff and by getting more work inside the railway workshops itself."²⁴

While we do not have much evidence to prove that the import of foreign goods into India had caused the retrenchment in the State Railway Workshops, the second aspect raised by the leadership of the SIRLU with regard to the increase in the number of superior staff was justified. It is evident that as far as the SIR was concerned, the strength of the staff in the various income brackets had risen as follows.

24. Swadesamithran, January 26, 1928, p.6 (my translation).

Table 3.4: Figures showing the number of staff in SIR in 1913-14 and 1928-29²⁵

Monthly Income	Superior Staff	More than Rs. 250	Between Rs. 30 and 249	Less than Rs. 30
1913-14	31	46	9,437	15,659
1928-29	43	327	13,142	17,773

It is evident from the data given above that while the number of staff drawing more than Rs. 250 per month increased by 610 per cent, those with monthly income between Rs. 30 and 250, rose by only 39 per cent. The increase in the strength of the lower paid employees who drew less than Rs. 30 per month was a mere 13.5 per cent during this period.

If we make a comparative study of the data in Table 3 and 4, we can arrive at the following conclusion as regards to the nature of the retrenchment: The percentage of staff retrenched by 1931, was around 5 per cent in the category drawing monthly income between Rs. 30 and 250 and 6 per cent of those whose income was less than Rs. 30 per month. The superior staff drawing more than Rs. 250 per month did not get retrenched at all in the SIR. Thus this fundamental point made by the leadership of SIRLU

25. RCIL Evidences, vol. VIII, Part II, pp. 228-31.
See Appendix I.

is justified.

Let us now look into the manner in which the issue of retrenchment was posed by them as an issue or matter for the struggle against British imperialism. This aspect was spelt out very clearly in the welcome address to the SIRLU conference at Nagapattanam in January 1928, by the President of the reception committee, Mr. Venkatachalam Iyer, in the following words: "This is an age of Trade Unionism and anything that is individualistic ought to fall. The unity among the capitalists of all countries, nationalities, castes, etc., is firmly established... The term capitalists include the Government too, since in any country, the Government is the biggest capitalist. The Government has sanctioned the present wage hike to the policemen and the P&T staff only after a struggle or a threat to an agitation. If the so called 'Patriarchal State' acts like this, how do we expect a fair treatment from a company registered in England, just through a memorandum. Hence, it is not surprising that the SIR has not satisfied you. There has been no country where the workers have got what they have wanted just by aspiring for it, and India is not an exception... Resolve now that you will not return to your houses without victory."²⁶

26. Swadesamithan, 22nd January, 1928 (my translation).

While the relationship between the British Indian Government and the administration of SIR was thus viewed by the leadership of the SIRLU on the eve of the strike in 1928, the conservative section of the leadership of the Union had consistently deprecated the workers from going on a drawn out struggle against retrenchment. For instance, while the preparation for the strike was going on, Ernest Kirk, the President of SIRLU said in a statement that "I am not against a strike but if initiated and rushed and wirepulled by adherents of Moscow it is severely handicapped from the outset."²⁷ And he warned the workers not to be carried away by the communist ideas, being imported into the Union. When the strike was on, he had persisted with this opinion and he attacked the strike movement, in an interview, by saying that, "The strike is due to the influence of the Communists. The militant Moscow virus has already got into the blood of several branch officers and members of the strike committee. I would get into communication with the agent and agree to call off the strike provided he would be willing to resume negotiations."²⁸

27. Labour Monthly, vol.X, No.10, 1928.

28. Ibid.

Another of the reformist leader of the labouring men, Mr. B. Shiva Rao deprecated the strike and suggested for the preparation of a list of grievances to be handed over to the administration of SIR. He had given, "... warnings against the machinations of persons like Singaravelu Chettiar who are always fomenting trouble."²⁹

