

STATE BANK OF INDIA OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION

(BENGAL CIRCLE)

(Registered under Trade Unions Act 1926-Regd. No. 6908)

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Circular No. 64/2019

Date : 10.06.2019

To All Members (Please Circulate)

We reproduce hereunder the Circular No. 40 dated 10.06.2019 issued by the General Secretary, All India State Bank Officers' Federation, the contents of which are self-explicit.

With revolutionary greetings,

Shubhajyoti Chattopadhyay
(General Secretary)

To all our Affiliates / Members:

*Golden Jubilee celebration of Indefinite Strike by officers of State Bank of India
Enliven the historical moment - Let the flame of struggle be eternally alight*

Today is a red-letter day in the history of our mighty Federation. This day, 50 year ago, ignited a spark; a spark which led to blaze that spread across the entire country and culminated in a 17 days indefinite strike by the officers of State Bank of India. An unprecedented event in the history of supervisory trade union movement.

2. This indefinite strike demonstrated strength, power of conviction and disproved the belief that supervisory cadre were not capable of organizing struggle and Trade Union movement. Incontrovertibly, it showed to the entire world that officers were capable of being united and waging a war to fight for their rights and protest against exploitation and oppression.

*3. Not many are aware of the background, the events that led to this strike and around it. We are duty bound to recollect and rejoice those moments. By this, we would not only be paying tributes and respects to the leaders who secured the lives and working environment of the officers, but our efforts to drive home the point that **"unity & solidarity"** and **"decisive action"** are the tenets in any working-class movement and can achieve the impossible. Let us recapitulate the events that led to the unprecedented, game-changing strike.*

- Around 1960s, award staff trade union movement gained momentum. A structured negotiation system was in place, bilateralism was recognized. Award Unions negotiated regulated working hours, Dearness Allowance, Leave, medical facilities et al, which made their working conditions better.*
- While the award employees enjoyed stipulated working hours, the work-pressure on the supervisors was humongous. They had to toil day and night, unmindful of hours and holidays. The draconian service conditions virtually enslaved the supervisory staff.*
- Officers who were promoted from the ranks began to dream of similar rights to the officers' organization as well. Thus, a number of officers' organizations were formed in various banks during the 1960s. The multiplicity of the unions was an obstacle for the emergence of the officers' organization in State Bank of India. It was during this period that the officers of the Bombay Circle under the leadership of Com. L.V. Subramaniam, the founder General Secretary of the Federation and Com. S.K. Mishra, the founder President of the Federation, consolidated the officers' movement in the bank under the banner of All India State Bank of India Supervising Staff Federation which later was renamed as All India State Bank Officers' Federation (AISBOF).*
- The newly formed Officers' Federation confronted a colossal challenge. The first and foremost was to consolidate all the splinter organizations under one umbrella. Thereafter, to consolidate the membership all over the country and commence struggle for the improvement of the working condition of officers in the Bank. Between 1965 and 1969, a number of mild agitations were conducted by the representatives of the Circle Associations and the Federation all over the country.*
- Federation had placed many demands before management during this period. Not surprising the first demand placed before the management was **"Regulated Working Hours"**, though the salary was not so attractive compared to other section of staff. This alone indicates the oppressive working conditions prevailing at that point of time. The other demands included, revision in salary, casual leave for officers, protection of emoluments on promotion from clerical to officer's cadre, transfers, medical benefit of self and family, housing accommodation, Inter Circle Transfers, improvement in LFC. Other important demands were about Grievance Procedure, Departmental Enquiry and abolition of recovery towards pension fund. There were series of meetings from 1965 through 1969.*

