

India

Tamil Nadu government steps up repression to crush bus strike

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The Tamil Nadu state government in south India has resorted to all means possible to break a two-week statewide strike of 125,000 bus workers, which it had provoked by slashing this year's Deepavali Festival bonus. Having cut the bonus from 20 percent of annual salary (6,000 rupees or \$US125) to 8.33 percent, Chief Minister Paneerselvam has threatened to sack strikers, warning of "disciplinary action".

The government has already unleashed massive police repression to crush the strike, which began on November 9. Within five days, about 11,000 workers had been arrested. On November 17, another 2,000 bus workers, their wives and children were jailed for picketing. In all, more than 12,000 strikers and supporters are now in prison. Nearly 4,000 were picked up at the outset of the strike as a "preventive measure," while the remainder have been jailed for specific alleged offences, including exercising their democratic right to picket bus depots.

Trade union leaders called a one-day token general strike on November 23 to pressure the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led government to add a few percentage points to the bonus in order to resolve the dispute.

Strikes erupted in other state government enterprises, including the Electricity Board and the Public Distribution Service of the Tamil Nadu Civil Supply Corporation, on November 13. Within 24 hours, union leaders sent the Electricity Board workers back to work without winning anything, effectively isolating the bus workers.

Public sector enterprise workers, including the bus workers, have been paid the 20 percent bonus for the past three years. In addition, state government

employees have been paid 1,500 rupees as an advance loan for the Hindu festival for nearly half a century. But this year only one group of government employees received the advance.

The AIADMK government, which came to office just six months ago, claimed that the previous Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government had emptied the state's treasury, making it impossible to pay the 20 percent bonus. Paneerselvam also declared that the bus corporations were running at a loss—4,810 million rupees this year.

Apart from police repression, the government is using thugs. According to trade union sources, AIADMK goons armed with 6- to 7-inch knives attacked workers at the Anna Nagar bus depot in Madras. They wounded four workers, while the police watched on silently. Soon after the incident, police arrested several of the workers for "indulging in violence and disrupting the law and order situation".

So-called public interest litigation has been filed in the Madras High Court, demanding that the court declare the strike illegal and take action against strikers.

The government has also mobilised private buses, mini buses and vans in the state, plus more than 1,500 private buses from adjoining states. It has begun a massive recruitment of bus drivers and conductors from the vast army of unemployed, as well as former army drivers. The scab buses charge high fares and have been involved in several accidents, including one that killed 28 passengers and 15 injured.

Workers have expressed their determination. "When prices of all essential commodities have gone up, how can workers accept the reduction of a bonus, which they had been getting continuously for the past three

years?” one asked.

A striker at the electrical department of Perambur bus depot in Madras said: “When bus depot managers are getting 20,000 rupees and enjoying other facilities, why should workers accept the reduced bonus? When the members of parliament raise their salaries, why shouldn’t workers be concerned about their bonus?”

He accused the government of holding the jailed strikers without proper sanitary conditions. In addition, increased bus fares were hurting the public. “The ordinary worker can’t afford the higher fares when he gets 50 rupees per day.”

It would cost the government about 600 million rupees to pay the 20 percent bonus to the bus workers, yet it is losing 80 million rupees a day through the strike—a total of more than 800 million rupees so far.

The government wants to crush the bus strike for two reasons. Firstly, it fears that the strike will encourage other workers who are faced with the drastic erosion of living standards. Soon after taking office, the government sent police to attack striking Neyveli Lignite Corporation coal workers, who demanded the revision of a lapsed wage agreement.

Secondly, the AIADMK regime in Tamil Nadu calculates that the defeat of workers would make it easier to privatise the bus corporation. Both the state and federal governments have long standing privatisation plans as part of the IMF-dictated reform program, but workers’ resistance has forced them to postpone their moves.

One of the strongest allies of the AIADMK, the Dravida Kazhakam leader K. Veeramani, has called on the Tamil Nadu government to take bold steps against the workers and to privatise the state-owned transport corporations. The *Hindu* reported on November 21 that the government is considering giving some routes to private bus owners, as well as other forms of partial privatisation.

According to the same newspaper, the World Bank has urged Indian governments to sell off profitable long distance and intra-city routes. Workers and the poor would oppose this, because buses are the cheapest means of transport in India, apart from the railways.

Though the DMK-led union is involved in the strike, the DMK Commerce Minister in the federal cabinet, Murasolimarani, is a strong supporter of the government’s privatisation program. The federal

government has also cut funding to the Tamil Nadu regime, driving it to attack living standards.

The strike is led by the Struggle Committee of Transport Workers, which is a front organised by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led CITU and the Communist Party of India (CPI)-led AITUC, the DMK-led LPF and the Congress (I)-led INTUC, in addition to the rightwing Hindu Masoor Sangam. Such is the feeling among bus workers, that many branches of the AIADMK’s bus workers union have even joined the strike.

Yet, these parties are politically responsible for the election of the AIADMK regime. It took office with the support of, and in an electoral alliance with, the CPI (M), CPI, Congress (I) and other capitalist parties, as well as the trade union bureaucracy.

During talks with the government, the trade union leaders have offered to end the strike in return for a promise to pay the workers 8.33 percent now and the balance of 11.67 percent later. But the government has flatly refused to accede to the unions’ face-saving plan. The unions are opposed to any broader political struggle against the state and federal governments and their policies of privatisation and other economic “reform” measures.



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