

Indian workers speak about the dangers of war

Our correspondents
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Over the past six months, India and Pakistan have been engaged in a dangerous military confrontation involving one million troops backed by armour, artillery, missiles and warplanes. In both countries, the governments and the media have continued a barrage of chauvinist propaganda aimed at justifying the provocative stance taken by the nuclear-armed powers.

The rapid build-up took place after armed Kashmiri separatists attacked the Indian parliament building in New Delhi last December. Tensions escalated following an attack on an Indian army base in the Jammu and Kashmir. New Delhi condemns the various armed groups opposed to Indian rule of disputed Kashmir as “terrorists” and accuses Pakistan of organising them. Islamabad, which claims to provide only moral support, regards the Islamic extremist militia as “freedom fighters”.

In India, Hindu extremist groups allied with the ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) have seized on the situation to stir up communal tensions. The BJP-led state government in Gujarat has been widely accused of complicity in anti-Muslim riots earlier this year which left hundreds dead and thousands homeless. A recent cabinet reshuffle by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has elevated several Hindu extremists, most notably Home Minister L.K. Advani, who has taken the post of deputy prime minister.

None of India’s opposition parties have criticised the government’s military stance. “We will continue to stand by the government on such vital issues,” Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi declared in May as war appeared imminent. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and Communist Party of India (CPI) have rallied behind the government in the name of “fighting terrorism”. No party has organised any meetings or demonstrations against the threat of war.

When our correspondents spoke to workers and students in Madras, the state capital of Tamil Nadu, they found there was far from unanimous support for war. Many expressed their fears about the impact of any military confrontation and the dangers of a nuclear conflagration. While there were many political confusions expressed in the course of the conversations, a number of the workers voiced a class hostility to the machinations of the government. They accused the Vajpayee government of using the sabre rattling to divert attention from its failure to address the pressing social crisis facing the masses.

We spoke to workers at the Villivakam bus terminus in northern Madras where nearly 100 bus conductors, drivers and technical staff are employed. As the discussion proceeded, a small crowd gathered around. One worker attempted to defend the government, saying that Pakistan was to blame for the situation. “How long can India remain patient when confronted by repeated attacks from Pakistan-sponsored terrorists?” he exclaimed. But only a few of his colleagues supported him. Others opposed war, some quite stridently.

“There should be no war,” Devendran, a bus conductor, said. “A peaceful solution must be found. When war comes, inflation will go up, military expenses will also rise on both sides. The consequences of war will be devastating for ordinary people.” He accused political leaders of “sitting in comfortably in AC [air-conditioned] rooms” and provoking a war “to get more votes when the next election comes”.

Kusalavan, a 57-year building worker, shared the same view. “It is the politicians who instigate communalism and it is the same people who live on people’s tax money. If war comes, we can’t look after our children and we may have to go out begging.”

A bus driver, Marie Joseph, said the problems in Jammu and Kashmir were the result of the social conditions. “There is no security for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. There are no jobs for the youth there. Mostly it is people between the age of 20 to 30 who turn to the side of extremism,” he explained.

He said his son had an arts degree but couldn’t find a job. Situations like this were pushing young people to extremes. “He may get together with a few like-minded friends and break into houses,” he commented, adding: “No one is an extremist by birth. Why would one become an extremist if he had been provided with food, clothing and housing?”

He explained that the government had branded transport workers as “extremists” and arrested them when they went on strike last November. Workers, he said, were in a very difficult situation. They had not received a bonus for the previous nine months or any wage increase.

We spoke to a number of people at the Ambethkar Nagar Housing Board quarters, which was built two years ago by the state government as part of its slum clearance program. Many of those who live in the small, single bedroom flats are very poor—most are day workers who find casual work in construction or factories. Some drive auto-rickshaws, many are unemployed. Very few supported the drive to war.

M. Subramani, a tailor who came to India as a refugee from Sri Lanka after the 1983 communal riots, said: “Day by day, inflation is rising. Kerosene now costs between 18 to 20 rupees a litre, rice costs 20 rupees a kilo. Poor people are affected very much but tens of millions of rupees are spent on nuclear bombs. Whoever comes to power, prices continue to rise.” What would happen if a war erupted, he asked.

T. Nagarajan, a local leader for a union of labourers, said: “[There is] no need for war. If the atom bomb is dropped, you can’t even grow grass. Agriculture will be affected. India first tested an atom bomb in Pokhran, then Pakistan did the same. You could put that money for good purposes. Starving people in Orissa are deprived of food and eat dry mango seeds. About 48 people died of starvation there. You should not spend the money on the military but on abolishing poverty.”

Referring to anti-Muslim agitation in Gujarat, he said: “We should support neither communalism nor war. It is good for the country to have unity among Hindus and

Muslims—we are involved together in production work. They must talk and avoid this war.”

Among students at the Pachaiyappa College, one of the oldest government-subsidised colleges in Madras, opinion was divided. A chemistry student, who had been to Kashmir as part of the student-based National Cadet Corps, supported the government. Others, however, shifted their position during our discussions and some were forthright in their opposition. Sathasivan Umapathy was concerned that nuclear weapons would be used if a war broke out. The consequences would be “worse than what happened in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and therefore war must be prevented”.

P. Mani, who is studying for his Master of Arts degree, said it would not be the sons and daughters of Vajpayee, Advani and Fernandes [Defence Minister] who would have to fight the war and get killed but the sons of ordinary people. “They stir up young people by their war-mongering talk and make them extremists.” He said it was ordinary people who would be forced to bear the burden of war—everything from bus fares to college fees would increase.

Despite the concerted campaign by the government and in the media, the interviews reveal widespread concern about the impact of a war and in some cases outright opposition. There is considerable confusion, which is not surprising given the consensus among all political parties, including those claiming to be socialist. Workers, however, are deeply suspicious of the government and understand that they, not the rich, will bear the brunt of any military confrontation.



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