

The South Indian Railway Strike, 1928: Labour Unrest, Worker Health, And Colonial Control

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the labour unrest in the South Indian Railway, focusing on the significant strikes of 1928. The 1928 strike, which began as a response to rationalization measures and retrenchment plans, escalated into a full-blown labour movement, with workers demanding better wages, working conditions, and union recognition. Ultimately, it was crushed with government crackdowns and arrests, taking leading labour figures out of the picture and dumbing down the South Indian Railway Workers Federation. The aftermath of the strike saw the retrenchment of approximately 4,000 workers and the closure of the Nagapattinam workshop. The study delves into the causes and consequences of the 1928 strike, including the role of the government, the railway administration, and the labour leadership. This article explores the connection between the strike and the health of railway workers—including trackmen, workshop hands, locomotive crews, pointsmen, porters, and gang women—by analyzing the conditions before the strike and the subsequent immediate and medium-term impacts. By carefully examining original important records including official government documentation, union documents and also newspaper reports, this research uncovers the complicated relationship between labour and capital as well as the rise of the worker's movement into a really powerful force shaping India's fight for freedom.

1.Introduction: British Colonialism commenced in the Madras Presidency following negotiations led by Francis Day (1605–73), an administrator for the East India Company, with Damarla Venkatappa Nayak, a ruler of Kalahasti and Vandavasi under the suzerainty of the Vijayanagar Empire, which resulted in a land grant in 1639 from the Raja of Chandragiri to set up a factory in the village of Madrasapattinam, where the new Fort St. George was built. An administrative organization was created to manage the settlement, and Andrew Cogan, the Chief of Masulipatinam factory, was appointed as its first Agent. Gradually, due to the victory in the war against Tipu Sultan and with the Poligars during the South Indian Rebellion, the East India Company completely took control over Madras. In Madras Presidency, the British colonial authorities concentrated on creating a robust administrative framework, advancing infrastructure, including roads and railways, implementing innovative agricultural methods, fostering Western education, and dramatically transforming urban environments through systematic city planning, especially in Madras (now Chennai), where significant architectural influences merged local traditions with British styles, all while ensuring dominance through a tiered social hierarchy and a system for land revenue collection. Since their main goal was to extract wealth from the colony, certain initiatives ended up benefiting the local population of Madras Presidency. In this regard, the British Raj deserves recognition for the construction of railways in India. By the late 1920s, the M.S. & M. Railway—stretching across significant junctions and workshops in present-day Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra—employed a varied workforce under a hierarchical structure based on pay, skill, caste, and contract type. Health was not solely a medical issue; it was intertwined with wage levels, construction schedules, seasonal disease patterns, housing conditions, food costs, and management practices. Indian Railways operates a diverse system featuring multiple gauges and traction types, encompassing an extensive network of 135,207 kilometers of railway tracks and 7,325 stations. (India Railway Year Book, 2023-24, 2024).¹ India possesses the fourth largest railway network globally, following the United States, Russia, and China.

2. Objective of the study: The study aims to delve into the labour unrest movement that took place in the South Indian Railway during the year, 1928. It will focus on the underlying causes, pivotal events, and the consequences for both the railway workers and the colonial administration. This study will highlight the role of trade unions, the grievances of workers, and the responses from the government, all while situating these developments within the larger framework of labour struggles throughout British India. Through the

examination of historical documents and modern accounts, this study aims to improve the comprehension of early labour movements and their significant influence on industrial relations in colonial South India.

