

Sixty million Indian workers strike against government economic policies

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More than 60 million workers from across India joined a one-day general strike Thursday, September 29, to oppose the neo-liberal economic “reform” plans of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government. These plans include privatisation of many state-owned businesses and changes to labour laws that would gut restrictions on layoffs, plant closures and the contracting-out of work. The strikers were also demanding central government legislation to overturn a Supreme Court ruling that government employees do not have a constitutional right to strike.

According to the Sponsoring Committee of Trade Unions, which called the protest, the strike was complete in the eastern state of West Bengal, in the northeastern states of Tripura and Assam, and in the southern state of Kerala. There was also a “bandh-like situation”—a complete shutdown including general strike and the closure of government and private firms, shops and transport—in the states of Haryana (north-central India), Orissa and Jharkand (eastern India).

To the dismay of big business, air traffic and public banks’ operations were severely affected, with Indian Airlines and private carriers forced to cancel a significant number of flights. Some airports were kept operating only because of the deployment of air force personnel.

Employees attached to the state-owned Airport Authority of India, which administers the country’s airports joined the strike especially to oppose the government’s plans to allow private-sector participation in airport modernisation, including in expanding the airports of New Delhi and Mumbai.

The strike brought operations at public-sector banks, including foreign exchange, deposit-withdrawal, and clearing operations to a grinding halt throughout the country. In Mumbai, India’s financial centre, some Rs. 40 million worth of cheques are cleared daily, but due to the strike, no cheques were cleared. The strike was also near-total in the oil, insurance and telecommunication sectors. More than 70 percent of the country’s 600,000 coal mining workers joined the shutdown. Many industrial plants were also hit by the walkout, including in the industrial belt in Haryana, where in July there was a major confrontation between protesting Honda workers and police.

The strike was principally called by trade unions affiliated to the two main Stalinist Parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI (M), and the Communist Party of India (CPI). These parties lead the Left Front parliamentary alliance, which is propping up the Congress-led UPA in parliament.

Commenting on the widespread participation of workers in the strike, M.K. Pandhe, the president of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—the trade union federation affiliated to the CPI (M)—said the strike was “a success and beyond our expectations.”

The Stalinists remain committed to sustaining the UPA in power for a five-year full-term. Indeed, the one-day strike was initiated by the Left Front and their affiliated unions with the aim of shoring up their anti-neo-liberal credentials, the better to continue their support for the government.

The Left Front and the unions were forced to call for a day of protest because of mounting discontent with the economic policies and pro-US orientation of the Congress-led government, which came to power in May 2004 on a wave of public anger with the neo-liberal policies implemented by the previous Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led regime.

Far from being aimed at consolidating the working class as an independent political force and placing it in the vanguard of the struggle to protect all sections of the oppressed from the rapacious socio-economic agenda of big business, the Stalinists mounted last week’s protest with the aim of tying the working class to a policy of pressuring the UPA into pursuing “pro-people” policies and giving neo-liberal reforms a “human face.”

This orientation was spelled out on the day of the strike, with Gurudas Dasgupta, the general secretary of the CPI-affiliated All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), promising that if the government doesn’t hear the protests, further appeals will be made.

“We have put the United Progressive Alliance Government on notice,” said Dasgupta. “If it does not reverse its policies and take into account the aspirations of the working class, there will be frequent and longer-duration strikes.”

Meanwhile, the CPI (M) suggested that the unions would be willing to work with the government in achieving greater labour-market “flexibility.” Declared the CPI (M) Polibureau, “The strike serves as a warning to the government not to embark upon changes in labour laws *without first holding negotiations with trade unions*” (emphasis added).

The capitalist press said little about the one-day general strike before last Thursday. But on Friday, there was a torrent of vituperous editorial comment. This reaction expresses the nervousness of the Indian ruling class at the growing working-class opposition towards the UPA government’s economic reform measures. It was also meant to send a strong message to the Congress-led UPA not to offer any concessions to secure the parliamentary backing of the Left Front.

Many of the editorials harped on the contradiction between the Left Front organising mass protests against the government and its support for the government remaining in office.

“The real question that needs to be posed to the Left parties,” said the *Hindustan Times*, “is this: if they are so angry with the government that they are willing to literally thrash it outside Parliament, what on earth are they doing in Parliament?”

In an editorial titled “Don’t strike work, look to China for inspiration,” the *Times of India* denounced the strike, while holding up China, which the CPI (M) continues to hail as a socialist country, as an example: “Unions are supposed to stand up for employees: Instead, by fighting to restrict investment they’re hurting their own constituency. And the unions’ Left sponsors should look to China, which attracted over 10 times the \$3.4 billion FDI that India has received so far this year, for clues about what posture to adopt on economic policy.”