Thus, disregarding the fact that the strike in 1928 in SIR had in it, an essentially anti-imperialist content, the conservative leadership had chided the understanding of the communists in this regard. The concern shown by the leadership of the Indian National Congress, evident from their various speeches were not translated into practice when the opportune movement. The analysis by the W.P.P. in December 1928, that, "...The whole world system of capitalism has for years past been in a condition of recurrent crisis. That this condition is not yet overcome is shown by the continuance of partial economic crisis in Europe and especially Britain by the preparations, both technical and diplomatic for war... and by continued growth of revolutionary movements, especially in Europe and China. British imperialism in particular is passing through a period of specially acute crisis, from which its permanent recovery is extremely improbable. The

29. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province), 1st half of May, 1928. (1/28, Home Political, NAI).

movement in India, nevertheless has to face a task of great difficulty. It must therefore be based on the broadest masses... "30

It is evident from this analysis that the strategy worked out by the W.P.P. was to strike British imperialism at its weak moment, in terms of the economic and political crisis. The leadership of the Congress at this point of time was busy, pondering over the question of the Nehru Report and then resolved with lot of hesitation to give one full year to the British to consider the question of complete independence for India. This situation in the history of the anti-imperialist movement has been explained by Subash Chandra Bose in clear cut terms: "The temporising resolution of the Calcutta Congress, only served to kill precious time."31

In the mean while the proclamation of the Public Safety Ordinance in 1929³² was followed by the arrest of more or less the entire leadership of the working class

30. W.P.P. Principles and Policies, Thesis submitted to the First All India W.P.P. Conference, December, 1928 (1928/18, JNU Archives).

31. Subash Chandra Bose, The Indian Struggle (Bombay, 1964), p.181.

32. It is to be noted that the Public Safety Bill was voted down in the Legislative Assembly, but was proclaimed as an ordinance by the Viceroy in 1929.

movement in India and their prolonged trial without jury for four long years, popularly known as the Meerut Conspiracy trial. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee referred to its executive council, in January 1929, for considering action on the following comprehensive resolution regarding the organisation of workers and peasants:

1. Labourers shall not work for more than 8 hours a day, i.e. 44 hours a week;
2. They shall not get a monthly pay of less than Rs. 30/-;
3. The labour movement shall have to be carried on irrespective of all questions of Indian or foreign capital. There shall be no distinction of capitalists on the score of their nationality.³³

While there is no evidence in the Congress documents with regard to the fate of these resolutions, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the course of his address to a district conference of workers in Howrah, (Bengal Province) in August 1929, said that, "In four or five months the country would see the beginning of a great struggle and urged them all to prepare for it."³⁴ This call was an empty one as far as the working class was concerned: the programmes of the Congress had nowhere specified in its scope, the

33. 'Congress and Labour since 1929. (F.No.K-W-to 257/1/30, Home Political).

34. Ibid.

strongest weapon of the working class - the weapon of strike. On the other hand, with the communists held up in the Meerut Conspiracy trials, during such a crucial moment in history, the workers were left without a leadership that could channelise the militancy and discontentment, into a united struggle against imperialism as was specified in the objective of the W.P.P. The outcome was that when the proposals for retrenchment were made in the M&SMR, by about 1931, the leadership suggested only arbitration by the State and the workers had to take retrenchment lying down.

It is to be noted here that, the events in the Railway labour movement during and after the strike in SIR in 1928 had both determined as well as reflected the internal strife in the Indian Trade Union Movement for the coming years. The struggle to exclude the communists influence or the 'Moscow virus' with the treatment of constitutional and conservative Trade Unionism had begun more than any other industry, in the Railways. For instance, in the month of August, 1928, "At a meeting of the General Council of the All India Railwaymen's Federation at Madras a suggestion was made by some communists that an All India Railway hartal should be observed on a specific day. It is said that this did not commend itself to the other members who turned it down. Some of the more responsible representatives,

had an informal talk on the question of excluding communists from labour movement in India... delegates from other provinces were warned in downright terms against trusting Singaravelu Chetty."³⁵

FROM THE 1930s to 1946:

The AITUC session at Jharia in December 1928 had brought to the fore the background to the ensuing split in the working class movement of the country. The ideas that were afloat in the session had posed in concrete terms, "an intense battle between two lines of action in the labour movement of the country, one - the constitutionalist and reformist path of not-too-much struggle with emphasis on constitutional remedy and a subordinate role of the working class in the national-political movement and the other - the path of revolutionary class struggle and an independent and vanguard political role of the working class."³⁶ In this battle, the communists were excluded from the labour movement for a short but crucial period in the years following 1929 and also when repression was concentrated on the communists by the British Indian Government; the Meerut conspiracy trials being a culmination

35. Fortnightly Reports, (Madras Province) 1st half of August, 1928. (1/28/1928, Home Political, NAI).

36. Sukomal Sen, op. cit., p. 287.

of this phase of repression.

The conclusion of the trials and the acquittal of the accused was also marked by a qualitative change in the relationship between the communists and the Congress, when in 1935, the United Front thesis (authored by R.P. Dutt and Benjamin Franklin Bradley of the British Communist Party) was put forward as the programme for action to the Indian Communists. This was an attempt to cement the split in the Indian Trade Union Movement that had occurred after 1928; this unity was established for a brief period, but it was shortlived. The formation of the Provincial ministries in 1937 had brought the problems of unity between the two classes, which had contradictory approaches to the struggle against imperialism, to the fore. This was manifested in the widespread increase in the number of strike actions all over the country as is evident from Table 2.1 of this dissertation.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the events following the Nazi attack on Soviet Union in 1942, brought to the fore the two perspectives on the nature of imperialism. The attitude of the communists to the war vis-a-vis that of the Congress, in 1942 is an important factor to be studied in the history of the working class movement in India. A discussion over this will however be too wide

from the scope of this dissertation; nevertheless its importance cannot be undermined. Suffice it to say here that, the position taken by the Communists that the nature of the war had changed with the attack of Soviet Union by Germany, i.e. it is then a 'Peoples War' was in consonance with the ideology of 'working class internationalism' and thus was different from that of 'bourgeois nationalism' of the Indian National Congress.

The events following the conclusion of the war had however witnessed yet another wave of strike actions by the working class and thereby also proving the credentials of the Communists in terms of their commitment to unremitting struggle against imperialism. This was spelt out clearly by the Communist Party of India in December, 1945 as, "...the period of an unprecedented opportunity to make the final bid for power... The new tactical line of the party is based upon the realisation that the war period of 'no-strikes' is over and the party must take the foremost lead in organising not only partial struggles of the workers and peasants but also anti-imperialist mass protest actions..."³⁷

37. The New Situation and Our Task: Resolution of the C.C. of C.P.I. passed at its meeting in December 1945. (Dec/6, J.N.U. Archives).

The party spelt out in its agenda to press on the new 'popular Government' to pass 'peoples ordinances' to ensure among other things, "No retrenchment and the guaranteeing of minimum wage to all industrial workers - Reconversion of all wartime factories to production for peace-time needs and thus maintain the existing level of employment".³⁸

These measures were not taken up by the Congress ministries and when the working class expressed itself in the form of strikes for these demands, severe repression was let loose. The role of the working class in the anti-imperialist struggle was not only undermined, but were chided at as mere expressions of the 'Moscow Virus' at both the instances. This was evident in the events preceding and during the strike in 1946. The withdrawal of the strike notice in 1946 (as has been explained in chapter II) on the basis of some assurances from the Railway Board had definitely scuttled the scope for the expression of the political task of the working class against imperialism.

