CHAPTER IV

STAFF AND WORKFORCE IN RAILWAYS
The nineteenth century railways of the British raj was built with the British Capital by the Indian labour supervised and directed by the British bureaucrats, contractors, engineers and foremen. The vast majority of the workers were unskilled labourers who worked as diggers and movers of earth and rock. Railway building was heavily labour intensive.1

The artisans, the carpenters, the iron smiths, station masters, painters and gangmen were locally recruited. The early builders, engineers, supervisors, traffic managers, locomotive superintendents came from Britain. The recruits arriving from England had to report at Calcutta prior to joining duty in the inland location. Dalhousie displayed much concern over the situation and felt that a line should be constructed from Bombay

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to Central India towards the south speedily to shorten the journey of new recruits.²

The Indians were taught plate laying and by 1860's it had become the job of Indians under European supervisors. Following this the consulting Engineer suggested the employment of educated young men either born in India or inured to the climate of India. The Madras Railway, the first guaranteed Railway tended to be the pioneer as far as the training and employment of Indian were concerned.³ T.T. Pears, a Railway Engineer in Madras remarked the special skill that the Indian obtained under the European supervision. "In this department the natives are employed in various trades connected


with locomotive Engineering and carriage building. The carpenters and blacksmiths are usually skilled at their trades. The natives are trained as firemen, lighters and some of them get through their duties remarkably well”.\(^4\)

C.E. Bruce, the first Chief Engineer in 1854 wrote, “The progress of the natives in learning plate laying under the tuition of Europeans had been most satisfactory. If they are carefully directed and remunerated, the natives of the country would be able to perform many of the duties for which they are generally considered unfit”. Unskilled labour was in demand to do manual work in the railways. During harvest season labour was found scarce. By 1865, when Indian industry was in the embryonic stage, railways employed, 34,000 workers in the running of the system. In 1895, 2,73,000 workers and prior to

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Great Depression number had reached to 7,90,000. The Madras Railway District 3 employed 5971 workers and among them majority were women and children. In all categories of work, women outnumbered men and they constituted a significant component of workforce.

On the commencement of construction of railways a system of contract was tried in Bengal. After some time it was abandoned. In Bombay big contractors had done the work with few failures. But in Madras getting the work done by contract was not tried because Bruce, the Chief Engineer had the experience of Bengal. Therefore he planned to execute the work through the engineers of the Company directly.

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5 Dharmakumar and Tapan Raychaudri (ed.) *The Economic History of India*, p.748.


Edward Davidson, *The Railway of India with an Account of their Rise, Progress and Construction*, p. 344.
The cost of labour was cheaper in Madras than in any other presidencies. The average cost per mile of a railway single tract in Madras had been eight thousand pounds to nine thousand pounds (8000 l to 9000 l), instead of from fifteen hundred thousand to twenty hundred thousand pounds (15,000 l to 20,000l) as in other parts of India.8

For the purpose of construction the entire distance was divided into several districts. For instance in the case of Madras to Beypore, the area covering 406 miles was divided into seventeen districts. The line from Madras to Menil, a distance of 50 mils was an experimental attempt, that later became the pattern to all railways in Madras.9

8 Ibid., 345.

9 Ibid.
The obroginal tribe in the North Arcot region called 'Wouddors' did manual labour of quarrying stones, sinking wells and other kind of earth work. The 'Wouddors' appeared in the railway records in the beginning of railway construction and their presence was very much in the district of Madras Railway and district of the northwest line of Madras Railway.10

Railway road was essentially made up of three different parts such as laying the foundation, the blast and putting tract on correct lines. For the formation of the railroad, blast was considered to be a kind of material used with broken stone, sand burnt bricks and granite. Thus manual labour became the dessideratum for undertaking such tasks.11

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10 The Oddes or Voddars were called Wouddors. In the Census Report of 1871 they were described as tank diggers and road makers of the country. They worked in gangs on contract. The women carrying the earth in baskets when the men use the pick and spade. They were employed in the PWD in the construction of railways.

Usually agricultural labourers in group worked except during harvest season. Under extraordinary situation labourers were also drawn from northern India. Sometimes work was disrupted due to caste equations. The local revenue officials and Misrasidars were prejudicial to the railway building in the beginning and so they did not like their field workers extending their co-operation to railway work.\textsuperscript{12}

Sometimes operation had been much retarded due to heavy rains as the officials had to be away from duty because of fever which raged the districts like Tirunelveli. Captain Paxon and Lieutenant Makgill entrusted work to the overseers who were invariably Brahmins. From the number of higher officials to sub-overseers money was provided to pay the coolies. But the Brahmins and other dominant caste considered it beneath

their dignity to place the hire money in the Pallars hand. They threw on the ground what they considered due to the Pallar without affording any explanation regarding the amount or giving them any opportunity of remonstrating. The consequence was that the labourers preferred to remain quietly at their own village instead of working under contractors who treated them very badly.\textsuperscript{13}

The Zamindars and headmen came forward to serve as contractors, as a consequence of which there was no dearth of labour. Most of the men recruited by them were petty contractors unskilled diggers and movers of earth and rock. In Indian villages, railway construction work was giving Indian villagers an opportunity to sell their labour power and for the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.14.
first time in history, the Indian cooly found that he had his power of labour, a valuable possession.\textsuperscript{14}

