

Leading Indian daily calls for suppression of strikes and unions

Keith Jones
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The New Indian Express, one of India's leading English-language dailies, published an extraordinary editorial in its issue of Friday, September 30, calling for the outlawing of strikes and trade unions.

At the end of a lengthy denunciation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies in the Left Front for having sponsored a one-day general strike against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's right-wing economic policies, the *New Indian Express* declared: "...perhaps the time has come for the Congress to get its act together and actually implement some 'neo-liberal' policies. It could begin by banning trade unions and strikes and freeing India of this scourge forever."

The September 29 general strike—which saw 60 million workers walk off the job—is testament to the continuing mass opposition of India's workers and toilers to the economic "reform" agenda of Indian capital. Seventeen months ago, India's previous ruling coalition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance, was routed at the polls when ordinary Indians were given the opportunity to render verdict on its claims that a surge in foreign investment, profits, and share prices meant India is "shining."

The Congress-led UPA, which survives in office only because it has the parliamentary support of the Left Front, professes alarm at the appalling state of public health care and education and concern for the plight of the poor. But it has pressed forward with implementing the very same big business agenda as did the Hindu-supremacist BJP—privatization, the gutting of all restrictions on layoffs and contracting-out, the slashing of state expenditure on agricultural price supports, the promotion of private-public partnerships, and massive new military expenditures.

Nevertheless, as the *New Indian Express* editorial

attests, sections of Indian big business are impatient with the pace of "reform." Fearing they will lose out in the ever-intensifying global struggle for markets, profits, investment, and resources, they want all working-class and popular opposition to the transformation of India into a cheap labor haven for international capital stamped out.

The Indian state has already moved significantly in this direction, with the courts issuing a series of judgments that threaten democratic rights, including the right to mount *hartals* or political strikes. In the summer of 2003, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that the state government of Tamil Nadu was well within its rights when it fired 200,000 striking government employees and sought to replace them with scabs. The Court then further proclaimed that state employees, and potentially other workers, have no inherent constitutional right to strike.

The *New Indian Express* is a major daily that serves as the flagship of a Chennai-based publishing empire, the "New Indian Express Group of Companies." Its influence and connections to India's business establishment are, however, far greater than this indicates, for the *New Indian Express* and the New Indian Express Group are themselves closely connected to an even larger Mumbai-based company, Indian Express Newspapers. (The two Express groups were created in the late 1990s when the grandsons of *Indian Express* founder Ram Nath Goenka decided to divide up his empire.) Indian Express Newspapers publishes dailies with a combined readership of more than 5 million, including the highly influential *Indian Express* and *Financial Express*.

So close are the two companies that the *Indian Express* and *New Indian Express* share articles and editorials.

On September 30, both papers published as their lead editorial a diatribe against the Left Front titled “Radical hypocrisy: It’s time the Left ended this agony.” Except for the concluding paragraph, the two editorials are identical.

Whereas the *New Indian Express* calls for the “agony” to be ended by the Congress-led government outlawing strikes and unions, the editorial in the *Indian Express* concludes by saying that the Left Front would be “more honest” if it withdrew support for the UPA government.

In other words, the Mumbai *Express* editorial board and branch of the Goenka business empire felt that the Chennai board and branch had gone too far in giving free rein to the anti-democratic animus that animated the editorial and in revealing what powerful sections of the Indian bourgeoisie think. So they replaced the last sentences calling for the banning of unions and strikes—that is, for the establishment of dictatorial forms of rule—while otherwise printing the same editorial verbatim.

Such is the state of class relations in the “world’s largest democracy.”



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