The subversion of the 1928 strike from within by the nationalist leadership had transformed itself into an open war, since, the 1946 strike in SIR had taken place when the country was governed by the Interim

38. Ibid., pp.10-11.

Government led by Jawaharlal Nehru, who had at one stage called upon the workers (in 1929) to prepare for a major struggle.³⁹ The province was governed by the 'popular ministry' headed by Prakasam, where the conservative trade unionist, V.V. Giri was holding the labour portfolio. It is to be noted that the firing on the workers at Golden Rock on the 5th of September, killing five railwaymen and injuring 173 workers, was the first of its nature during the tenure of the 'popular' Prakasam ministry. In fact in May 1946, when the railwaymen had expressed their preparedness for a strike, by voting by an overwhelming majority for the strike, the Minister for Industries and Labour, Mr. V.V. Giri, issued a statement on the 11th of May 1946, where he had, "...advised the workers against the indiscriminate resort to the weapon of strike. He advised both workers organisations and those of the employers to exploit every resource in their power to secure an internal settlement of disputes. He appealed for a spirit of discipline among the workers and also for a recognition on the part of employers that workers were not 'slaves' of the industrial system but 'freemen'."⁴⁰

39. Refer to footnote 33 of this chapter.

40. Fortnightly Reports (Madras Province) for 1st half of May 1946 (18/5/46, Home Political).

When the strike fever was continuing inspite of the advice of V.V. Giri and the attempt by Mr. T. Prakasam to effect a compromise between the leadership of SIRLU and the administration just before the August 1946 strike, "the Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress Committee at its session passed a resolution dissolving of the strike".⁴¹ After the commencement of the strike, and the police firing at Golden Rock, the attitude of the Congress as shown earlier was reified, when "The debate in the Legislative Assembly on the Police Firing at Golden Rock was availed of by the Honourable Prime Minister to rebuke the communists for their violent and disruptive activities."⁴²

To conclude, we may say that the strikes in SIR in 1928 and 1946, had expressed in their content as well as forms some of the basic traits of Indian Trade Union Movement. The schism that was developing in the AITUC was reflected in the SIR strikes in definite forms.

41. Fortnightly Reports, (Madras Province) 1st half of August, 1946 (18/8/46, Home Political).

42. Ibid.

CONCLUSION

We have seen, hitherto in the previous chapters the emergence of the labour movement in SIR and the M&SMR and put the subject in the overall context of the Indian Trade Union movement. In addition to this, an attempt has been made, especially in chapters II and III, to put this aspect in its historical context; i.e. in the decisive and the most important phase of the anti-imperialist movement in India. Notwithstanding the fact that the 'making of the Indian working class' had manifested itself in clear-cut political terms during the period between 1920 and 1946, one can see tendencies in that direction in earlier times. The period preceding 1920 in general especially the second half of the nineteenth century was, "...rich in collective action by the working class. These actions took many forms; forms that were not primitive precursors of 20th Century Unionism but which did, on occasion, include formally organised unions..."

The collective action was not only the expression of grievances among a growing body of industrial labourers (important though they were) but of a bigger and more fundamental social regrouping; an emerging class, a working class, of waged labour; of men and women who had to depend increasingly on the sale of their labour to

survive."¹

These actions by the working class of 19th century were, "planned, complex and effective responses to job-related oppression and exploitation as well as to opportunities perceived by the workers to certain beneficial possibility."²

Before the 1920's at local levels the labouring men in India grouped themselves as a social class during the process of fighting against the conditions of work prevailing in their respective industries. The important point is that, during the period after the first World War, the crisis that was inherent in the Colonial Economy had deepened and in the 'twenties of this century we also witness the concretisation of the unity of the labouring men. It is to be noted here that apart from the demand for a wage-hike in 1928 and the release of the impounded dearness allowance in 1946, what was taken up as a central demand by the leadership of SIRLU was the question of retrenchment. The understanding of the WPP and at the later stages the CPI on this question and of the leadership of the SIRLU throughout this period that, retrenchment was necessitated due to the economic policies of a colonial regime, had in effect, made the demand against retrenchment and the ensuing struggle an integral part of the struggle

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1. Ian J. Kerr, "Working Protests in 19th Century India: Example of Railway Workers", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. XX, No. 4 (1985), p. PE34.
 2. Ibid.

against imperialism.