The Europeans secured the higher post though an increasing number of Indian and Anglo Indian were employed in subordinate positions. Complaint was heard from the Indians in matters of promotion and salary. A part of the trouble arose due to the hierarchy of administration and the operation of a railway in India from Britain. The problem centered on the concentration of two races working together into an effective staff and securing racial co-operation in such biracial arrangement.\textsuperscript{15}

Indians got postings in the subordinate supervisory line or sub Engineers of lower grades and a sanitary inspectors of Engineering Department. In the mechanical, traffic engineering


\textsuperscript{15} Daniel Houstan Bucharan, \textit{The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India}, p. 188.
and loco running departments, the white men employed special grade apprentices. These apprentices on completion of training were appointed in the railway services. But the case of Indian were different. Though they were trained and educated as the Europeans for the same number of years, posting was denied and no job guarantee was given to them. At any time the Indian could compulsorily be divested of their position.\textsuperscript{16}

The Railway administration not only indulged in economic exploitation but also in labour abuse. The social standards of the workers were appaling, as the foreign directors undermined the interest of the workers.\textsuperscript{17} Most of the managing and supervisory staff, the running staff, drivers, special grade drivers travelling inspectors of accounts, signal inspectors were


\textsuperscript{17} Das Rajnikanta, \textit{The Labour Movement in India}, Madras, 1923, p. 34.
Europeans. Experienced Indians having a good knowledge of accounts were not promoted to the category of officers.\textsuperscript{18} The Mathrubhumi from Calicut to the statutory Railway Board’s display of racial prejudice as ‘Efficiency and Administrative skills are not the monopoly of English’.

The composition of work force from the loco staff to workshop employees and to gangmen who maintained tracks reflected the heterogeneity of railway labours. The recruitment policy was totally on the basis of racial discrimination which varied from place to place, section to section which clearly indicated the British exploitative policy against the Indians. The trackmen were the worst sufferers.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{18} Royal Commission of Labour in India, Vol. VII, part I, \\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 549. 
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Early in 1860 the coolies in Tiruchirapally District along the coolies of eastern Bengal abstained from the railway work to raise the wage for each work. Contractors of Travancore branch of South Indian Railway in 1901 sought government support when coolies whom they had recruited for Cuddapah absconded.20

II

The Railway employees of India and Burma were organised into a single organisation, The Amalgamated society of Railway Servants Association in 1874. The Society was registered under Indian Companies Act of 1882. Membership was limited to Anglo Indians and European employers of the railways. The society was more in the nature of a friendly society than a trade union. It advised its members to avoid

strikes. The Society existed till 1928 when it changed its name to National Union of Railwaymen.21

During the time of Madras Railway Company, the railway employees at Perambur workshop were getting very low wages. Their living condition was very poor. The railway authority exploited the workers to the maximum. To improve their working and living condition, the workers of Perambur workshop went on a strike in 1898. It fizzled out. The English and Anglo Indians refused to co-operate as they were loyal to the administration.

Again in 1905 they went on strike insisting on their demands. The strike failed to receive any response from the railway authorities. The contract of the old Madras Railway Company expired on 31.12.1907 and by a new contract signed

with the Secretary of State. The Madras and South Mahratta Railway came into existence on 1.1.1908.\textsuperscript{22}

Though the British imported engineers and railway materials from England they had to set up workshop with built-in manufacturing facilities. But skilled manpower to work in these workshops was not readily available except in carpentry, blacksmith and menial labour. Therefore the railway workshops had to provide facilities for training manpower in various trades. Madras Railway Company built its workshop in 1857 while South Indian Railway had it in Nagapattinam in 1860. The signal and telecommunication workshop at Podanur set up near Coimbatore in the later days around 1928 was noteworthy. The South Indian Railway shifted its workshop from Nagapatinam to

\textsuperscript{22} History of Indian Railways Constructed and in Progress, corrected up to 31 March 1923, p.146.
Golden Rock in Tiruchirapalli in 1928.  

The shifting of workshops led to the agitations in the workshop in 1927-28.

In respect of railway workshop the principal locomotive shops and carriage building sheds were situated at Perambur, Arakonam, Nagapatinam, Hubli and Pondanur. The major workshop of the railway was situated at Perambur, four miles from the city of Madras. Between 1858-60 permanent works of construction were undertaken. A portion of engine workshop was also built around 1863. More than 5500 workers were employed in the workshop by 1865. In 1911 there were 10 workshops and 247 steam engines with the South Indian Railways.  


