

TSRTC Strike - The story so far

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Vaishali (Host)- Since Oct 5, Telangana State Road Transport Corporation workers have been striking for 26 demands of theirs to be heard. Telangana government led by Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao came down heavily on the employees, firing 48,000 employees who participated in it. The primary demand of the employees is that they want TSRTC to be merged with the state government and their salaries be paid on time. They also want the buses rechecked and allowances fairly given among other things.

Today is the 14th day since the strike began and this continue with other employee union and political parties extending their solidarity to the strike and calling for a statewide bus strike overnight. I am Vaishali, a reporter of Suno India, in this episode of suno India show me try and understand what led to the situation. The president of the TSRTC employee Union, S. Babu tells about their major demands.

S. Babu- Out of 26 demands from the JSE, 20 demands within the purview of the management, only six demands related to government of Telangana. The government of Telangana has to clear these six demands where they are in position, but they are not coming forward. 6 demands are: Merger of KSRTC into government and providing 1% of budget provision in the government annual budget and exemptions like TSRTC from all types of taxes.

These are the demands from the government and making recruitment since 5 years we are not having any recruitment. There are 7000 vacancies in TSRTC, if we were made to clear that vacancies unemployment will be cleared. We are requesting the government to bear the losses, and also the losses we are getting on the diesel rate of fluctuation of diesel rate, to bear the losses on par with Tamilnadu and Karnataka government. To make tax exemption for 5 years, to the TSRTC we are making we are paying 1 crore taxes to the government. So you exempt them in total it is 1000 crores. If you exempt 1000 crores automatically it will be in profit.

Host- So during the strike how many buses were operating under TSRTC?

S. Babu- At present they are operating I think 10 or 15%. Their own workmen temporary workmen, most of the buses are in the depots only. Because no regular employee is there only contractual or temporary employees are operating the buses and the buses also getting accidents. It is, it is getting regularly 12 crore rupees per day but now I think we are only getting 1 crore from the buses which are operated by the management.

Host- Supposing the government continue their silence what what will your next action plan B?

S. Babu- I don't want to break any buses or tyre depletion we don't want to do, we do not want any travelling inconvenience to the public or the passenger. Just we are sitting at the depots to stop the buses. And we are requesting the drivers and conductors who are operating, to not operate the buses we are requesting them. Don't come to operate the buses because the buses are over aged buses. Because it is already completed 10 lakh kilometres. we are operating the buses 10 lacs kilometres, after completion of 10 lakh kilometre the buses will be scrapped. The buses cannot be used for passenger transportation. Any time accidents will occur with that buses. We are making all efforts for the sake of passengers, for the facility of the passengers, for the purchase of new buses but the government is not making any efforts on their side to purchase new buses and to give more comfort to the passengers.

Host- Thank you Mr Babu.

Ratna who had also worked with TSRTC Hyderabad, also joins us to share their views.

Host- So firstly we have heard that there is a sudden push for privatisation of public transport. Do you think there is some truth to this fear?

Ratnam- There is a list of 26 demands, there are issues ranging from the merger of the cooperation with the government, that is for the safety of their jobs and something very simple I'd say more child care leaves for the women. So we are asking them, those to be something on par with government employees. And with regards to the privatization issue itself TSRTC right now has 21% hired buses. Hired buses are where TSRTC pays the private operator certain rupees per kilometre, agreed throughout tender process and the driver is given to the buses owned by the private guy and the fair is collected by TSRTC. So in a lot of cases this is look act as a private participation and not more of a complete privatisation. But what is more concerning right now during this strike is the 20% complete privatisation. So one of the press releases of the Telangana chief ministers has put out it is 30% will be hired buses, 20% will be private and 50% their own fleet. always concerned with the private buses has been that they will operate on the profit roads and TSRTC will be left with the route that make only losses and that is how for a very long time the urban operation has been cross subsidized by the city buses that actually make a profit. In fact there are a lot of intercity routes and some city bus routes actually which make profit but just taking a step back here, I want to say that we should not look at public transport from the perspective of a profit or loss, concerned with the 20% privatization is TSRTC will be left with the routes that are not profitable and all of the profit will be taken by them. And the financial condition may get even more worse. Given the way it is financed now it is important for the TSRTC to retain all of the routes in the States as they are now so that they can come out of this financial mess in a much better way.

Host- Why does the TSRTC asked for merging it with the state government?