3. Railway Construction under the British Raj: In Indian History, the pride of the first rail line has always goes to the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (GIPR) train that was constructed from Bombay to Thane on 16th April 1853 but the use of rail transport in India can be traced back to decades before this train came into existence. India's first railway was the Red Hill Railroad which was built in Madras in 1836 (Satya, 2008).² Like many early railways, it was built for the goods carriage. In the South, the first line was formally initiated on July 1, 1856, by the Madras Railway Company. This line stretched sixty-three miles from Vyasarpadi Jeeva Nilayam (Veyasarpandy) to Walajah Road (Arcot).⁴ From its inception, Rail Line construction gradually extended to the major cities like Delhi, Madras and Bombay over period of fifty years. By 1900, over 24,000 miles of tracks had been laid. The railway engines evolved from Steam locomotive (1880) to Electric locomotive (1925) and it further changed to Diesel locomotive (1954). By the 1990's, Steam Locomotives were phased out and are currently operated only on mountain railways and on heritage trains. The British railways played a vital part in the industrial revolution, commuting and transportation of goods. It also aided in developing the Indian Economy by providing the British Government with a 5% return and investment. It transformed India's internal and international trade position by allowing raw and agricultural items to be transported quickly. For the railway construction, Indians were appointed as labourers. In that way, many peasants turned into railway labourers due to the commercialisation of crops by the colonial government. It employed the largest number of men, nearly eight hundred thousand. Four of the Nine principal railways of colonial India were state-owned. The Railways constituted one of the major colonial plunders of British Imperialism.

4. Post-war Impact on Indian Railways: After the end of the First World War, the post-war economic crisis did not fail to make itself in the Indian Railway industry (M, 1932).⁵ It wasn't until the beginning of World War I that railways began to really consider the general wellbeing of their low-wage employees. During the war, significant increases in wages and allowances were required, and even cheap grain shops were established to alleviate the consequences of rising prices and the rising cost of living. After World War I, the labour situation grew critical. Prices kept rising. There was widespread demand for permanent increases in wages and salaries, in addition to those granted during the First World War period. The impact of war had also made workers aware of their rights. For the first time, railway workers formed unions and began to bargain collectively for better terms (M, 1932).⁶ Before World War I, strikes were uncommon and largely limited to certain areas or to a small number of workers. Labour unions grew and multiplied in the years following World War I, becoming potent weapons for collective bargaining. In 1924, more than a dozen railway unions were linked with the All-India Railwaymen's Federation, collectively representing over 200,000 members (Hutton, 1933).⁷ Throughout this period, strikes became frequent, reflecting a widespread sense of distress and discontent among railway workers.

5. Strikes of Railway Labourers

The South Indian Railway witnessed a significant strike in 1928, with various factors contributing to these strikes had the subsequent effects on railway labour. Notably, each of these three periods had distinct causes, though all were shaped by the tensions between labour and capital. The Royal Commission on Indian Labour (RCIL) stated, "The great outbreak of strikes following the war had clear economic motivations; an increase in wage levels was overdue, and workers became aware of the hardships related to long hours and other issues." (Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931).⁸ By the end of 1922, conditions stabilized somewhat, with improvements in the situation and wages. Thus, the first phase of strikes during 1928 resulted from declining living standards and a growing awareness among industrial workers about the power of strikes. The time period between 1923 and 1927 was typically characterised by relative industrial tranquility. Nevertheless, this was also a period when various sources of discontent were lying dormant and represented a stage in the Indian working-class movement characterized by a gradual increase in awareness and unity among workers. It was at this significant phase in history that the global capitalist depression began to emerge. The Royal Commission on Indian Labour states that, "By the end of this period, there were indications of falling prices, and while industry continued to grow, profits steadily diminished and, in some instances, vanished altogether. Efforts to address the depression through enhanced methods and wage reductions had significantly contributed to the renewed surge of strikes in 1928." (Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931)⁹

5.1. Widening Strike Action: Appointed in 1926, the Railway Workshops Review Committee, led by Sir Vincent Ravern, was tasked with exploring the potential for rationalization in the railways. In its 1927 report, it recommended a reduction of around 75,000 workers and advocated for more efficient labour use through better operational methods in the Railway Workshops. Based on the report, the administrators of South Indian Railways, decided to shut down the Nagapattinam workshop and implement various technological upgrades at the Golden Rock workshop, Tiruchirappalli by the close of 1927. This decision resulted in certain staff members from Nagapattinam being left in limbo while others had to relocate to Golden Rock near Tiruchirappalli after completing a trade test to utilize the new equipment in the upgraded workshop. This situation created significant tension, ultimately leading to a major incident in 1928. The South Indian Railway Labour Union (SIRLU) Central Committee held a meeting on 10th January 1928 and presented several demands:

- A monthly wage increase of Rs.30 for all unskilled labourers
- Enforcement of the government's policy that pay scales should not discriminate based on caste or color
- Immediate placement of material orders by Permanent Way Engineers within the workshops. The Union highlighted that the engineers' inaction had led to a lack of work for the labourers and raised concerns regarding potential workforce reductions, calling for immediate intervention
- An increase of at least 25 percent in the salaries of employees relocated to Golden Rock, considering that the cost of living in Tiruchirappalli is 45-50 percent higher than in Nagapattinam.(Ananth, 1988)¹⁰

Additionally, they demanded for the labour representation on the Roger Committee, which was formed to address labour rationalization in the workshops, and the meeting resolved to hold a labour conference for South Indian Railway on 21st and 22nd January, 1928, in Nagapattinam to discuss the rationalization and retrenchment proposals from the S.I.R. Company. As discontent brewed within South Indian Railway, the broader political atmosphere was highly charged with proposals to boycott the Simon Commission.

The situation in the areas impacted by the Southern Indian Railways (S.I.R.), located in Tiruchirappalli, can be described as follows: "Tensions seem to be escalating once more in Tiruchirappalli, and the District Magistrate anticipates a strike in February unless the Government of India Committee takes action against job cuts... Police measures have been implemented to prepare for possible unrest. Subsequently, the Government of India opted to move forward with the retrenchment plans, explaining its announcement regarding railway job reductions as follows: "By mid-1925, the majority of the overdue repairs and maintenance from wartime had been completed, prompting the government to determine that the workforce in the workshops was excessively large and needed to be reduced." As a result, following the strike by Bengal Nagpur Railway (BNR) workers at Kharagpur and the actions of East Indian Railway (EIR) workers at the Lilooah workshop (which were largely reactions to retrenchments and the firing of Trade Union leaders), the staff of South Indian Railways at the Podanur and Nagapattinam workshops refused to participate in mandatory trade tests in June 1928 and instead initiated a sit-in protest at the Nagapattinam Workshop.

The request made by the South Indian Railways Labour Union (SIRLU) leadership to the agent to delay the retrenchment plans was turned down, with the agent stating that the job cuts stemmed from a Government inquiry and that the carriage repair workshop would be impacted first (South Indian Railway Strike, 1928).¹¹ A sequence of gatherings arranged by the Labour Union emphasized that if the carriage repair shop shuts down, the employees in the workshops should either go on strike or engage in a satyagraha on the premises. Following these events, workshop workers at facilities in Nagapattinam, Golden Rock, Tiruchirappalli, and Podanur began a sit-in starting June 29, 1928, and a hartal was staged in Nagapattinam town the next day, presenting the following demands to the South Indian Railway management:

- A general wage increase of 25%
- A minimum wage of Rs. 30 per month for gangmen
- The retraction of circular No. 202 (the circular concerning staff retrenchment)

On July 6, 1928, the labour union of the South Indian Railway announced a general Strike at multiple locations, effective from July 14, 1928. (Ananth, 1988)¹²

5.2. SOUTH INDIAN RAILWAY STRIKE, 1928: The strike began on July 20, 1928, with nearly all skilled workers and night duty staff abandoning their posts, leading to a complete halt of operations at the central stations. Before the strike took place, the leadership of the South Indian Railway Labour Union made unsuccessful attempts to negotiate arbitration with a government agent acting as a third party. Sathyamurti, a member of the Congress in the Madras Legislative Council, stated: "The government was passive and

unconcerned during the period leading to the strike and during the negotiations, which ultimately failed and resulted in the strike." Moreover, the Colonial Government backed the South Indian Railway Company, aiding in the dismissal of the workers. This accusation had merit; in fact, during the strike, the State Police force was mobilized, and its powers were enhanced. (Ananth, 1988)¹³