The impact of First World War had made the labour conscious of its rights. For the first time railway workers started their unions and began to assert themselves collectively. In 1924 All India Railway Federation had on its affiliated list more than dozen unions.\textsuperscript{26} First World War had also a tremendous impact on the attitude of the government on social and economic reconstruction. The world wide uprising of labour consciousness had its impact in India, where for the first time the industrial workers awoke to their rights particularly in the matter of wages and working hours.\textsuperscript{27}

Up to the end of 19th century there was no state control over the employment of any industrial establishment in India. Employers did what they like, with the result Indian

\textsuperscript{26} J.N. Sahani, \textit{Indian Railways: One hundred Years}, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{27} Sewe Singh Chauhan, \textit{Labour Welfare, Administration in India}, Delhi, 1993, p.16.
labour was exploited to the fullest extent. The working condition was abominable. The human factor in labour was ignored. The Acworth Committee set up in 1920 under the chairmanship of Sir William Acworth, a British Expert, recommended a system of state management for the Indian Railways. It condemned the dual administration of the Company and Government and their management from London. The Committee recommended a member for labour matters in the Railway Board, which consisted of five members.²⁸

The Royal Commission on Labour was appointed in 1929 to report on the condition of labour. The Commission had 11 members and M.T.H. Whitley as the Chairman. The Commission made comprehensive investigation on almost all problems. The commission focused the absence of proper

dwelling for the workers. The recommendation of the Commission laid framework for the welfare measures in the country. The Labour Commission made enquiries and gathered oral evidence from the employee’s unions. The evidence by S.V. Aiyer, the editor of Indian Railway magazine and president of the Madras of South Mahratta Non workshop Employees union exposed the abominable living condition of the workers in the Perambur workshop, the head quarter of Madras and South Mahratta Railway Company.²⁹

In the Railway workshop area, residential quarters were built for the Indians. The houses were very dingy without proper ventilation. Conservancy arrangements were inadequate. Rent was fixed at a high rate and it worked ten per cent of the salary of the worker. Practically all the railway quarters

remained vacant. The staff occupied houses near the place of work. But in cities and towns they could exercise the option of remaining out of the quarters.

The Madras and South Mahratta Railway administration made very poor arrangement to the children of Indians to have school education. Only few schools were provided to the Indians. Out of 170 schools only 5 schools were opened to Indian Children. The amount allocated to an European child was Rs. 75/- whereas to the Indian child it was Rs. 12/- in the railway school.30 The existence of separate institutions to the Indian, Anglo-Indians and Europeans provoked the Indian workers to think of a union to question the injustice and social prejudice meted out to them.

30 Evidence of Madras and South Mahratta Railway Employees union before the Royal commission on Labour in India, Vol. VIII, part I, p. 554.
The Madras Labour Union was formed in 1919. It was the first organisation which came close to the model of a modern trade union organised by B.P. Wadia, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress. The union was considered the earlier successful trade union formed by nationalists. They regarded the struggle of the industrial workers a supplementary endeavour for winning Home Rule.\textsuperscript{31}

But the colonial state did not tolerate the trade union activities of the Indian workers. Earlier in 1918 the South Indian Railway Employees Union was formed by bringing together the railway employees of Perambur. T.V. Kalyana Sundar Mudaliar was one of the premier organisers of the labour movement. He

\textsuperscript{31} Kuriakose Mamkottam, \textit{Trade Unionism, Myth and Reality, Unionism in the Tata Iron and Steel Company}, New Delhi, 1985, pp 3-4.
resigned his teaching job and associated himself fully to the labour struggles.\textsuperscript{32}

Inspired by the success of the Madras Labour Union the railway workers of Madras and South Mahratta Railway workshop at Perambur approached Thiru Vi. ka to help them in founding a union. The immediate reason that prompted the workers to organise themselves was that in 1919 the superintendent of the workshop shot at the workers without any provocation. Two persons were killed and twenty one were arrested. On a complaint from the railway authorities, the unjustified action of the management prompted the workers to form Madras and South Mahratta Railway Employees Union in

\textsuperscript{32} A.R. Desai, \textit{Labour Movement in India}, New Delhi, 1985, p.32.
1919. G.S. Arundale became its first president with Chelvapathi Chetti and Ramanujulu Naidu as general Secretaries.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1920 the South Indian Railway Union had 793 members and Madras and South Mahratta Railways had 812 members in the union. The All India Railway Men’s Federation met on February 16, 1925 after the government had embarked on nationalisation of railway companies. Some of the prominent office bearers elected were N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri, Mukandalal Sircar and E.L. Ayer.\textsuperscript{34} The Madras and Mahratta Railway Union was not recognised by the Railway authorities.

V.V. Giri addressed many meetings and stressed the need for their joining in the union. Because of his effort,

\textsuperscript{33} V.V. Giri, \textit{My life and Times}, Vol. I. Madras, 1976, pp. 76-77.

\textsuperscript{34} Nrisngha Chakrabarty, \textit{History of Railway Trade Union Movement}, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 3-5.
membership increased to 32,000, when the total strength of the workers in the railway was 43,000 in 1929.\textsuperscript{35}

The government of India gradually accepted the policy of Indianisation recommended by the Lee Commission by the end of 1925-26. Taking all the company run railways together, the Indian appointed during the year 1926-27 was 56.9 per cent.\textsuperscript{36} As regards the Indian recruits the percentages were 61.1 Hindus, 11.1 Muslims, 11.1 Anglo Indian and domiciled Europeans, 11.1 Sikhs, 5.6 Indian Christians.\textsuperscript{37} Yet many complaints were made of discrimination against Indian in matters of promotion and salary. Many Indians and Anglo Indians were efficient workers. They would have provided good

