

India: As Centre Unveils 100-Day Action Plan for Railways, Unions Allege Attempt to Privatisise

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There have been no major pan-India protests by railway employees since 1974, but the 100 day action plan could trigger mass unrest.

New Delhi: Less than a month after coming back to power with an absolute majority, the Narendra Modi government has approved a '100 Days Action Plan' of the Ministry of Railways. Approved by railway minister Piyush Goyal, the items in the action plan are to be implemented by August 31.

In addition to providing wi-fi at all railway stations, installing advanced signaling systems and eliminating all manned level crossings on the golden quadrilateral and diagonals, the action plan also aims to restructure the railways, corporatise railway production units, 'redevelop' 50 railway stations and urge passengers to give up subsidy on train tickets.

The Debroy committee had suggested corporatisation of the Indian railways and encouraging private sector participation in [its 2015 report](#). The action plan can be seen as a continuation of implementing the recommendation of the committee.

Railway unions across the country have expressed strong opposition to this action plan, calling it the first step in the complete privatisation of Indian Railways. The plan to corporatise production units has hit a raw nerve, as employees see this as a direct threat to their status as Central government employees.

The action plan proposes to conduct a detailed study in 100 days to corporatise these seven Production Units (PUs) - Chittaranjan Locomotive Works (CLW-West Bengal), Integral Coach Factory (ICF - Chennai), Diesel Locomotive Works (DLW-Banaras), Rail Coach Factory (RCF - Kapurthala), Modern Coach factory (MCF-Rae Bareli), Diesel Loco Modernization Works (DMW - Patiala) and Rail Wheel Factory (RWF - Bengaluru).

PUs and associated workshops are supposed to be clubbed into a new entity called "Indian Railways Rolling Stock Company" under the Ministry of Railways. Starting with the newly set up MCF-Rae Bareli, all PUs are to be taken over by the new entity in a phased manner. Since all of these units are profit making, trade union leaders argue that there's no need to change their structure and operations.

"It's not just the Modi government, we have opposed such moves by all parties. The UPA under Manmohan Singh was trying to do the same thing. In 2005, then railway minister Lalu Prasad Yadav moved a proposal in the parliament to turn RCF-Kapurthala into a Public Sector Undertaking (PSU). We protested against that as well," Sarvjeet Singh, general secretary of Kapurthala RCF Employee's Union, told *The Wire*. "We are Central government employees covered under the Pay Commission, this status will be done away with once our unit is corporatised," he added.

On being asked about the possible motive behind the decision, he says that the government might first convert this into a company, then show it as loss making and eventually sell it off to private parties. Citing the example of the ailing Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), he added there's no proof that corporatisation leads to better profits or more efficiency.

"The ultimate goal of this action plan is privatisation; it has just been camouflaged as corporatisation," Tapan Sen, general secretary, Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), tells *The Wire*. He says the role of production units is to supply rolling stock to the railways and maintain a network throughout the country. "They can't sell their products in the market and only supply coaches, locomotive, engines, wagon and other rolling stock to the Indian Railways," he adds, arguing that it doesn't make sense to set up a separate company under the Companies Act unless the end goal is either closure or complete privatisation.

Most unions express opposition

Most of the Railway unions have come out with statements against the move and Sen claims that protests have already started in Chittaranjan and Rae Bareilly. If not handled with sensitivity, it has the potential to snowball into a large-scale agitation. "The government has started taking us lightly because we haven't gone on an [all India strike since 1974](#), we won't hesitate from showing our collective power if we are pushed in this manner," Manoj Pandey, national president of Indian Railway Employee's Federation, told *The Wire*.

The All India Railwaymen's Federation has also warned the government of 'serious unrest' over the action plan. "It is worth mentioning here that serious unrest is brewing among the employees working in production units of the Indian Railways, against the 100-day action plan of the Ministry of Railways," said general secretary Shiv Gopal Mishra [in a letter to the Railway Board chairman V.K. Yadav](#). "...it may result in a serious threat to the industrial harmony prevailing for nearly four decades over the Railway System," the letter adds.

On the 'redevelopment' of 50 stations, activists call it an unjust move against the poor and destitute. "Everyone knows that railway stations are the houses for many poor in our country. Hereafter, none without ticket can even enter the stations (as is the case in airports), let alone use station toilets, or platform roofs. The homeless and destitute will lose even this tenuous home," says a statement by the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU).

Referring to PM [Narendra Modi's 2014 speech at DLW Banaras](#), Amarjeet Kaur, general secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), says the PM has taken a U-turn. In the speech, the PM can be heard reassuring his audience that there were rumours of privatisation of railways but they were all lies as he won't ever let it happen. Ironically, DLW Banaras is one of the seven production units being considered for corporatisation. "All of these units have the latest machinery and large pieces of land, these steps have been taken to privatise railways bit by bit. This is condemnable," Kaur told *The Wire*.

Questioning the government's priority, Singh says, "There's no 100-day action plan against hunger, for education or public health. Why the rush to privatise railways? Private manufacturers are being privileged while there's a deliberate strategy to make us a 'sick' unit. If they negotiate directly with railway employees, we can give any desired results. We are all skilled and educated workers unlike contract employees who are being employed for most of the new work now."

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