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- During 1966, first Charter of Demands containing 22 demand was presented. Many meetings took place. Regulated Working Hours continued to be one of the demands in every meeting.
- While Management conceded few demands, of which abolition of contribution towards pension was one, many issues remained unresolved and kept in abeyance.
- In 1967, Officers protested against the atrocious behavior of management in transferring President of Delhi Association. Mass casual leave was resorted to by officers in Delhi and Bombay.
- The year 1969 was decisive. Driven by prolonged delays in reaching settlement, Federation launched "Work to Rule" agitation. Despite an understanding not to victimize any officers on account of any activity related to collective bargaining, Bank charge sheeted four officers for disobeying the orders for passing cheques of Rs.25000 and above. Though the few demands were conceded, the agitation in Bombay circle continued as the four officers were victimized. Management pursued its hard stand. Federation gave a call for non-cooperation during the month of June, 1969 in Bombay Main Branch. As a part of this non-cooperation, the Head Cashiers, refused to part with the keys and declined to hand over the same to the Management.
- **9th June 1969 – was a red-letter day.** Supervisory staff, including senior members of Association and key-holders applied a mass casual leave. On **11th June 1969** - Bank relieved the 4 senior officers who were holding keys, pending action against them. Later in the day, they were placed under suspension. The four comrades who were suspended for legitimate Trade Union activities richly deserve their names to be etched in golden letters in the annals of history of our Federation - **Com V.H. Khedgikar**, who rose to the position of the General Secretary of the Mumbai Circle Association during the subsequent years, **Com. Aspi Banker**, **Com K P Sanjana** and **Com. A F Fernandez**.
- This action of the Management was instigative. Officers, who were tormented, subjugated and exploited gave a vent to the pent up anger and frustration . Suspension and charge-sheets to the officers in Bombay triggered off a spontaneous, voluntary and furious reaction, which resulted in the 17 day long strike that shook the entire nation. A live movement thus took its birth. It was a saga of struggle and sacrifice by thousands of officers across the country who came out openly against the draconian decision and conclusively displayed their collective strength to the Management, who had never expected such a backlash from the officers' fraternity in 150 years of existence of the Bank. Our Bombay affiliate jumped into action. All the branches in the city of Bombay were shut down on the same day spontaneously and the entire operations came to a halt. The strike spread to the whole Circle. The Federation gave a call for an indefinite strike demanding the immediate re-instatement of the officers suspended by the Bank for their legitimate trade union activities.
- A conspicuous, need-to-be-noticed fact is the way the news spread across the country. Only offices had the telephone facility. Telegram was the only quick mode of communication. Letters took weeks to reach destinations. Despite this, the message of the 'Indefinite Strike' call spread like wild fire all over the country. This shows how deeply the dignity and respect of the officers was hurt. The trust and confidence they reposed in Federation and the craving for justice came to the fore. From 16th June, 1969 onwards all the branches of State Bank of India all over the country remained closed. It was the beginning of the first ever Indefinite Strike call by a supervisory Trade Union not only in the country but in the entire world. The strike was out of volition. There was no formal notice issued. There was no preparation. Yet through the word of mouth, the news had spread and the reaction was belligerent. Officers came out on the streets to support the cause and demanded the reinstatement of the four comrades. Federation and the Officers gained confidence and strength with each passing day. It was the battle for survival. Federation leaders led by Com L V Subramanyam and Com A V Rajwade led from the front. In many places office bearers went around the town on cycles to put up posters.
- True to its level-headed thinking, Federation made attempts to drive home the point to Management to come to negotiating table. But, the management did not yield. Attempts from various quarters did not yield result. The impasse continued. The strike had its telling effect on the nation's economy. Pressure was mounted on Central Government by Ministers of various States and politicians.
- Support started pouring in from all the sections of society. Management made attempts to sabotage the strike, gave advertisement in dailies, twisted the truth. Few seniors within the Bank went forward to take keys. But officers refused to oblige and stuck to their stand. The citizenry understood the cause of the strike. Even the politicians made attempts to prevail upon Management, but to no avail.
- Staff Federation directed its members not to accept officiating or to take keys. Association of Officers of Bank of India Officers and RBI extended the fraternal support. The Officers' Association of Subsidiary Banks (Associate Banks) extended support by calling for a day's strike.
- The Bank did not relent in the beginning. The then Chairman Shri R.K. Talwar had refused to negotiate with the Federation at first. However, as the strike progressed, it gathered momentum as officers vented out their frustration by shutting down all the offices for 17 successive days. The only demand of the Federation was against victimization of officers and recognition of the officers' right to strike.
- Ultimately, on 27th June 1969, the struggle reached its logical conclusion. The strike was called off at 5.45pm. Bank had to reinstate all the four officers and agreed to commence dialogue on the other pertinent issues raised earlier by the Federation. No action was initiated against officers who were served memos. Com V H Khedgikar who was suspended was paid full salary and allowances, treating the period of suspension as on duty, subsequently. It was the edifice of a great movement as our Federation emerged stronger by the day.

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- The seventeen days indefinite strike was described by the BBC as the first indefinite strike by the supervisory cadre in the entire world. The Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad conducted a study on what forced the officers to strike work and revolt against the management.

4. This historical strike has taught us many lessons. This was an opportunity to prove our mettle and inherent strength. This gave us structured fora at both Corporate Centre and Circle level. The bilateral relationship was established and strengthened during subsequent years and the mutual trust and respect between Federation and the Bank developed to work in unison towards a common goal.

5. Yesterday our Mumbai affiliate felicitated Com Khedgikar, the only living legend of the four comrades, who were victimized by the Bank. He was emotional and said that he was not afraid of plunging into the movement called by the Association as he felt it was a legitimate demand. We salute Com Khedgikar for his sacrifice for the cause. We should emulate the conviction and courage of Com Khedgikar.

6. Comrades, having recollected this momentous event, we should not forget to notice the upheavals of the past 50 years. While subsequent to indefinite strike, the industrial relations improved, we could achieve improvement in service conditions and clinch innumerable benefits for our fraternity.

7. We are standing at a cusp of time, which is strikingly similar to the situation prevailing 50 years ago. It seems that the wheel has turned a full circle.

- Work-life balance and regulated working hours are the principal demands of the Federation. We are witnessing exploitation, humiliation of officers, both within and outside the organization. Denial of legitimate leave is reported across the country. The workload is humongous. Added to this is the pressure to sell third party products, which is one of the root causes of angst and frustration. Life style diseases has affected most of the officers.

8. On this momentous occasion, let us take a pledge that we all stand united. **Unity cannot be spelt without "U"**. Comrades, silence is no longer an option or a virtue. Federation has clear thought and vision. There will be no compromise on dignity and respect. Let us stand united. There is nothing that unity cannot achieve. Together, we will achieve and demonstrate that we are capable of achieving.

With revolutionary greetings,

Yours comradely,



Soumya Datta
General Secretary

If you tremble with indignation at every injustice then you are a comrade of mine—Che Guevara

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