\textsuperscript{35} V.V. Giri, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 78.


railway personnel if unfortunate racial animosities had not existed.38

In 1926 Madras and South Mahratta Railway Employees Union had called its first conference in Krishna Talkies, Walton Road, Madras. N.M. Joshi presided over the conference. In 1927 the annual conference was held under the presidency of Rama Rao. When Gandhiji visited Madras on 3.9.1929 he was invited to lay the foundation stone for the union building which was a unique incident in the annals of Madras and Mahratta Railway Employees Union. Kasturiba Gandhi handed over the first brick to Mahatma to lay the foundation. It was a day of rejoice for Perambur workers. It was noteworthy to find that the strike of the Perambur railway

employees synchronised with the Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience Movement.\textsuperscript{39}

The union published a monthly periodical under the title Madras South Mahratta Railwaymen in English. Later a Tamil version came out as ‘Thozilali’.\textsuperscript{40}

\section*{III}

The railway workers did not want to take the unfair working condition laying down. Their protest against these injustice, unfair conditions of work, racism, poor wages, miserable living condition took different forms of action. The earlier strike in the railway was the Drivers strike in Madras. \textit{Andraprakasika} of May 29th 1909 wrote that railway administration neglected Indians and employed the Eurasians only

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\item V.V. Giri, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 78.
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in their services. The Eurasians had a strong union. They were very stubborn and never heeded the words of the Agent.\textsuperscript{41} The drivers strike affected the loading and unloading section. An attempt at sabotage was made at Perambur to derail the mail train.

\textit{Sasilekha} hoped that Railway authorities would consider the grievance of the drivers and redress them in order to get the work carried. The paper held the view that stoppage of traffic was a death blow to the people.\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{Hindu} of 16th June and the \textit{Madras Mail} eshorted the public to wait for the automatic settlement of the strike.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Andraprakarika}, Report on Native News Paper (hereafter RNNP) dated 19 May 1909

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Sailekha}, 28th May 1909, RNNP, dated

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Hindu}, 16th June 1909.
Another labour protest took place in 1910 when the locomotive staff at Jolarpettai junction struck work. In 1913 the traffic staff of Madras and South Mahratta Railway struck work for about a fortnight. These protests were mainly against the working conditions.

During the early days of Madras and South Mahratta Railway Company a group of foreigners consisting of members of Royal family came to India. A Society for the Railway Servants was organised in 1909. This Amalgamated Society organised many meetings of the Indian and Anglo Indian Railway workers. First they came to Madras and were staying in Clarence Hotel at Egmore. It had been an organisation of covenanted European staff and Anglo Indians. The organisation
was a mutual insurance society than a trade union. They also advocated strikes in the Indian Railways.44

In 1912 the Amalgamated Society succeeded in organising a strike in the Perambur workshop and a meeting was held at Foxen Street, Perambur.45 Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras supported the Railway administration in suppressing the strike. The Madras government issued orders to Collectors authorising them to warn the villagers adjacent to the line which were affected by the strike that they would be responsible for the safety of the line.46

44 V.B. Karnik, Indian Trade Union - A survey, Bombay, 1960, p. 34.

45 S.A. Mahalingam, History of the Sangh, 1919-1979, p. 43.

46 G.O. No. 561 (Public) 7th September 1913.
In this strike the strikers were replaced by prisoners, sappers and signallors from the army. This move compelled the workers to return to work, without achieving anything concrete.\textsuperscript{47}

Immediately after the strike of the traffic staff in 1913 the railway authorities issued an order to the workers to sign a service code. The employment of Madras Railway had signed such a code from 1905 to 1908. However until 1913, the workers had defied the directive. The railway authorities insisted on signing the agreement for the regularisation of the services of the employees in the substantive posts.\textsuperscript{48}

Tension mounted between the Eurasians section of the workers and the Indian section when the former accepted the terms of agreement in the service code. The authorities accused

\textsuperscript{47} *The Madras Standard*, RNNP, dated 6th January 1914,

\textsuperscript{48} G.O. No. 195-196 (judicial), 27th January 1914.
that the workers refused to sign the code due to the machination of the Amalgamated Association of Railway Servants. The workmen on the other hand apprehended that the move was to prevent the workmen from joining any strike in future. The clause objected was the one which had the provisions for the stoppage of pay and deduction of penalty from the salary at the worker’s credit under the control of the company. 49

Even though the locomotive and carriage superintendents issued instructions to the workshop managers and the Foremen that the workers should not be compelled to sign it, the latter compelled the workers to sign it. The Amalgamated Association of Railway Servants sent a telegram to the Chairman of the Railway Board, to the Agent of Madras and South Mahratta Railway praying that for the redressal of the

49 The Hindu, RNNP, dated 20th December 1913.
grievances of the workers an enquiry be instituted. But the telegram remained unacknowledged.50

In the last week of November 1913, about 100 workers of the carriage building shop at Perambur were asked to sign the service agreement which they refused. Immediately 43 workers were served with 24 hours show cause notice. Their pay was also withheld. Consequently about 700 workers went on strike on 28th November 1913. After heated arguments, the workers pelted stone on officers. In the midst of commotion, the Loco Superintendent and the Works Manger intervened and the workers were persuaded to return to work.51

