

India: From the Trade Unions to Modi's BJP

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George Fernandes was the legendary socialist behind India's massive 1974 railway strike. But by the end of his life, he embraced a reactionary Hindu nationalism.

When George Fernandes died at the age of eighty-eight earlier this year, he was almost a forgotten person. Yet he had once been an astounding figure, a militant trade unionist who clashed with Indira Gandhi's authoritarian government and committed himself earnestly to socialist causes. But in a matter of years, he moved radically to the right, aligning with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), supporting India's nuclear weapons program, and even defending Narendra Modi during the bloody anti-Muslim 2002 Gujarat riots.

His life and trajectory tell us a lot about what's happened to politics in India over the years.

Fernandes was born in a Christian family in Karnataka. His family wanted him to become a priest. In 1949, he instead went to Bombay, as it was then called, and was drawn there to the socialist movement and trade union activism.

Recruited there, he became a trade unionist, active in several transport workers' unions — the BEST (Brihanmumbai Electricity Supply and Transport), the Taxi Drivers' Union, and so on. In 1967, Fernandes, then aged thirty-seven, stood against Congress candidate SK Patil and defeated him in the parliamentary elections, earning the title George the Giant Killer.

In 1968, he lost the BEST strike, but it still managed to achieve more wages and rights for the workers than in the past. At the same time, the failure ultimately imposed a higher workload on sections of the workers.

Railway Strike 1974

But it was in the railways that Fernandes emerged as an all-India leader. The All India Railywaymen's Federation, largest of the railway unions, has been affiliated to the HMS union federation for a very long time. By 1974, wages of railway employees had remained frozen for years, even though in other government sectors wages had risen. The eight-hour working day had not been brought in even a quarter century after independence.

In 1974, India's railways were the fourth largest in the world, with over 39,000 miles of tracks, and about 70 percent of food, fuel and freight was transported by these lines. Stephen Sherlock's [study](#) documents the terrible working condition of the railway workers. But Sherlock also shows how bottom-up craft unions played a bigger role than the two dominant bureaucratic unions, the NFIR (pro-Congress) and the AIRF.

Eventually, a national coordinating committee was formed, and the strike was to begin on May 8, 1974. Fernandes was arrested even while negotiations were proceeding, showing that breaking the strike was paramount for the government.

Across the country thousands of railway workers were arrested. The draconian provisions of the Defence of India Rules and the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) were used against the workers. This was the first time that the working class was able to show its autonomy in political action. The twenty-day strike involving 1.7 million workers was among the biggest in the history of the world, and the government spared no brutality to smash it.

In Bombay, electricity and transport workers as well as taxi drivers joined the protests. In Gaya, Bihar, striking workers and their families squatted on the tracks. More than 10,000 workers of the Integral Coach Factory in Perambur, Tamil Nadu, marched to the Southern Railway headquarters in Chennai to express their solidarity with the striking workers. Similar protests erupted across the country. Not a single important rail centre in India was immune.

Emergency and the Janata Era

Fernandes emerged as a celebrated hero, even though the AIRF was a relatively bureaucratized union and smaller crafts unions had played a more militant role. This experience certainly hardened his anti-Congress attitude. He would take part in JP Narayan's movement of 1974-75, whose central goal was the ouster of Indira Gandhi from her position as prime minister.

In response, Gandhi would use a constitutional provision (since repealed) to declare an "Internal Emergency" that lasted from June 25, 1975 to March 21, 1977. During that time, she would arrest a huge number of politicians, impose press censorship, and use other dictatorial methods. Fernandes challenged the imposition of the Emergency, but also went underground. Eventually he was arrested in 1976, and was one of the accused in the Baroda Dynamite Case, in which he and his associates were accused of planning to use dynamite to blow up railway tracks and government establishments.

This was an early instance of the political use of the CBI, a branch of the police under the direct control of the Central Government. One of the iconic images of the Emergency period is of [Fernandes in shackles](#), his arms raised high in protest.

When Indira Gandhi called for fresh elections in 1977 and relaxed the Emergency, the Socialists, the Congress (a rump that had opposed Gandhi and had formally retained the organizational machinery, though she took away the bulk of the party in 1971), the Bharatiya Lok Dal, the Jana Sangh (the RSS front and forerunner of the BJP) and a breakaway group from the Congress, the Congress for Democracy, all fought together on a common platform. They won more than 43 percent of the vote and 298 seats, with their allies winning further seats so that a Janata Party government was formed. Fernandes, still in prison, contested from Bihar's Muzaffarpur and won that year's elections and several more (1980, 1989, 1991, and 2004). This was unusual, in a province where caste-based electoral politics has often been prominent.

The limitations of Fernandes's socialism was evident in the Janata era and after. The Janata Party saw the RSS for the first time gain public acceptance: its cadres had been important in the elections, it had prominent members in the cabinet (Vajpayee and Advani), and it now used its access to state power to start pushing its agenda in many areas of civil society.

Some of the party's secular elements, like Madhu Limaye and Chandra Shekhar, objected to Prime Minister Morarji Desai granting communal forces so many opportunities. Fernandes spoke in defence of Morarji Desai, but was won over by fellow socialist Limaye the next day, and switched sides. Fernandes' long term political associate, Jaya Jaitley, however, claimed later that it was not political conviction but personal loyalty to Limaye that caused this about-face.

From Anti-Congress to Ally of the BJP

The tensions of the earlier socialist movement now tore the socialists apart and moved them in different directions. Fernandes' mentor, Lohia, had once raised the slogan, "*Congress hatao, Desh bachao*" — eject the Congress and save the country. Fernandes was to follow this politics to its logical end: by allying with the BJP.

The failure of all shades of the electoral left to build independent politics free of bourgeois parties has meant that since the rise of the BJP, all too often the question has been, who is the lesser evil? Congress or BJP? With whom should leftists ally in the next elections?

From the mid-1990s, Fernandes allied with the BJP systematically. This alliance came with the seeming solace that the National Democratic Alliance would formally exclude any talk of a Uniform Civil Code, the Ram Mandir and Article 370. These token concessions kept him and other "secular" supporters of the BJP happy, while it meant that the RSS could proceed to build its forces.

The ultimate result was not a shift of the BJP toward the center, as Fernandes had dreamt, but his own rightward shift. In the NDA government of Vajpayee, he served as defence minister (1998-2004). In that capacity, he defended the Pokharan II nuclear tests, and even said that given the Chinese threat, it was necessary for India to have a strong nuclear deterrence.

Fernandes' secularism was finally buried in 2002. In that year, the Narendra Modi government of Gujarat was accused of abetting a province-wide pogrom against Muslims. One well publicized case was that of Kausar Bano, whose womb was ripped open and the fetus torn out. The *Times of India* reported Fernandes defending this, saying that such tales had been heard for the last fifty-five years — why make noise now?

It is not surprising, then, when we look at the obituaries written about Fernandes, that most were from people in or close to the NDA. Ill for a long time, with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, unable to speak, Fernandes was also politically finished a long time before he died.

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