All this does not mean that the role played by the labour in railways prior to this period of study is negligible in any sense. The point is that, the railway worker's movement had taken a concrete shape in terms of its ideology during this period. They had transcended from the previous phase of primitive or 'pre-political' acts of protests. (the term 'pre-political' can be explained as those acts of protests wherein the objective of the action is not defined in relation to broader political objectives transcending the immediate demands and issues) A new phase had set in from the turn of the century, with the working class entering the arena of the National politics. The analysis of the communists the WFP in 1928, with regard to the role of the working class in the struggle against imperialism vis-a-vis the other social classes, was part of this process of concretisation of the working class ideology in twentieth century India. It is to be noted that the workers in SIR had put up an unremitting fight in the 19th century against the two major forms of oppression, "The first and often most explosive was the extended arrears in the payment of wages... The second was the demand for higher wages. Other causes included disputes over supervisory practices or over working conditions."³

3. Ibid.

The irregularity in the payment of wages more or less rectified by the turn of the century, the other unresolved issues were not only taken up by the leadership of the working class, they were placed in their perspective and thus set the task for the working class in the ongoing struggle against imperialism. This task was set before the Indian Working Class, not by a mere subjective choice by the leadership, but on the basis of a concrete analysis of the situation as has been explained in chapters II and III of this dissertation. The fact that this leadership chose the path of organising the workers against imperialism in the manner they did from 1928 onwards had enough justification in the sense that the experience of the abrupt withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921 and also the indifference of the Congress to the problems of the Working Class, which became evident in the period after 1926-27, (when retrenchment of labour accompanied standards of living conditions).

The difference in the form and content of the reaction to the similar objective conditions by the men in SIR to those belonging to M&SMR (this fact that the conditions of work were the same in the two railways is evident from chapter I), suggests that the nature of the leadership is an important as the objective conditions in studying working class protests. This point, made at a general level in the

Introduction of this dissertation, in the context of explaining the failure of the English Working Class to remain in the forefront of the World Working Class Movement and its marginalisation in British Political tradition, is valid in the context of the Indian Trade Union movement too. The refusal of the leadership of the M&SMR Employees Union, both in 1928 and 1946, to seek redressal of the grievances of the workers through militant struggles stultified the movement in M&SMR. The inculcation of consciousness in the working class, by waging continuous battles through which alone, the contradiction between labour and capital could be exposed was essentially missed out in M&SMR. The Communist hold over the workers in SIR was evident in the fact that the SIR men were prepared to face bullets both in 1928 and 1946. Apart from this, in the first General elections to the Central Legislature in 1952, the Communist candidate, K. Anandan Nambiar, who was the General Secretary of SIRLU during the struggle in 1946, (he was arrested after the Police firing in November 1946 at Golden Rock) defeated the Conservative Trade Unionist Mr. Adikesavalu Reddiar by a large margin from the Railway labour constituency.⁴ This contextual understanding is

4. P. Ramachandran, 'Paralumandrathil Nambiar' (Nambiar in the Parliament, in Tamil), p.2.

essential, when we attempt at generalisations as to the success and failure of the strike actions in 1928 and 1946.

It is essential in this context to take note of the strategic importance of the Indian Railways to the economic and political control of the country for the Colonial Government. This importance was felt by the Government and this alone explains the repressive measures taken by the State during the events in 1928 and 1946. The notorious clause 81 A of the Defence of India Rules, which provided for the detention of Trade Union leaders without trial and various other provisions were used to crush the strike. While in 1928, it was the British Indian Government which resorted to such a severe repression, the strike in 1946 was suppressed with a heavier hand by the use of the entire state machinery by the newly inducted 'Interim Government' in the Centre and the 'popular-ministry' in the province.

To conclude, while it will be an overestimation to say that the working class in India on the whole and the men in the SIR were conscious of their role in history, it will be incorrect to underestimate their essential and integral role decided by the form and content of the demands and the movements, in the struggle against imperialism and against exploitation of Labour.

The struggles in their course, had advanced the level of consciousness from that of mere trade unionism to that of the working class in a colonial setting and thus was certainly different in both form and content from the movement in the period before 1920.

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