The strained relations were further aggravated by the introduction of new rules which curtailed the time to pass

50 The Madras Times, 22 December 1913.

51 The Hindu, 2 January 1914.
though the gate way both in the morning and noon to fifteen minutes instead of half an hour. The workmen contended that the time permitted was too short a period to enable all the 7000 men in the workshop to pass through without overcrowding. The curtailment of time resulted in the men being marked late, even though they reached in time. Those who did not succeed to get into the workshop before 7 A.M. and 12 P.M. were marked late and fined half an hour’s pay. The workers thought that it was a punishment for refusing to sign the terms of agreement. It was followed by dismissal of 41 workers.52

The carpentry section of the carriage building in Perambur workshop was situated a couple of furlongs from the gate. The workmen in the carpentry selection constituted the largest number among the artisans. They were determined that

52 G.P. No. 195-196 (Judicial) 27th January 1914.
they should not return to work on time. On 19th December 1913 when the workmen returned to duty at 12.30 P.M., they did not put the tickets in the box in time. When the Foremen Walker questioned, they pointed out the impracticability of the whole men reaching the workspot punctually on account of the insufficiency of the interval time. Some correspondence passed in this connection between the Foreman and Works Manager.

About 2.30 PM the workers learnt that except for a few men who placed their tickets in the book in time, the others were to be fined an hour's pay. The news spread like a wild fire and it was the immediate cause for the trouble. One of the workmen who sought a clarification from the authorities were assaulted by Finch, the Assistant Foreman. Walker, the Foreman, ran to give an alarm signal to secure help but he was

53 *The Madras Mail*, 20th December 1913.
attacked by the workmen. They blew whistles which sent signal to all the workers who armed themselves with anything they could lay their hands on.\textsuperscript{54}

Meanwhile BomFord, the Works Manager, arrived at the spot. He was beaten with sticks. He escaped to his office. The crowd then entered into the erecting shop, broke open the hammer hander and chased away the European officers. The broke many glass windows and furniture. Norton, the Watch and Ward Inspector was manhandled. In order to protect his life and limb Norton used his revolver.\textsuperscript{55}

Proteus, Deputy Loco Superintendent Fowle, Personal Assistant, confronted the workers with revolver and started firing. As a result of firing on the workmen, one Natesa

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Indian Patriot}, 25th December 1913.

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}
Mudaliar received a shot in the forehead. He fell down and died on the spot. On 23rd December 1913 Siyalam, another workman, died of bullet injury in the general hospital, Madras.56

Meanwhile the policemen from Sembiam station rushed to the spot. The workshop was closed until further notice. The nationalist press demanded an independent enquiry into the firing incident. But the government turned it down. After the reopening of the workshop on January 1, 1914 the loco-superintendent canceled the order reducing half an hour in to fifteen minutes and reverted to the old rule.57

During the days of Non Co-operation movements, the Congress openly proclaimed that without Swaraj the labourers could never prosper and therefore the aim of freedom movement

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56 GO. No. 195-96 (Judicial), dated.

57 Ibid.
was the attainment of Swaraj. The workers contributed their share to the successful transformation of the Indian National Movement into a mass movement in the 1920's and 1930's.\textsuperscript{58}

In 1920 under the leadership of Packeeriswamy Pillai strike broke out in Nagapattinam. The cause of the strike was related to a fire incident in the Nagapattinam workshop and the consequences that followed. The railway administration dismissed six of the workmen who happened to be suspected by Giles the loco superintendent. In 1920s in the workshop there was disparity between the European and the Indian staff on pay scales. The attitude of railway management reflected in the dismissal of workers. However the attitude of the Nagapattinam workers were in the nature of pressure tactics than an actual strike.

\textsuperscript{58} C.S. Krishna, \textit{Labour Movement in Tamil Nadu}, p. 178.
In 1924 a strike broke out in south Indian railway but it was confined to the Anglo Indians. In the same year railway strike commenced at various centres in Madurai, Tiruchirapalli, Villupuram, Thanjavur, Nagapattinam, Tirunelveli and Egmore. The general reason for the strike was the reduction in the number of firemen of an engine from two to one throughout the south Indian Railway.\textsuperscript{59}

The strike in Salem and Podanur continued while in other places the strike was not vigorous. Throughout this period both Varadarajulu Naidu and Packeeriswami Pillai played a key role in solving the workers problems.

In Tamil Nadu the emergence of the Trinity V. Kalyana Sundara Mudaliar, Varadarajulu Naidu and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy had brought a change in the domination of lawyers

\textsuperscript{59} C.S. Krishna, \textit{Labour Movement in Tamil Nadu 1918-33}, p. 118.
in the Congress. When E.V.R decided in favor of reconstructing the self respect movement based on socialistic principle it was welcomed by a large section of members who had been exposed to the Communist ideology through trade union. In 1919 Singaravelu Chettiyar, a fisherman born in Nochikuppam and a lawyer by profession, entered the Congress politics. He actively associated himself with the Rowlat Satyagraha and Non Co-operation Movement. He was the first to infuse leftist ideology in to the trade union movement.