Although the government held thirteen-fourteenths of the capital in South Indian Railway (SIR), it distanced itself from any accountability and instead engaged in repressive actions. In this context, it is pertinent to briefly describe the nature of the repression that occurred during the strike. "To effectively control the collapse of the strike, a strategy for police patrols in trolleys along the main lines was devised and executed. This required the deployment of approximately 1,000 additional police officers sourced by the Inspector General from various districts. Additionally, District Magistrates were instructed to remain alert for any inflammatory speeches or other incitements to violence and to quickly apply the relevant sections of either code." The Indian Penal Code (IPC) or the Criminal Penal Code (CPC) was enforced wherever necessary. Furthermore, they were directed to create special provisions for the swift trial of all cases arising from the strike.

The District Magistrate of Tanjore, who was known for his prompt handling of such cases, reported that the sight of forty-three individuals being taken to prison with sentences of rigorous imprisonment and fines within mere days of their arrests had a considerable effect. Notices were served to forty individuals, restricting them from attending public gatherings in Egmore, and within three days of the strike's commencement, there were 62 arrests. (Trivedi, 2009).¹⁴

The two Communist leaders who were at the forefront of the strike, Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukundalal Sarkar, were arrested on July 23, 1928, and by July 27, 1928, almost the entire strike committee, except for two members, had been detained. Notable labour leaders from various political backgrounds, including Conservatives such as N.M. Joshi, V. V. Giri, and Ernest Kirk, along with Communists like Singaravelu Chettiar and Mukundalal Sarkar, were barred from entering the Nagapattinam District for two months. (Reddy, 1980).¹⁵ In addition, Singaravelu Chettiar, Mukundalal Sarkar, and D. Krishnaswami Pillai, the President of the Strike Committee, faced charges in the Railway Conspiracy case and were each sentenced to one year of rigorous imprisonment. Perumal, an activist, received a life sentence and was subsequently exiled to the Andaman Islands. It is crucial to recognize that the repression experienced during the strike was only a precursor to the more severe suppression that followed during the boycott of the Simon Commission and the Civil Disobedience Movement. For the working class, the Trades Disputes Act of 1929 and the Meerut Conspiracy Trials would symbolize the aftermath of the repression in 1928. It is enough to say that the South Indian Railways strike of 1928, which followed earlier strikes in BNR and EIR, set the stage for the trajectory of the Indian working-class movement for approximately the next two decades.

6. Health Conditions Prior to the Strike (c. 1925–1928)

6.1 Disease Ecology and Everyday Hazards

- ❖ Communicable diseases: Camps, gang lines, and crowded marketplaces near stations frequently experienced outbreaks of malaria, cholera, smallpox, plague, hookworm (ankylostomiasis), and pulmonary tuberculosis. The seasonal spikes in malaria coincided with monsoon rains and water accumulation around cuttings, culverts, and borrow pits.
- ❖ Occupational risks: Workers on the tracks endured injuries from crush incidents and lacerations, as well as risks of sunstroke and snakebites; those in workshops were susceptible to injuries from metal filings, harmful fumes, heat stress, and noise-induced hearing loss. Locomotive crews faced risks of burns, cinders, and long-term respiratory issues.
- ❖ Diet and costs: Low pay, irregular overtime, and surging prices for basic goods like grain and kerosene limited calorie consumption; to cope, there was an increase in tea and bidi consumption.
- ❖ Gendered roles in labor: Women working as ballast carriers or in cleaning roles faced a dual burden—engaging in strenuous physical labor while also managing unpaid domestic duties, which heightened the likelihood of anemia and poor maternal health.¹⁶

6.2 Living Conditions, Water Supply, and Hygiene

- Lineside 'lines' and chawls: Typical accommodations were overcrowded, with unplastered walls, insufficient ventilation, communal latrines, and inconsistent water availability. Drainage systems often stagnated around gang quarters and sleeper depots.
- Temporary building sites: Residents lived in makeshift huts, with varying levels of health services at camp dispensaries, and a transfer of sanitation responsibilities from the company to minor contractors.¹⁷

6.3 Medical Facilities and Accessibility

- Healthcare facilities: The company provided medical services at major junctions, yet uneven coverage meant that many workers depended on distant healthcare options or had to pay private practitioners.
- Eligibility criteria and access barriers: Access to medical care was often contingent on employment type (permanent or casual/contract), job rank, and racial distinctions; European and Anglo-Indian employees typically received superior services.¹⁸
- Data management: Records of accidents and illness often underrepresented minor injuries and ailments that were treated unofficially or by private providers, obscuring the actual rates of morbidity.

