

Indian unions call off stoppage after state government sacks 200,000 strikers

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Unions covering teachers and government employees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu last weekend called off an 11-day public sector strike and appealed to the state government for unconditional talks after the government sacked more than 200,000 of the 1.3 million striking workers.

The unions' abandonment of the strike has left thousands of individual strikers pleading with authorities for reinstatement. At least 5,000 of their positions have been filled already by government supporters and desperate unemployed workers.

In order to divert the anger of workers, the unions have filed a petition in the Indian Supreme Court challenging the validity of the mass summary dismissals. By taking the legal action, which could drag on for months, the union leaders hope to pressure the government into accepting their offer of talks.

The right-wing state government of Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa not only dismissed the strikers; it ordered midnight arrests by the police and evicted hundreds of thousands of workers and their families from the government homes they have occupied for many years.

The sackings took place under the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), which the government introduced last year. The Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance (ESMO), an amendment to the ESMA, was hastily rushed through the state assembly on the fourth day of the strike, on July 4.

Under the amended ESMA, the government can declare any service or industry an essential service. Any essential service employee who strikes or instigates others to strike, and any person who advocates or supports the strike, faces three years of imprisonment or a fine of 5,000 rupees, or both.

From July 7, the sackings began with the posting of

names of those dismissed. Eviction notices appeared simultaneously. Under the same ESMO ordinance, the government began the recruitment of 15,500 temporary staff from among members and supporters of the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) to fill the vacancies.

According to state government sources, the new recruits would be paid salaries of 4,000 rupees, less than half the normal salary of an office worker. These temporary workers have to sign contracts not to indulge in any anti-government activities nor join any trade unions. They must report for work on holidays if required and can be dismissed at any moment without being given any reason.

Not since the British colonialists handed over power to the Indian elite in 1947 has a government, state or federal, sacked so many workers for exercising their fundamental right to strike. In 1948, when railway workers struck, about 30,000 were arrested, imprisoned or sacked. In 1960, when federal government employees walked out over pay, thousands were arrested and dismissed. In the famous 1974 railway strike that triggered the notorious emergency rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a few thousand workers were arrested and dismissed.

The Joint Action Council of Teachers Associations and Government Employees Organisations and the Confederation of Teachers Organisations and Government Employees Associations had given the state government the legally required three months notice that the statewide indefinite strike would begin from July 2.

Their list of 15 demands mainly called for the restoration of rights taken away by the Jayalalithaa government. These included the withdrawal of the state government's decision to increase the eligibility period

for a pension from 30 years service to 33 years, and to pay only 50 percent of the eligible pension amount in cash, with the remainder in the form of government bonds.

The other demands included full cash payment of gratuities and earned leave, restoration of a holiday bonus, and payment of the entire 4 percent Dearness Allowance (DA) sanctioned last October. The list also called for payment of the 60 percent arrears of pay, allowance and pensions, impounded in 1998 and the restoration of a 20 percent cut in the DA.

After ignoring the demands of the workers for over two months, on June 26, Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, called the unions into talks, only to inform them she would use the full force of the ESMA if they went on strike. Then, in a preemptive move to break the strike before it started, she began the arrest of union members and leaders from midnight on June 30.

Her actions only angered workers. From the afternoon of July 1, instead of the next day as scheduled, the indefinite strike began as office workers and teachers walked out of their offices and schools. Following the failure of two strikes during 2002 to win any concessions from the government, the response to the strike call was overwhelming.

Strikers interviewed by the WWSW expressed scepticism in their unions and dissatisfaction with the existing political parties.

Jegadeesan, a 30-year-old teacher who manned a picket line, said: “For decades, we teachers have been struggling under our organisations. Whether our movements will succeed in this struggle has been placed under a question mark. We have to find an alternative to win our demands.”

A 40-year-old electricity worker said: “This is the worst government I have come across in my life. Even all the other political parties are just looking on with folded arms without moving even a tiny finger. A revolutionary change should come among our youth.”

By contrast, when interviewed, union official Peter Alphonse sought to appease the Jayalalithaa administration, declaring: “Our movement is not against the government. Our struggle is not a political struggle. If the government invites us, we are prepared for negotiations”. He called the strike a strategic move by the trade unions “to bring pressure on the government to retain the gains won in the past”.

But the government is under pressure from big business and the international creditors such as the IMF and the World Bank to drastically cut the number of jobs in the government services and the education system. Against fierce competition from other Indian states, the Jayalalithaa government is seeking to make Tamil Nadu the cheapest labour market in the country.

For months, the government has been engaged in a campaign to provoke middle class layers and the poor against the teachers and public employees, falsely claiming that their salaries consume 94 percent of state revenue. The government’s own white paper, submitted with the 2003 budget, states that salaries comprise just 39 percent of the demand on revenue, while pensions account for 19 percent.

No restraint has been shown in handing massive pay rises to members of parliament and cabinet ministers. Millions of rupees have been spent boosting the police force and establishing police commando units. And transnational corporations are being wooed to Tamil Nadu with “attractive” tax concessions, free land and other facilities.

By calling off the strike and sending workers to plead for their jobs, the trade unions, backed by all the old left political parties, including the two Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), have demonstrated that they offer no alternative to this program.

After doing nothing to defend the sacked workers for more than a week, the national unions declared July 16 as a day of protest, India-wide. They did not even call a one-day strike to demand the reinstatement of the sacked workers, instead proposing factory gate meetings to demand that the Jayalalithaa government “begin negotiations with the unions to resolve outstanding issues”.



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