He was disillusioned with the Congress in the context of abrupt withdrawal of non-cooperation movement. He formed a Communist group in Madras in 1922. He was a labour leader of considerable eminence. In him Periyar E.V.R.

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61 Singaravelu was born in February 18, 1860 at Chennai and passed way on 11.2.1946.
found a competent person to draw up self respect programmes on communist lines. The Government viewed the propaganda of self respecters with concern. Singaravelu and P. Jeevanantham took active role in the political wing of movement and labour union activities.\textsuperscript{62}

The infiltration of communism in the trade union movement and working struggle was one of the most remarkable aspect of the movement of the railway workers especially, in the South Indian Railway during 1924-28. The strike began on 20 July 1928. It lasted only for ten days. But it shook the Railway administration from top to bottom. The Government of Madras characterised it as 'the most important event of the years' and described it as violent and extensive.\textsuperscript{63}

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\textsuperscript{63} V.B. Karnik, \textit{Strikes in India}, Bombay, 1967, p. 213.
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On 29th June 1927 the workshop staff at Golden Rock, Nagapatinam and Podanur downed their tools because the Agent had announced his plan of retrenching 3171 men.64

The two main issues involved in the strike was retrenchment and the shifting of the workshop form Nagapatinam, Podanur and other places to Golden Rock. Agitation among the workers began as soon as they came to know these two plans.65 There were also other long standing issues from the menial and the running staff for an increment from Rs. 15/- to Rs. 25/-. The staff of Loco and Traffic Department suffered during long hours of work and inadequate rest at home and non-provision of week end holidays. The general secretary of SIR Labour Union pleaded the Railway


administration to relieve the menials of their semi-starvation condition. On the other hand the Agent was very much particular with the question of retrenchment.66

The manager of workshops suggested a considerable reduction in the number of workers employed. Moreover the workers refused to submit to trade test which the Railway Management announced. The workers of Nagapatinam, Podanur and Golden Rock refused definitely to submit to Trade Tests. They struck work as consequence of which the Agent of SIR declared a lock out with effect from 29th June 1928. The workshops were closed. The workers had organised themselves into a union and constituted a strike committee. In the union there were two factions. One was moderate and the other was militant, represented by Singaravelu Chettiyar and Mukudilal

Sarkar. A Central Committee under D. Krishna Sami Pillai was formed. On 24th June 1928 a common strike committee was appointed from the SIR Labour union.\(^6\)

The Call for a general strike was given on 14th July. Later it was postponed to 20th July since many of the prominent leaders were away from Madras. The Agent made a last ditch attempt to avert the strike lest it had not effect on the workers. The hour fixed for the beginning of the strike was midnight on 19th-20th July. The strikers split into several group went out in different directions to mobilize the workers and campaign for the cause. The strikers were noticed all along from Egmore on the north to Tuticorin on the south.\(^6\)

\(^{67}\) GO. No. 960 (Public) dated 30th October 1928.

The strike lasted for ten days. But during these days the working of the railway was completely dislocated. The Railway Administration sought the assistance of Military and Police. The strikers were full of resistance. Police opened fire on strikers at various places and in the process killed and wounded many. The police resorted to firing at Mayavaram, Villupuram, Tuticorin and Kodaikanal. The District Magistrate kept informing the government about the extent of strike at the district level.69

By July 24th 1928 the entire Executive and strike committee members had been arrested. Singaravelu and Mukuandalal Sircar were arrested on 23.7.1928. The office of the union was raided and the union journal ‘Thozilali’ were seized.

69 GO. No. 960 (Public) dated 30 October 1928,
The strike committee called off the strike from the morning of 30th July 1928.\footnote{K. Murugesan and C.S. Subramaniaym, \textit{Singaravelu - First Communist in south India}, New Delhi, 1975, p. 54.}

The SIR union president D. Krishna Pillai was sentenced to go ten years rigorous imprisonment. Perumal, a striker was sentenced for life. The two leaders of the strike Singaravelu and Mukudilal Sarkar were charged under 120 B of the Indian Penal code. The British thought that this was the first case of conspiracy of any importance in the Madras Presidency and the case was known as ‘Trichinopalli Conspiracy case’.\footnote{GO. No. 422, (Public) dated 28th March 1930.}

The retrenchment as planned was carried out and there was no revision of pay scales. On August 1930 Singaravelu was released. He was at the age of seventy. Perumal was detained and put to Andamans. The Congress
ministry of Rajaji formed in July 1937 only ordered the release of Perumal.\textsuperscript{72}

The strike in south Indian Railway was a subject of dispute in the Madras Legislative Council. Satyamurthy questioned the legality of firing by the police in some important places as it was resorted to without the order of the Magistrate.\textsuperscript{73} In his May day speech of 1933 Singaravelu explained how some Gandhian satyagrahis in the strike followed non violent attitude but the police held the communist responsible for all violent actions.