In its post-strike editorial, the *Indian Express* decried the Left Front’s influence over the government, although time and again the UPA has pressed through right-wing policies over the Left’s objections: “The nationwide strike by Left-backed trade unions hoped to achieve one thing alone—an ugly show of strength of the Left parties.... If the Left is trying to establish itself as an opposition party, should it not first withdraw support to the UPA rather than strike to show its deep and wide disagreement with the government?”

Although the CPI (M) and its allies called last week’s protest to contain the growing working class discontent and have repeatedly made clear their intention to sustain the UPA in power, the corporate media demands that they refrain from even such actions because they fear they could develop beyond the control of the Stalinist leaders and because they want class relations in India radically restructured to the detriment of the working class and toilers. In particular—as signalled by a recent series of reactionary Supreme Court rulings—India’s ruling class wants to see the country’s long tradition of political strikes, *hartals* and civil disobedience movements stamped out and the prerogatives of capital greatly expanded.

Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram tried to downplay the strike’s economic impact, but spokesmen for big business were outraged. Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry President M.K. Sanghi said, “The strike has paralysed the economic and industrial activities all over the country in a substantial manner, the losses of which are difficult to be measured now.” Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry President Onkar. S. Kanwar said the strike had given a “rude shock” to India’s image as a global economic power: “At a time when India is getting increasingly integrated with the rest of the world, a strike by workers in major infrastructure and financial services will send negative signals overseas.”

World Socialist Web Site correspondents talked with striking workers in Chennai (Madras) in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. They distributed copies of the statement on the strike issued by Wije Dias, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, and published on the WSWs on the day of the strike.

In his statement, Dias showed how the Left Front and union leaders were seeking to harness the growing social discontent to their leadership so as to be able to shackle it to the Congress-led UPA government. He called upon Indian workers to break with the nationalist, parliamentarist and class-collaborationist politics of the Left Front and to base their struggle against the UPA government and the Indian bourgeoisie’s drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for world capital on an international socialist programme.

Wrote Dias: “The Stalinist Communist Party of India, from which the CPI (M) emerged, helped deliver the mass anti-imperialist movement (of the first half of the 20th Century) to the bourgeois Indian National Congress and the horror of partition, by oscillating between hailing the Gandhi-led Congress as the leader of the national-democratic revolution and its World War II support for the British

colonial state. Post-independence, the CPI and subsequently the CPI (M) hailed the bourgeois-led Indian state that came into being out of the abortion of the anti-imperialist struggle, as a bulwark against imperialism. In line with that position, the Stalinists today claim the oppressed masses of India can fight imperialism and the ravages of capitalist globalisation through the Indian capitalist nation-state.

“The SEP and our co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International by contrast insist that the struggle against capitalist globalisation and imperialism is only possible through the unification of the working-class in struggle against capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system. As part of this struggle and in opposition to the foul chauvinist, communalist and casteist politics promoted by the rival bourgeois regimes of South Asia, the SEP fights for a united socialist federation of South Asia.”

The WSWs correspondents discussed the political issues raised in the statement about the strike and plans for meetings in India to be addressed by SEP presidential candidate. Workers enthusiastically responded to this initiative of the SEP to provide revolutionary leadership to the workers across South Asia.

K. Jayakumar, a telecommunication worker in Chennai, said, “[Prime minister] Manmohan Singh’s government is an anti-worker and anti-people government. It has set out to privatise the PSUs [public sector undertakings]. It has opened the door for 74 percent foreign direct investment in the telecom sector. This would mean that BSNL [Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited—the government owned telecommunication company] would go down.”

K. Ramakrishnan, a bus conductor attached to Ayanavaram depot in Chennai was critical of the union leaders: “All the union leaders are selfish. No worker today stands to benefit from the unions. I stand for socialism, whatever form it may take. I will come for the meeting in Madras, which will be addressed by your candidate in the presidential elections to be held in Sri Lanka.”

T. Pandiyan, a technician from the same bus depot, said, “Many workers in our depot are following the developments in Sri Lanka. We are against the state oppression against the Tamil people there. I was born in Deraniyagala in Sri Lanka and came to India when I was small under the Sirima-Shastri Pact [a pact that provided for the forced repatriation of a large number of Tamils from Sri Lanka’s plantation district]. I would like to listen to your candidate in the Sri Lankan presidential elections.”



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