

Millions of Indian government employees to go on strike today

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More than 10 million employees of the central and state governments, various publicly-owned companies, and India's financial institutions are expected to join a one-day national strike today, February 24, to protest against a Supreme Court ruling that public sector workers have no right to strike.

The sweeping anti-worker ruling came in a dispute provoked by the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) state government of Tamil Nadu. When 200,000 Tamil Nadu employees launched an indefinite strike last July 2 to demand the restoration of pensions and other benefits unilaterally slashed by the state government, Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha rushed through emergency legislation outlawing the strike, then dismissed the workers en masse and ordered the hiring of strikebreakers.

Unable to advance any other perspective to oppose the state government's all-out attack, the unions terminated the strike on July 12 and appealed to the Indian Supreme Court to reinstate the sacked workers. A panel of the Supreme Court ruled on July 24 that the AIADMK government was well within its rights to strip the workers of their right to strike and even to terminate them. In what amounted to a diatribe against the unions, the panel claimed government-worker strikes have had a ruinous impact on the public and were neither a legal nor a "moral right."

Having given sanction to Jayalalitha's strikebreaking and indeed encouraged other governments to similarly rob public sector workers of their basic union rights, the Supreme Court panel, in the interests of defusing an explosive situation, counselled the government to reinstate most of the workers if they submitted a humiliating written apology and accepted the contract rollbacks imposed by the government.

Jayalalitha accepted the court's advice and soon was

being feted by India's corporate elite for having delivered a body blow to the working class.

The unions and the Stalinists parties—the Communist Party (CPI) and the Communist Part of India (Marxist)—were, for their part, stunned. It is now seven months since the Supreme Court ruling, yet today's one-day strike is the first major protest against it.

The principal demand raised by the union federations supporting today's action—the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), and the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), respectively aligned with the CPI (M), CPI, and the Maoist, Socialist Unity Centre of India—is that India's right-wing, Hindu chauvinist-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government "take steps to negate the impact of Supreme Court's observation on the right to strike." The unions are also protesting against that the NDA government's economic policies, which have led to "galloping unemployment, growing poverty, reckless privatization and closures."

Plans for the day of protest predated the NDA's decision to dissolve parliament and seek re-election eight months ahead of schedule. But the Stalinists will no doubt use today's strike to try to refurbish their tattered left credentials, the better to promote their electoral understanding with the Congress, the traditional governing party of the India bourgeoisie and a proponent of capitalist globalization with a "human face."

Given that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the dominant party in the NDA coalition, it is hardly surprising that the bank union affiliated to the BJP, through their joint patronage by the Hindu supremacist RSS, has condemned the strike as "politically motivated" and is urging its members not to take part.

The Congress Party-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) backed out from the strike and issued a statement that, echoing the Supreme Court, denounced “irresponsible trade union” actions for doing “damage” to the working class and the economic growth of the country.

Significantly, the workers most directly impacted by the Supreme Court decision—the Tamil Nadu government employees—will not participate in today’s national strike. No doubt for fear of government reprisals, they are being asked only to join in evening rallies. Since the defeat of last July’s strike, the AIADMK government has continued its attack on the public sector workers, imposing cuts in holidays and other working conditions.

Last summer’s Supreme Court judgment marked a new stage in the drive of India’s corporate and political elite to make the country a magnet for foreign investment by gutting basic worker rights. By stripping public sector workers of the right to strike, the Indian ruling class is both seeking to crush resistance to the privatization of public services and government-owned enterprises and to demonstrate to foreign capital that it is intent on radically changing India’s labor regime. The crux of the “second stage” of reforms initiated by the NDA government and whose speedy implementation is demanded by big business is the dismantling of restrictions on layoffs, closures and the use of contract labor.



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