In Railways when the Administratin proposed retrenchment the All India Railwymen’s Federation demanded a Board of Conciliation to suggest the method of retrenchment to

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avoid the discharge of lower paid staff. But the Railway Administration went ahead with its own programme of retrenchment and refused to discuss it with the union. The Madras and Southern Mahratta Employee’s Union was enraged by the refusal of the government to appoint a Conciliation Board to look into their grievances. The sixth annual conference of Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway Employee’s Union which was held at Bangalore on 4th and 5th April 1931 under the presidenship of V.V. Giri passed a resolution condemning the retrenchment policy of the railways and forwarded it to the government.74

The election of V.V. Giri as president of the Madras and South Mahratta Railway union injected new vigour to the Trade union Movement. At the request of R. Srinivasalu, the

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74 GO. No. 1060 L (Misc) Public Work and Labour Department, dated 17 April 1931.
leading office bearers of the union V.V. Giri became the president of the union in 1929, the year in which the fourth annual conference was held. S. Srinvasa Iyengar, the president of the union in 1927 also wanted V.V. Giri to lead the Unions.\textsuperscript{75}

Economic measure on the extensive scale was adopted by the end of 1930-31. This was owing to the fall in earnings of railways. It was proposed to introduce a cut back on staff charges to the tune of 50 per cent. Economy was attempted in the following heads:

1. Reduction in the strength of subordinate and inferior staff and of workshop employees.

2. Reduction in superior or Gazetted officers.

\textsuperscript{75} V.V. Giri, \textit{Op. cit.}, pp. 77
3. Reduction in special pay and allowances

4. Emergency cut in pay.\textsuperscript{76}

The union discussed the attitude of Madras and South Mahratta Railway administration on the question of retrenchment. It had been agitating the mind and railway workers since 1927. The railway announced on 19th September 1932 that the surplus staff in any one shop would be discharged. The union was informed that 474 men were in surplus to requirements and the present retrenchment was the unaccomplished part of previous years retrenchment.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Indian Railways Administration Report}, 1931-31, Vol I. pp. 60-61. V.V. Giri was one of the founder of the All India Railwaymen's Federation in 1925. He was elected president of the Trade Union Congress in 1926 and 1942. During the days of Civil Disobedience Movement he did a lot to organise trade union in support of the national movement. Mrs. Padma Balakrishnan, \textit{The Madras Directory and Who's who} 1948, Madras, 1948, pp 7-8.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{GO. No. 597, Railway (Confidential)}, dated 10 March 1933.
The administration refused to reinstate 93 workers who were compulsorily discharged in 1931. The two major issues were the figures of surplus nem and the discharge of 93 men compulsorily from service. The union took a ballot to ascertain their views and they decided to go on strike. There was a spontaneous strike at Hubli workshop due to the violent behaviour of a Foreman at Millwright shop. V.V. Giri deputed R. Srinivasalu, the general secretary of the union, to go to Hubli to sort the issue.78

V.V. Giri made extensive tour to gather strength and explained to workers about the direct action if their demands were not conceded. Sensing the gravity of the situation, the Agent Wathan announced the revision of pay scales. The revision was nothing but the merger of grain compensation

allowance with the pay scales. In the revision of pay, clerical staff were omitted and this gave rise to protest from the workers. On behalf of the clerical staff the Perambur workers held massive demonstration and on 25th October 1930. A huge procession was organised from all over Madras terminating at the Perambur Union office. V.V. Giri addressed the gathering and the Agent promised pay revision for the clerks. In the meantime the Madras and South Mahratta Railway authorities served a notice of termination of employees including 50 apprentices. The workers staged a satyagraha from 17 June 1931 sitting peacefully in the respective shops. Next day the workers were forced to start their work as soon at they entered the shops. But they began a ‘sit in strike’.79

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The Madras and South Mahratta Railway Employees Union, Perambur held its meetings on the 21st of October. Giri advised them to get the opinion of the workers. The workers expressed their opinion through the ballot in favour of the strike. After successful planning the strike began on 24th October 1932, in the Perambur Mechanical Workshop. The strike was not confined to Perambur. The worker in the Arokonam and Hubli technical workshop went on strike in sympathy with the striking workers.  

It was a fight not on behalf of the Madras and South Mahratta Railwaymen but on behalf of all workers in the matter of retrenchment. Help came from all corners in sympathy with the strikers. A discharged railway employee of Madras and South Mahratta Railway wrote in *Andrapatrika* that Indian

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Railway companies had discharged 43,000 workers in the course of the past two years. The Madras and South Mahratta Railway Employees union appealed for the support of all unions in different parts of India. Meanwhile Jammnadas Mehta, the president of A.I.R.F., announced his moral and material support. S.C. Joshi also provided invaluable help. The general public also showed sympathy towards the strikers.\textsuperscript{81}

Help came from all corners in sympathy with the strikers. Bags of rice, dal and donations came. Weekly rations were distributed to the strikers. V.V. Giri appealed and received help from international organisations. The B.N.R (Bengal Nagpur Railway) sent a batch of trained men to assist the Madras and South Mahratta Railway Union men.\textsuperscript{82} To keep the

\textsuperscript{81} Report of the Native Newspapers for the Month of December, 1932, p. 926.