Ratnam- This demand has been in place since 2013. In fact in 2013, the Union has given this presentation to the government and then in the united Andhra Pradesh the government had formed a committee to examine their demands. and they were supposed to make this

committee the committee was supposed to give the report in hundred days. Unfortunately this was not reported will back at that time also because of the statehood agitation and all. It's sort of went under the carpet in Andhra Pradesh it was included in one of the election promises of the YSR city government and they actually implemented it. I think the reason Unions are asking for it and I worried about it is because for quite some time now they have not been receiving their salaries on time. Every month they are receiving their salaries on 5th or 6th for sometime 7th. And when you are getting only 15-20 thousand a month, that is quite a delay. And a lot of people are there rents are due there, school college fees are due. So that is a cause of concern. Another reason why they don't feel secure about their jobs is because of the perpetual losses. And for quite some time now government has been eating into their CCS. CCS is a Credit Croft Society where employees can take small loans. The corporation has been eating into that money to pay their salaries. And for cooperation itself it is a task every month to go to the government and ask for an advance to pay even salaries. So the assumption here is that if the corporate is merged with the government finances could be managed better. I think that is the reason why unions are asking and I see fairness in their demand and that's about it.

Host- But why does the government oppose this merger? What will this actually cost them ?

Ratnam- The government still looks at TSRTC as a corporation and as a business and not as a public server. I think it is a big thing to say but then from their statements in the past few days it is evident from their statements that they want TSRTC to sustain with their finances on their own. While we appreciate them asking TSRTC to be financially responsible, you can't really ask them to sustain themselves because the fares have been kept low to enable access to different sectors of people right, sections of people and right now just consider if you are spending about 50 rupees per kilometre on operating buses you are not not earning more than 30. And there is nothing wrong in it there is nothing wrong in keeping the fair low because public transport enables economy. Public transport provides access to job, healthcare and profession. So we should look at something which enables economy and find other ways to fund it. Right now more than 75% of their means come from just fares collected. and that is not the way you finance your public transport corporation. So you should look at other sources of revenue. While I think it is good to look at them to earn from their own assets, leverages and assets but there are ways to finance. Let's say, many cities have done urban transport funds which are which actually get money from sales taxes and various other things like that. In fact, there is something called, it is mandatory for cities to form urban transport funds and they were supposed to fill that with money from sales tax, property tax and things like that, and it was never done. So I think there should be, there needs to be a completely thinking of how TSRTC to be financed. And we should remove this whole profit loss equation because public transport is a service and it is not a business.

Host- The chief minister's office in Telangana has said that 48000 staff of TSRTC who went to protest will not be hired back and also that they will be considered as self dismissed because they protested. Will they be able to do something like that?

Ratnam- I don't think it is legally possible for them to remove 50,000 employees at once. While the government is in its own right to say that this right is illegal because through

whatever ways we might term them as abuse of the ESMA, essential services maintenance act, they are in their own right to term the strike illegal. But I don't think they can dismiss so many people at once because the reconciliation process will not complete. Reconciliation process started and at that point the unions had walked out of the talks because the government was not listening to them. They should I think the government right now call them back for talks again because we have lost enough life and this is not something, a lot of people are getting inconvenience, and once school starts you don't know all the hell's gonna break loose.

Host- You said that they called the strike illegal. How did they call it illegal?

Ratnam- So there is something called essential services maintenance act and every 6 months they issue a government order banning strikes in TSRTC. And they can do that using this essential services maintenance act. Hence the strike was illegal. This has been happening whenever they said that there is going to be a strike notice served. Because I have been observing this from the strikes in, during this. That is when all of the government employees in Telangana had gone on strike and in the second month of TSRTC, and then the TSRTC had gone on strike. That every time there is a strike notice given, you know that there is going to be a strike notice given so a few months before that, they will issue this ban on strikes and then there will be a GO saying this and then immediately there will be a circular circulating saying that there is a ban on strike and we have received strike notice, so the strike is illegal. Everyone will participate in the strike will be marked in their attendance register with the red. This has been repeating all over The times now. The government might have their own reasons for saying that this is an essential service so we don't want to stop.

Host- Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Ratnam- There's this one thing about dismissing 48000 employees and once and then trying to hire quickly a few other people, the problem is finding skilled drivers is a big problem in India. Many smaller city bus systems like systems in Aurangabad are not able to operationalize all of their fleet because there aren't enough drivers. so you saying this that I am going to dismiss 20000-25000 drivers at once, where are you going to find all of these people because you need to operationalize buses soon. And their solution for that seems to be asking ordinary doctors and police to drive the buses but then how long will you sustain using that. The thing is that there are many drivers in TSRTC that have been driving for more than 20-30 years without any accidents. TSRTC has this college in Hyderabad where they train their drivers, there are pressure training and there is a strict protocol on which the drivers they are put on different routes as well. Older drivers are not sent on like say guard routes, if they have a small minor accident they are sent on refresher training. how are you going to manage all of this if all your staff is going to be new. I think we should stop this rhetoric and call them for talks and that's all I have to say.

