

Indian tea estate workers still on strike after six months

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16 December 1999

More than 2,000 workers from the Manjolai Tea Estates in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu have been on strike for more than six months, defying police violence and management threats of sackings to continue their campaign for improved working conditions and backpay. The strikers make up 85 percent of the total workforce on the Manjolai, Nalumuku and Oothu tea estates on the southern tip of the Western Ghats mountain range in the Tirunelvely district.

The strike has been led by the Pudhiya Tamizhagam (New Tamil Nadu), a caste-based political party that is in alliance with the Tamil Manila Congress, a regional breakaway party from the traditional party of the Indian capitalist class—the Congress (I). The Pudhiya Tamizhagam (PT) claims to represent a section of the Dalits—India's oppressed castes.

Last month PT leader, Dr. K. Krishnasamy, called on the Tamil Nadu government to intervene in the dispute and buy the Manjolai Estates after management threatened to sack the entire workforce if they did not report for work by November 15.

On November 24, the state government's Joint Commissioner of Labor held tripartite with the trade unions and management. The talks broke down after the estate management insisted that they would only take back permanent workers—the workforce is made up of 1,600 permanent workers and 800 temporary workers. Further negotiations took place on December 8 and are due to continue this week.

The strikers are living in Arokiyanathapuram village near the three estates and have survived on food provided by adjoining villages. Each village has taken turns contributing two to three sacks of rice, as well as dhal [lentils], to the common kitchen that is feeding the workers and their families.

Work on the estates is being carried out by a handful of remaining workers as well as managerial, supervisory and

clerical staff and 350 contract workers recruited after the strike began. The three estates totaling 804 hectares belong to the Singampatti Group, owned by the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd, which claims to have lost 1.5 million kilograms in tea production due to the strike. The company calculates that the central Indian government has lost 500,000 rupees in excise duty and the Tamil Nadu government 3.2 million rupees in sales tax.

The dispute began in February after the union demanded that management stick to the eight-hour day stipulated in the Labor Act. The field work begins at 7.30am and ends at 4.30pm with an hour for lunch at 12 noon. The plucked tea leaves are weighed three times a day—at noon, then at 2.30pm and a final weighing at 4.30pm. Since management refused to discuss an eight-hour day, the union instructed workers to leave the fields at 3.30pm and take their leaves for weighing. When management refused to weigh the leaves, the workers simply left them at the weighing stations.

The management retaliated by deducting half a day's wages even though workers had worked eight hours as stipulated by the Labor Act. Workers' wages are 63 rupees or about \$US1.50 a day. Each day for three months, workers stopped work at 3.30pm, management cut half of their wages and refused to negotiate on an eight-hour day. The current strike finally erupted on May 29.

On June 7, all 1,600 workers—650 men and 950 women as well as 25 children and some retired workers—marched to the Tirunelvely collectorate [state and district government offices]. Police refused to allow the workers to meet government officials and when they tried to enter the office, arrested 450 of the male workers. They were remanded under "judicial custody" and imprisoned 300 kilometres away in Trichy in southern Tamil Nadu.

The following day, a demonstration led by women workers marched to the district collector's office demanding the release of those arrested. Again the police

prevented the protestors from meeting officials and arrested 200 women workers and 15 children who were also jailed in Trichy.

On July 23, in what became known as the Manjolai massacre, police brutally attacked a peaceful demonstration of Manjolai workers, their families and supporters on their way to the collector's office. Seventeen people died and about 500 were wounded when police charged using tear gas and six-foot batons known as lathis, deliberately forcing many of the crowd into the Tamaraparani River. Some 18 to 20 are still missing including three women workers.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi immediately called a press conference to defend the police, claiming that they "had been attacked by the demonstrating workers and in self defense the police were forced to lathi charge the demonstrators. Those who died drowned when they ran to escape the lathi charge and tried to cross the river."

This claim has since been refuted conclusively by a committee appointed by the People's Rights Association to investigate the police attack. The committee visited the massacre site and spoke to the families of the workers who were been killed or wounded. The committee consisted of the former chief of the Tamil Nadu police, V. Lashmana Narayanan; the former judge of the Bombay High Court, H. Suresh; former Indian Administrative Service official, V. Karupan; and former Vice Chancellor of Sundaranayar University, Vasantha Devi.

In its report released on October 27, the committee concluded: "The demonstration of the Manjolai workers on their problems was peaceful... it was the lathi charge of the police, which was the main reason for the deaths of the demonstrating workers. This incident would not have happened if the district collector had received the leaders of the demonstrators into his office and received their memorandum to the government."

Following the July police attack, the General Secretary of the Human Rights Commission, Karthekeyan visited the Manjolai estates and declared that he had found no bonded labour conditions nor bonded labourers. But he agreed that what existed on the estates were "slave conditions for the workers". Karthekeyan is a former head of the CBI, the Indian counterpart to the US FBI.

In India, the term "bonded workers" applies only when workers and their families are unable to pay their debts and become literally enslaved to money lenders or employers, sometimes for generations. In the strict sense, the Manjolai workers are not bonded labourers but they

had little choice but to accept the low pay and atrocious working and living conditions on the estates.

Men and women workers work in the fields for nine hours a day. The tea bushes are on the steep hillsides at an altitude of between 4,500 and 4,800 feet, subject at different times of the year to heavy rains and sometimes snow. Workers pick under all conditions. There are no toilets or shelters.

Workers leave their homes in the early morning, walking up to seven kilometres to reach the roll muster point by 7.30am. They are assigned their work for the day—picking, weeding, spraying insecticide, etc—and with an hour off for lunch, work continuously until 4.30pm when they bring the tea leaves to the weighing points. By the time they get back to their "lines" it is 5.30 or 6pm.

Throughout the day, overseers supervise the workers. During working hours, workers are not permitted to walk off to urinate. The overseers even demand workers show them the spot where they have urinated in order to check that the workers have not simply been resting.

Estate workers live in so-called "line rooms"—long, roughly constructed, barrack-like huts divided into living areas or "rooms" approximately 10 feet wide and 18 feet long. On the Manjolai estates, each "room," which is subdivided into a verandah, living area and kitchen, houses three families. Twelve or more people have to live, sleep and cook in an area of 180 square feet.

It is such appalling living and working conditions that drove workers to take strike action for more than four months at the end of 1998, and to initiate the present strike.



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