

19th SEPTEMBER 1968

In the history of workers in struggle in India the nationwide strike of Central Government Employees on 19th September, 1968 has a prominent place. All the leaders who lead and participated in the strike have retired and some of them are no more.

Background

The indefinite strike of Central Govt. Employees in 1960 was the first major strike of Central Government. Employees after independence. The five days strike from 1960 July 11 midnight was brutally suppressed by the Central Government declaring it as "Civil Rebellion". The main demand of the strike was improvement and modifications in the 2nd CPC recommendations.

The Need Based Minimum Wage, though adopted by the 15th Indian Labour Conference in 1957, was rejected by the 2nd CPC.

The Joint Consultative machinery (JCM) was constituted in 1966 as a forum for discussing and settling the issues raised by CG employees. GL Nanda then Home minister of India inaugurating the JCM on [28-10-1966](#) expressed a hope that "the strikes will be made superfluous". Jagajivan Ram then labour Minister expressed a hope that "I wish that the Council will function in such a way that all the disputes or differences that may arise, will be resolved by them and no occasion will be provided for the Labour Minister to exercise his authority of setting up of the Board of Arbitration." But JCM was a failure then, and it is a failure now also. In the very first meeting of the National Council JCM, the following three demands were notified by the staff side.

1. Grant of Need Based Minimum Wage as approved by the 1957 Tripartite Labour Conference.
2. Merger of DA with Pay and
3. Revision of DA formula.

After prolonged discussion for more than one and a half year disagreement was recorded. According to the JCM scheme once disagreement is recorded the matter should have gone to arbitration, but Government refused to refer the matter to arbitration. Protesting against this arbitrary stand of the Government, the staff side leadership walked out of the JCM and decided to go for one day's strike. A Joint Action Committee was formed and the date of the strike was decided as 19th September 1968. The following were the main demands of charter of demands for the strike

1. Need Based Minimum Wage.
2. Full neutralization of rise in prices.
3. Merger of DA with Basic Pay.
4. Withdrawal of proposal to retire employees with 50 years of age or on completion of 25 years of service.
5. Vacate victimisation and reinstate victimised workers.
6. No retrenchment without equivalent alternative jobs.
7. Abolition of Contract and Casual Labour System.

Strike notice was served and the Joint Action Council (JAC) decided to commence the strike at 0600 AM on 19th September 1968. Intensive campaign was conducted throughout the country. AIRF, AIDEF, NFPTTE and Confederation were the major organisations in the JAC. Government invoked Essential Service Government also issued detailed instructions to impose heavy penalty including suspension, dismissal, termination, break-in-service etc. on the striking employees. Para-military force (CRPF) and Police were deployed to deal with the strike. Central Government gave orders to all State Governments to suppress the strike at any cost.

Kerala was ruled by the Communist Government during the strike. Chief Minister. E. M. S.Namboodiripad declared Kerala Government's full support to the strike of Central Government employees. The Central Government threatened dismissal of the Kerala Government for defying the Centre's directive to suppress the strike.

It was a war-like situation. Arrest of Leaders started on 18th September itself. About 3000 employees and leaders were arrested from Delhi alone. All over India about 12000 Central Government employees and leaders were arrested and jailed. In spite of all these repressive measures the strike commenced on 18th after noon itself at many places and was a massive success all over India and in all departments including Railway, Defence, P&T, Audit and etc. About 64000 employees were served with termination notices, thousands removed from service and about 40000 employees suspended. Eight employees were brutally killed at Gauhati, Bikaner and Pathankot.

They were:

Com. Paresh Sanyal Gauhati Bongaigaon,
Com. Raman Acharjee, Gauhati, Mariani,
Corn. Kishan Gopal, Bikaner
Com. Lakshman Shah, Pathankot,
Com. Raj Bahadur, Pathankot,
Com. Debraj, Pathankot,
Com. Gurdeep Singh, Pathankot,
Com. Ghama, Pathankot

In CPWD office in Delhi the strike was not that successful. But hearing that all over India central government employees were on strike the local leaders of CPWD workers in Indraprastha Estate, New Delhi decided to pass a resolution in an urgent meeting, expressing solidarity with striking workers. It seems that the Special Branch police sent a wrong message that CPWD workers are going on strike. Para military (CRPF) came and started beating brutally all staff who came across them - men or women, peon or officer. One employee, **Arjun Singh**, in a bid to escape from the lathi beating by CRPF jumped out through the window on third floor. His body was broken and shattered into pieces. Blood everywhere in the ground. Seeing the horrifying scene some people started vomiting.

Though the strike was only for one day on 19th September 1968, the victimisation and repression continued for days together. Struggle against victimisation also continued including work-to-rule agitation, hunger fast of leaders from 10th October 1968. There was unprecedented support to the strike and relief work and also to agitation for reinstatement of the victimised workers, from National Trade Unions, State Government employees and teachers Unions/Federations etc. A mass rally was organised before the residence of Prime Minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi on 17th October, 1968.

19th September 1968 strike is written in red letters in the history of Indian Working Class.

The strike was historic in more than one sense. The same government which refused to accept the demands were compelled to implement some of them afterwards. DA was granted regularly. Third CPC was set up in 1970. Liberalized pension scheme was introduced in 1973. No struggle goes in vain.

The long term impact of a struggle for a genuine cause should be understood properly. The benefits of past struggles often accrues to the present/future generation. Struggles are inevitable to establish more and more equitable peaceful society.\

Let us salute the martyrs of past struggles.

Let us remember with gratitude all those who suffered immensely in the past struggles.

Let us resolve to make future struggles massive success.

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Acknowledgment:

I have taken the article written by Com. Radhakrishna, leader of central government employees in Bangalore for preparing the above write up

I am proud that I participated in the strike on 19th September, 1968.

I am proud that I had a leading role in that strike in CTO Trivandrum

I am proud that I am product of the Token Strike on 19th September 1968.

I salute the Heroes who gave the extreme sacrifice on that day.

...P S Ramankutty, 19th September 2021.