

3. Ms D. Shaleel (HMS), Chairperson of National Committee of Railway Women Employees (AIRF)

BIO-NOTE

She is the additional general secretary of the East Coast Railway Shramik Union (AIRF), and in the national leadership of HMS.

Born on December 18, 1949, she studied up to SSLC and married a railway employee in 1968. But in a very tragic accident her husband, an engine driver, died while exchanging engine keys at the very platform. This tragedy occurred within five months of her marriage.

Shaleel was given compassionate appointment in the railway hospital by the GM using his special powers. She has Congress background of her family and believes and fights for social reforms and against obscurantism. So she has not given up any of the signs of a married women like

"mangalsutra", bangles, etc. In the hospital she found many women suffering family tragedies and decided to take up their cause.

Shaleel was trained in the Jaiprakash Narain Institute at Calcutta by big leaders like J.M. Biswas. As a consequence of this and due to encouragement by CH. Gandhi, she decided to take up TU work even while being employed in the hospital, and later in Superintendent's office.

She and others raised questions as to how could women work when the AIRF was named All India Railway MENS' Federation. J.M. Biswas and other agreed, and it was decided that women should be given at least one-third representation. She took active part in conducting all India and local railway women's meetings and conferences. She is also on the ICFTU bodies.

She has intervened in many women railway workers' problems – women gangmen, technical, engineering, lady drivers, computer reservation section, etc. She has got them simple elementary facilities like the toilets, resting sheds for lady gangmen and so on. Women's branches are being started. All India meeting in Vishakhapatnam was participated in by 1,000 delegates.

Women's participation in railways and railway TUs is increasing. There is more consciousness, clarity and boldness now. In this matter, East Coast Railway Shramik Union is ahead of others.

She is now pressing for a separate women's all India TU wing.

TRANSCRIPTIVE NOTE

(Ms. D. Shaleel was interviewed in the office of East Coast Railway Shramik Union, Vishakhapatnam, on September 12, 2004 at 1 pm. She showed great interest in our work and readily gave interview even without prior appointment.)

She described her family background. It was a tradition of freedom struggle, and this helped her prepare for subsequent problems and activities. She went through difficult times within months of her marriage, as her husband met with a tragic death. She had to look after her only child, who is now in good job. She was given a job in railway on compassionate grounds by GM using his special powers.

She has faced all the problems of a widow, yet refused to toe the traditions. She also decided to take up common cause of women. She also fought male domination within the union. She ultimately became an active office-bearer of the railway workers' union. In all these matters she made a special mention of CH. Gandhi, general secretary, ECoRSU. J.M. Biswas was also instrumental in bringing her into TU movement.

She says that women are today becoming more conscious, important and confident. They are participating in men's domain, to the extent that in some departments there are fewer men than women.

As an attitude of male-dominated management and unions, she mentions how she and others had to fight hard to get even elementary facilities like toilets. The management people give her alibi that this is not available anywhere in India. Her efforts in the AIRF resulted in women's representation of one-third. Vizag in this matter leads in the country. The railway women workers' conferences are effective platform of airing their grievances and organising them. National Women's Committee of the railways has become a powerful organisation. Gangmen level women have serious problems but now they are boldly facing them. With more women in various railway jobs, they are forging ahead.