7. The 1928–1929 Strike as a Health Crisis

7.1 Health-Related Grievances

While the strike was framed around wage concerns, allowances for high costs, service conditions, and union recognition, workers repeatedly tied their issues to health:

- Requests included safer tools, protective equipment (gloves, goggles), and reduced hours;
- Demands for improved clean water sources in gang lines, enhanced drainage, and regular distribution of quinine;
- Calls for equitable medical care for casual and contract workers, along with maternity services for women.

7.2 Strain during the Strike

- ❖ Income loss and nutrition: The halt in work and consequent wage loss led to decreased intake of protein and fats; where relief kitchens were organized, they helped alleviate the worst impacts for families.
- ❖ Law enforcement and violence: Arrests, police baton charges, and evictions resulted in immediate injuries; the threat of job loss discouraged attendance at hospitals.
- ❖ Mobility, disease transmission, and congestion: Large gatherings and picketing heightened the risk of respiratory illnesses; overcrowding in homes of supporters increased vulnerability to illness.

7.3 Mutual Support and Solidarity

- Assistance networks: Unions, caste groups, and local businesspeople occasionally managed food distribution and the supply of basic medicines (quinine, castor oil, bandages).
- Local media: Newspapers in Tamil, Kannada, and Marathi highlighted cases of injuries, fatalities on the job, and unsanitary living conditions, turning personal grievances into broader public claims.¹⁹

8. After the Strike: Persisting Trends, Concessions, and Regulation (c. 1929–1933)

8.1 Changes in Health Infrastructure

- Selective growth: The railway network either expanded or formalized health facilities at key junctions and improved some sick lines and isolation areas, frequently citing “lessons learned” from unrest and disease outbreaks.
- Maternal and child health initiatives: Establishment or enhancement of midwifery programs, infant monitoring services, and limited milk provisions for some railway colonies, especially for families of permanent staff.
- Sanitation initiatives: A more organized approach to latrine contracts, repairs for drainage systems, and anti-larval spraying measures near railway yards; periodic distribution of quinine and smallpox vaccinations was coordinated with municipal authorities.²⁰

8.2 The Emergence of Medical Oversight

- ❖ Attendance management: Stricter requirements for sick leave documentation and increased scrutiny for malingering; medical boards became involved in managing absenteeism—connecting health to productivity standards.
- ❖ Barriers to access: Contract and casual workers continued to encounter subjective criteria for entry to company medical facilities; requirements for proof of employment and supervisor endorsements became more stringent.
- ❖ Incident reporting: Improved documentation enhanced reported figures while overlooking informal injuries that went unrecorded.

8.3 Labour market sorting and health disparities

- ❖ Beneficiaries: Skilled craftsmen and permanent way personnel with long tenure and established union involvement experienced more significant improvements in access and housing enhancements.
- ❖ Left out: Contract workers, women, and seasonal laborers continued to face unsafe loads, overcrowded living conditions, and user fees at municipal health facilities; maternity care for female workers fell behind.
- ❖ Workshop vs. gang disparities: Workshops benefited from fixed-location clinics and welfare committees, while dispersed gang lines relied on remote healthcare and occasional mobile medical teams.²¹

9. CONSEQUENCE OF THE STRIKE, 1928: In light of these circumstances, the Secretary of the Labour Union and its treasurer, Mr. Krishnamachari and Mr. Pillai, who were the last remaining members of the strike committee not incarcerated, issued the following statement on July 30, 1928: "We have demonstrated our capacity to organize and engage in collective action... (however) we recognize that the public has suffered as a result of this conflict between capital and labour, and we regret having to resort to a strike against our better judgment... With confidence in our cause, we are dedicated to continuing our struggle through nonviolent means, and in an effort to reduce public disruption, we have decided to conclude the strike starting at 6 A.M. on the 30th." (South Indian Railway Strike, 1928)²²

