

TRIBUTE TO A TRUE TRADE UNION LEADER - COM. UMRAOMAL PUROHIT

Com. Umraomal Purohit, doyen of the Indian Trade Union movement, was an undisputed leader of the working class and family of 1.4 million railwaymen for more than six decades. Com. Umraomal Purohit was one of the front rank leaders of Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and served these organizations in various capacities during his lifetime.

Com. Umraomal Purohit was born on 1st March 1928, at Jodhpur, presently in the State of Rajasthan to Smt. Bholkidevi and Shri Manmal. Com. Purohit joined the Jodhpur State Railway in 1946 at the age of 18 and before that he was working as a Clerk in Criminal Court for a short duration. His desire to serve the working class and downtrodden got involved him in a strike within 15 days of his service and was dismissed and later on reinstated. He was again dismissed in 1947 for the cause of protecting the interest of workers and reinstated in 1949. After independence, all the State Railways were merged with Indian Railways and different zones were formed. After the formation of Western Railway in the year 1951, Com. Purohit got associated with Western Railway Employees' Union (WREU) and was elected as Branch Secretary at the age of 23. He was elected as Vice-President of WREU in the year 1953. Com. Purohit was elected as General Secretary of WREU in the year 1958. He served WREU as its General Secretary up-to the year 2000 and since then he was its President. He was taken on deputation with WREU in 1957 and was the first full-timer on deputation with the trade union on Indian Railways. He continued on deputation from 1957 to 1986 till his retirement.

Com. Purohit contributed immensely in organizing WREU from grass-root level, building-up a dedicated cadre of youth and women, organizing Branches and Divisional set up and raising the status of WREU as one of the strongest affiliates of AIRF and HMS. Being a compassionate human being, he had a soft corner for lowest categories of railwaymen such as Gangmen/Trackmen and it was because him that this category got innumerable benefit by way of service conditions, promotional prospectus and remuneration. He was virulent opponent of the provisions of Rule 14(ii) of Railway Servants (Disciplinary & Appeal) Rules by virtue of Article 311(2)(G) of the Constitution of India, which empowers the Disciplinary Authority to arbitrarily remove or dismiss a railway employees from service. He fought many such cases and was successful in reinstating all the employees dismissed under Rule 14(ii) and the prominent one are those of 48 Loco Running Staff involved in LRSA illegal strike and all of them were reinstated with backwages and continuity of service by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India. Similarly, he got reinstated 3 Gangmen of Sawai Madhopur and 5 employees of Dahod Workshop dismissed under Rule 14(ii) through agitation and skillful negotiation with the administration. WREU under his leadership, got all the railway employees shunted out during the 1974 strike, reinstated with full back wages by challenging the action of the administration in court of law, including the apex court. His skillful negotiation with the Railway administration on railwaymen's demands and staff grievances was praised by one and all, which not only improved membership and finances of the organization but also catapulted him to the highest post of the trade union in national and international levels, i.e. as Secretary (Staff Side) of Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM), General Secretary of Hind Mazdoor Sabha, President of All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) and International Transport Workers' Federation. His leadership took WREU to a new height and WREU today is one of the strongest affiliates of AIRF and HMS of which WREU was the founder member.

Com. Purohit was elected as an Asst. General Secretary of AIRF in the year 1962 and as its Working President in 1976. In 1980, in the Bikaner Convention of AIRF, Com. Purohit was elected as the President of AIRF (membership of more than 1 million) in which post he continued till his last breath. He played a very prominent role for success of the 1960 strike of Central Govt. Employees in which 5 comrades of Dahod namely Ranjit, Sakharam, Khaderan, Sitaram and Kripashankar became martyrs facing bullet of Gujarat Police. WREU constructed a Memorial at Dahod in their memory and observes 12th July as Martyrs Day. He also led the historical 1974 strike of Railwaymen.