\textsuperscript{82} The Hindu, 12 December 1932.
striking workers together Giri suggested the idea of building a small hall for the union office for keeping the strikers occupied. The attitude of Railway authorities was adamant. The central executive committee decided to call for a general strike on 22 December 1932.\textsuperscript{83}

The strike had extended for over a month. The Agent condemned the general strike notice illegal. But the Public’s sympathy was with the strikers. In the meantime V.S.S. Sastri, P.S. Sivasawami Iyer, P. Varadarajulu Naidu and other prominent leaders in the city of Madras issued an appeal to end the strike. A citizen’s committee with Europeans and Indians representing trade Association met Jamnada Mehta and V.V. Giri. The committee assured the workers that their demand would be considered. The committee gave full assurance that they would

\textsuperscript{83} V.V. Giri, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 83.
stand by their word in the reinstatement of 93 employees retrenchment in the previous year. The strike was called off on 9 January 1933.84

Unfortunately the citizens committee cold not fulfil its promise. The Chairman of the Committee F.E. Garnes left Madras for Rangoon issuing a statement that the Agent was not agreeable to the terms of the settlement. The workers were disappointed. The strike turned out to be a failure. Meanwhile the Perambur railway workers started collecting contribution among the retrenchment workers in Hubli and Arakonam. The union considered the action of the Agent as a breach of contract and filed a case against him. The Agent wanted the general secretary Krishnamoorthy to withdraw the case. He expressed his inability since it was the decision of the Central Executive

84 GO. No. 597, Railway (confidential), dated 10.3.1933.
of the union. He was therefore dismissed from service. The dismissal of Krishnamoorthy created confused situation among the labourers.

The Thozhilar Murasu observes 'the Perambur Employer's Union's Secretary was dismissed from service. The Madras and South Mahratta Railway Adminstration had perpetrated several iniquities for crushing the Railway Employee's union and denying statutory right to join the union. The action does not affect the union but the very basic principle of Labour Union Movement pushing an employee because he serves as secretary is tantamount to coercing labour union contrary to the principle of trade unionism.'

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85 *Fortnightly report*, First half of January, 1933.

86 *Fortnightly report*, for the month of July to December, 1933.
After the failure of the strike, the membership of the union declined there was no fund with the union. V.V. Giri stated that the sorry state of affairs in which they were caught was due to the double role played by the citizen’s committee. It was a tactical mistake the strike was called off based on the assurance of the Citizen’s Committee. Giri’s association with the union ceased in 1934.

Railway strike broke out in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II. In Golden Rock a ‘stay in strike’ was organised with the demands from staff for the improvement of their services conditions and the setting up of a central pay commission to revise their pay and allowances.

It was but quite natural that a large body of Railwaymen who had worked loyally in the war effort should have felt that their economic troubles would come to an end
with the end of war. Due to various factors their expectations was belied. They faced the possibility of retrenchment due the reduction in the railway activities and the absorption of exservicemen. Thus towards the close of the year 1945-46 a large number of petitions were received by the government from All India Railwaymen’s Federation presenting various demands and asking for adjudications. In response, the government in May 1946 had announced the appointment of a pay commission under justice Srinivasa Varadhachariyar with Justice Rajadhyaksha as Adjudicator.\textsuperscript{87}

But notice of a general strike was served on the government by All India Railwaymen’s Federation on 1st June 1946. The strike was to commence on 27th June 1946 if their

demands were not conceded. At a special meeting of the Railway Board and the Federation held on 29th May 1946, the demands of the railway workers were placed.

1. Rs. 60/- per month as minimum wage

2. Interim increase of pay

3. Job security

As a result of the bipartite agreement an interim relief of Rs. 4.8 per month to the railway employees drawing a salary of Rs. 250 per month and below was announced. The government agreed that no railway servant who was in service as on 15th September 1945 would be discharged on becoming surplus unless he refused alternative employment. As a result

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88 Ibid., p. 47.
of these, the All India Railwaymen's Federation called off the general strike.\(^{89}\)

This settlement did not prevent the occurrence of a general strike on the South Indian Railway. The trouble began with a lightening strike of the workshop staff on 23rd July 1946. On the 1st August 1946 the SIR labour union served on the Railway administration. A notice of a general strike on the same day. Notice was accompanied by a list of demands to the Adjudicator and central pay commission. On 11th August 1946, a strike notice was served on the administration by the SIR Station Masters Association with the list of demands. The general strike commenced on the night of 24th August 1946 and continued till the evening of 22nd September 1946 when it

\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 48.
was called off. The situation returned to normal on 26th September 1946.90

The strike was a matter of discussion in the Madras Legislative assembly. Sri Pillalamari Venkatasvaralu raised the issue as a matter of public importance since the Malabar police Harrison entering in railway colony causing atrocities on the unarmed workers of Golden Rock workshop.91 The South Indian strike went on for 21 days the state government had no jurisdiction over railways. But the use of police against the workers was the concern of the government. The railway workers observed 1.6.1946 as ‘All India Railway Men’s Day’. The Communist Desaabhimani gave its support under the heading


‘Railway Men’s Struggle is a Struggle against Britain’. The Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress Committee passed a resolution disapproving the strike.

The Congress considered the Communist wholly responsible for the strike. On the other hand the workers considered that it was wrong on the part of the police to arrest these workers who have inherent right to picket. Peaceful picketing is a right recognised all over the world.  

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92 Fortnightly Report, August 1946, p. 93.

93 GO. No. 1648 (Public), dated 25 July 1946.