By the end of November, the workshop in Nagapattinam was closed, leading to a considerable number of workers being dismissed. In July 1928, the South Indian Railway administration withdrew its recognition of the South Indian Railway Labour Union (SIRLU), which resulted in the closure of the Labour Union's office in Nagapattinam. In that same year alone, roughly 4,000 workers were laid off from SIR. The process of revival was slow, and it wasn't until 1937 that the South Indian Railway Labour Union (SIRLU) was officially registered under the Trade Union Act and affiliated with the All-India Railwaymen's Federation.

It is critical to recognize that the workers' strike at SIR was not an isolated event but rather marked the end of the first phase of the labour movement within the Railways and the beginning of a second, more significant phase, which reached its peak in 1946, just prior to independence.

The situation after the strike reflects a typical colonial welfare approach: gradual enhancements depicted as kindness, provided where they also bolstered labor discipline and productivity. New healthcare facilities and sanitation initiatives alleviated some health issues and injuries but were considered privileges dependent on adherence to employment conditions. Conversely, the contract-dominant periphery—such as ballast carriers, temporary laborers, and numerous women—remained structurally vulnerable.²³

Crucially, these actions also established new types of oversight. Sick leave verification, medical boards, and attendance check injected clinical governance into shop-floor oversight. Consequently, the strike led to a transformation in health management: from a disregarded expense to a controlled factor. However, this management approach was inconsistent across locations (junction vs. line-side), skills (artisan vs. coolie), and gender.²⁴

The conclusion of this phase of the strike movement also coincided with the implementation of the Trades Disputes Act in 1929 and the Meerut Conspiracy Trial, which effectively led to a discernible reduction in the intensity of labour protests. The subsequent wave of struggles did not affect the railway sector to the same degree as it had in 1928, but by 1945-46, tensions began to escalate once more, suggesting an impending confrontation, as indicated by the sentiments of the Director of the Intelligence Bureau concerning the increasingly dire labour situation, with no signs of improvement anticipated in the near future, alongside an ongoing decline in law and order heavily influenced by Communist and Congress Left-wing factions.

6. Conclusion: To conclude, the History of railway construction during the British Raj is not merely a tale of infrastructure development, but a narrative woven with the struggles and aspirations of countless Indian labourers. The introduction of railways transformed the economic landscape, facilitating trade and contributing to British profits while simultaneously revealing the stark exploitation faced by workers.²⁵ Key strikes in 1928 illuminated the growing consciousness among railway labourers, who began to harness their collective power in the fight against oppression and for fair wages. These events marked a pivotal moment in the Indian labour movement, establishing a foundation for future activism and unionization. Despite the repressive measures from colonial authorities, the resilience of the labour force signified a critical turning point towards greater rights and representation. The M.S. & M. strike sparked health reforms within a paternalist paradigm that selectively embraced certain groups of workers while leaving others in precarious situations. If the ill health

prior to the strike stemmed from negligence and systemic poverty, the post-strike ill health increasingly became a matter of eligibility and compliance.²⁶ For a comprehensive analysis, future research should include disaggregated data on morbidity and accidents, cost trends for essential goods, and detailed studies of specific junction towns and gang lines in Tamil-speaking regions to illustrate how health risks and advantages were reallocated.²⁷ The second phase of the railway workers' strike commenced in 1946, following the conclusion of World War II. Similar to the situation in 1928, the economic conditions for workers in 1946 deteriorated due to insufficient wages and rising living costs.²⁸ This resulted in strikes among railway workers in 1946. As the Study reflects on this complex History, it becomes clear that the railway labourers' struggle was not just a fight for better conditions but a significant chapter in India's broader quest for justice and independence.²⁹ Their legacy continues to resonate today, reminds the importance of solidarity and resilience in advocating the workers' rights across all sectors.

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