Host- Thank you Mr. Ratnam.

On speaking with the general secretary of the staff and workers federation, Mr. V Srinivas Rao, we understand what led to the protest. He is also the All India Road Transport National Secretary.

Mr Rao- In the last two to three years the government has not given us any reimbursements anything that were given to the TSRTC. At the time of 2018 we are ready to go to strike, all together, all the union working in the TSRTC, then the government nominated 7 ministers committee. At that time arrears period is completed, the government is decided to actional incharge to the principal secretary, transport and building. But he has a lot of work. He has transport commission also, urban development ministry some responsibility is there, then transport and building the building and double bedroom planning is there. So in order to look after the TSRTC issues, there might be irresponsible there. So he is not taking his responsibility and the government is putting committee, 7 members committee. What assurance is given at the time of 2018, June 10th, not completed up to this year and now the government has nominated in 9 member expert committee to study the TSRTC, and what are the actions taken for the development. There is a Geetam Tiwari from Delhi, IIT Delhi and other professionals, transport professionals there is a 9 member committee. The government has given them 3 months to study, but upto 15 months gone there is no report. The government is not ready to take that report. The report is ready by the committee. But they're not conducting the meeting and not taking that report. This is the situation prevailing, our issues are long pending issues, long pending issues. Actually bus pass reimbursement is 2809 crores to be paid by the government, we are asking for this pay through budget, that is 2018-19 budget, they have put that 520 crores in the budget. But they are given through this budget 230 crores only. Here at the time of 18 and 19, last year budget they are putting 520 crores, and actually they are paying 664 crores. But in the budget the budget allocation is 520 crores only but we are given only 130 crores. Last in the five years the payments have been 2809 crores, but the government has paid only 649 crores. Remaining what about 2200 crores, and we are paying much of interest that is the interest pattern is that 280 crores per annum. This is a situation, again and again management and government had to pay the amount and we are asking the government to put a budget, in budget allocation 1% of the state budget that is the revised estimate budget is 100046 crores, we are just asking for 1046 crores, give to the TSRTC for a period of 3 years only, not for long years. The government is not ready to put that. This is the situation, there is no one to discuss the issue and the government is not ready to discuss our issues and what all promises given by the government that is not also fulfilled, meanwhile for that two years or 3 years. So that is the situation.

Host- So what is your plan if the stalemate continues between TSRTC and the government? Is the strike is continued for a long period they are trying to, for one day all of India transport workers strike they are planning that also. How did so many employees can be sacked and replaced for protesting?

Mr Rao- If I am going to resign, I am an employee, I am going to TSRTC, before one month I'll give letter to the management. Now that I will pay one month salary to the corporation, this is the system. If you have dismissed me what can you do, the proper way to dismiss is first you have to serve a notice and then serve a charge sheet, and then detailed enquiry

conducted and then liable to removal or suspension or anything. These take 5 to 6 months is that we are not the government employees we are the industrial dispute under the industrial workers and we have our rights there. But this is a depression type of depression is there, definitely this is illegal. if you are including the new person first you have to notify the vacancies. we are in the job how will you notify the vacancies. so what the government decides is that daily operation we will take that. There is no permanent recruitment system, and this is impossible, is the government is decided and all the dismissals is finalized after they are including permanent. Now there is only daily basis recruitment, that is the operation purpose that is not a problem.

Host- Earlier few days ago it felt like there has been a break in this stalemate, when Keshav Rao asked the striking employees to come in for the talks. What happened after that?

Mr Rao- The letter written by Keshav Rao that is independently. In that letter is asking to things is that. One thing is, first the RTC worker to call of their strike and come to the discussions. Who is negotiating. He is not the competent person, he is only MP. Not really government has given any opportunity to discuss with the workers. After that later the very next day he is stating that, who am I, I am not the government, I am a political party member. How can I discuss with the RTC employee. That's his personal statement. Why you are writing a letter and why you are creating a nuisance in the organisation? One thing is that he is responsible for the RTC strike, that is the admittable.

Host- So I think TSRTC should be merged with the state government?

Mr Rao- In the Telangana Secular samay at the time of 2012-13, when Mr Keshav Rao is the president of the TRS, he has given assurance to the RTC employees that after the formation of Telangana we will go to merge the RTC and RTC employees will be recognised as the state government employees. At that time the Congress government is there, Kiran Kumar Reddy, he is the chief minister. This year also, we are asking for it.

Host- The Telangana High Court has ordered both government and TSRTC management to begin talks with Union leaders to end the ongoing stalemate. The court has asked to conclude the talk within 3 days and a detailed report of the talks to be submitted by October 28. The government is yet to receive a copy of the court orders and on the receipt of the same the government has stated that it will move forward.

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