Com. Purohit, a strong follower of Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayanji, greatly contributed in building-up and developing Railwaymen's Federation. Railwaymen are benefited in improving their status, working conditions and emoluments due to his skilful negotiations and organizing militant agitations including strikes. He was

instrumental in introduction of Transfer Allowance, Education Allowance, National Holiday Allowance for Open Line staff, Night Duty Allowance, Group Insurance, constitution of Railway Labour Tribunal, Re-classification of Artisan staff, Cadre Restructuring, etc. He will be remembered as architect of Productivity Linked Bonus (PLB). The Railwaymen will ever remember his contributions in achieving Retired Railway Employees Liberalized Health Scheme (RELHS), Introduction of Casual Leave to Workshop employees, 12 National Holidays to 1.3 million Open Line staff, not counting value of Privilege Passes for the purpose of income tax etc. Due to his consistent efforts, Safety Related Retirement Scheme (SRRS) was introduced and further modified and renamed as Liberalized Active Retirement Scheme for Guaranteed Employment to Safety Staff (LARSGESS), which benefitted a large number of employees working in safety categories for getting employment to their wards. Due to the strict opposition by AIRF under his stewardship, Indian Railways were saved from the clutches of privatization and scrapping of the retrograde recommendations of the Running Allowance Committee-2002 from reducing the pay element of the running staff drastically. He was very instrumental in appointment of thousands of Act Apprentices as Substitute Group 'D' employees in Railways.

Since 1977, Com. Purohit was representing 4.5 million Central Government employees in the country as the Secretary of Joint Consultative Machinery (JCM) National Council till his last. Immediately after becoming the Secretary (Staff Side) JCM, he could achieve restoration of five installment of Dearness Allowance to Central Government employees, which was curtailed by 0.5% during Emergency period. His tireless efforts, matured leadership combined with skilful negotiations had resulted into several achievements for millions of Central Government employees in the country. At the time of implementation of the 4th Central Pay Commission (CPC), he succeeded in getting minimum benefit of Rs.100 in pay fixation. After 45 hours hard negotiation with nine Group of Ministers under the Chairmanship of Shri Indrajit Gupta, the then Home Minister and Shri Madhu Dandavate, the then Vice Chairman of the Planning Commission, as a Convener, many retrograde recommendations of the 5th CPC were rejected, Assured Career Progression Scheme was introduced for the first time, Leave Encashment during retirement was increased from 240 to 300 and the pay fixation benefit was raised from 20% to 40%, which was the highest in case of Central Government employees. He also succeeded in improving the recommendations of the 6th CPC such as fitment formula (increased from 1.74% to 1.86%); rate of increment (increased from 2.5% to 3%); grant of Transport Allowance without surrendering of Residential Card Passes; Leave Encashment while in service; Modified Assured Career Progression Scheme; placement of Group 'D' employees in GP Rs.1800 (by in-house training irrespective of their educational qualifications) and all the Group 'D' employees got consequential benefits such as payment of arrears, seniority and retirement benefits with effect from 1.1.2006. He was instrumental in getting the service conditions and remuneration of the Railway employees and other Central Government employees improved considerably by effectively representing their cases before the successive Central Pay Commissions starting from 3rd Central Pay Commission, various Committees/Tribunals, various Arbitral Fora and also in Joint Consultative Machinery etc. On his insistence, a separate delegation of women employees met 6th CPC members and was successful in getting various women friendly recommendations in the 6th CPC such as Child Care Leave, which was further improved later by DoP&T and Railway Board, increase of maternity leave to 180 days, etc. Due to constant persuasion of Com. Umraomalji, two additional seats were allocated exclusively for women employees in Railway Board and Zonal level Negotiation Fora. He was a member of SCOVA and representing pensioners cause and his achievements in getting Dearness Relief on pension and family pension and Fixed Medical Allowance, extension of family pension to dependent parents, handicapped wards, unmarried, widow/divorced daughters will always be remembered.

In the year 1985, Com. Purohit was elected as the General Secretary of Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). He played a very important role in building and strengthening HMS. During his tenure, HMS grew from strength to strength. He relinquished the post of HMS General Secretary in March 2012. However in his honour, HMS bestowed him the post of Chief Advisor. He played a vital role in increasing the membership of HMS by bringing into its fold millions of workers from both organized and unorganized sectors. He was a light house who guided trade union movement through the troubled times, strengthened and ensured a place for HMS in the annals of Indian trade union movement and economic history. He was a man who believed in negotiating and dialogue to ensure peaceful resolution of disputes while never compromising in struggles against injustice. He strived throughout his life to improve the lives of workers by making a difference at micro and macro-policy levels and contributed constructively to meet development challenges facing our country. *'Progress and not necessarily perfection'* was his guiding motto. All his efforts and decisions were geared towards achieving constant progress

towards social justice for all workers. In these efforts he also strove relentlessly to promote trade union unity in the country. He was a firm believer in united voice and united action by trade unions in India - for which he made many efforts. His contribution in bringing all Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUOs) and Industrial Federations on one common platform resulting in strengthening the trade union movement in the country was appreciated and praised profusely by trade union leaders in India.

He was closely associated with Jai Prakash Narayan, V.V. Giri, Guruswami, Maniben Kara, Achyut Rao Patwardhan, Sane Guruji, Peter Alwaris, Jagdish Ajmera, V. B. Karnik, Madhu Dandavate, Surendra Mohan, Justice Sachhar, Justice Tarkunde, A.C. Sen, Dr. G.G. Parikh, Dr. Shanti Patel, Priya Gupta, S.R. Kulkarni, Manohar Kotwal, Tulsi Boda, T.C. Jain, Sanat Mehta, K.R. Prabhu Desai, K.A. Khan, F.M. Pinto, Vasant Khanolkar, S.M. Joshi, Bagaramji Tulpule, D.D. Vashisth, Jyoti Basu, Mrinaltai Gore, George Fernandes, J. P. Chaubey, G.B. Sukhi, C.S. Menon and many others. He organized a grand meeting at Abu Road in respect of Shri V.V. Giri ji, who resigned from the post of Labour Minister in protest against Government of India's reluctance to implement Bank Employees' Award. For the last four decades, J.R. Bhosale, present General Secretary, WREU was very closely associated with him. During his activities, he came into contact with many Ministers and high ranking government officials.

Com. Purohit was very actively associated with the International trade union movement. He was a member of Executive Board of the erstwhile ICFTU now International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC), which fights for democratic rights of workers, developing collective leadership for restoration of human dignity, freedom and peace. He was a great champion of ILO values and guiding force behind the Indian trade union's current campaign for ratification of ILO Conventions 87 and 98.

For more than three decades, Com. Purohit was also associated with International Transport Workers' Federation, (ITF), the biggest transport workers organization in the world consisting of Railways, Road, Port & Docks, Seafarers, Civil Aviation, Tourism and Fisheries, having more than five million membership from 151 countries. He worked in different capacities including as member of its Executive Board, Management Committee and Chairperson of Railways and various Committees. He was Coordinator of ITF affiliates in India for many years. He was unanimously elected as the President of ITF in its Congress held at New Delhi on 5th November 1998 which has further enhanced the prestige of the entire working class of the country especially railwaymen, as he was an ex-railway employee. He was the first Asian and Non-European President of the ITF and he continued in that post for two consecutive terms. He represented workers in International Labour Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund for labour cause particularly opposing privatization all over the world. Due to his strenuous efforts, ITF started its regional office in New Delhi which was resulted in expansion of educational and other activities in the entire Asia Pacific region. While relinquishing the post of ITF President-ship in Durban Congress in the year 2006, ITF honoured him by presenting its Golden Badge for his outstanding contribution.

In his passing away, Indian trade union movement in general and Railway unions and HMS in particular, has lost a stalwart, a visionary, and an astute trade union leader. He was a guide, a mentor and a father figure for many trade union leaders. With his demise, an era has come to an end in the Indian trade union movement. Com. Umraomal Purohitji will always be remembered as a great humanist, democrat and committed trade union leader who always tried to bring everybody together in the common goal of strengthening trade union movement so as to give effective voice, representation and participation of workers in the decision making processes. He has devoted his entire life to protect and promote the interest of the downtrodden and working class. He has served the working class of India whole-heartedly and selflessly till his last breath. His untiring and exemplary services to the cause of working class in India will always be an inspiration and guide to all of us in the trade union movement. Today, trade union movement in India is passing through a testing time and undoubtedly we all will miss him in our endeavours. A real tribute to Com. Umraomal Purohitji would be to carry forward his great legacy of trade union work with the same passion, commitment and zeal as he did throughout his life to safeguard the interest of workers and downtrodden.

J.R. Bhosale,
General Secretary, WREU