

Indian airport workers strike against privatisation

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A national strike by Indian airport workers against the privatisation of the New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) airports is entering its third day, despite government efforts to intimidate and suppress their protests.

The ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government announced on Tuesday that it had struck a deal to sell off India's two largest and most profitable airports. The New Delhi contract went to a consortium led by GMR, an Indian construction company and Fraport, the operator of the Frankfurt airport. The Mumbai airport will be taken over by GVK, another Indian corporation, and its partner, Airports Company South Africa.

The decision provoked an immediate response by airport workers who are concerned about their jobs and conditions. After an initial three-year period in which all jobs will be protected, the private consortia will have a free hand to slash up to 40 percent of the workforce.

Hundreds of airport employees gathered near the Civil Aviation Ministry in New Delhi for a lunch-hour demonstration on Tuesday. Such was the sentiment among airport workers that the Airports Authority Employees Union (AAEU) was forced to call an indefinite strike of its 23,000 members across the country.

On Wednesday, workers walked off the job in Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata (Calcutta), Chennai (Madras), Bhopal and other airports. According to union officials, 90 percent of airport employees joined the strike. In some centres, such as Hyderabad, workers organised protests but kept working.

Despite the strike, most airports have continued to function even though services have been poor and the movement of cargo delayed. Only in Calcutta did air traffic controllers stop work, forcing the temporary

closure of the airport on Wednesday. The following day, authorities claimed that 30 percent of scheduled flights were taking off.

The Airports Authority of India (AAI) currently manages 125 airports throughout the country including all 11 international airports, 77 domestic airports, 9 airports for customs officials and 28 civilian enclaves inside military airfields. Mumbai and New Delhi are, however, the most important, accounting for 49 percent of all passengers and almost 65 percent of international passengers. The two airports also bring in 33 percent of AAI revenue.

The Congress-led UPA government regards the privatisation of the two airports as a test case for its market reform agenda and has prepared for a confrontation. The decision coincided with the World Economic Forum in Davos where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was seeking to convince foreign investors to come to India. He told corporate executives that his government had made "considerable improvement" in the economy since taking office 20 months ago, adding "there are some problems that the government will tackle with determination".

The government is preparing to use draconian measures to crush the strike. On Tuesday, the Central Industrial Security Force, which is in charge of airport security, was put on alert. The Indian Air Force has also been placed on standby. Home Secretary V.K. Duggal wrote to the chief secretaries and police chiefs in each of the Indian states to bolster security at all government airports.

On Wednesday, police charged and beat protesting workers with lathis or long steel-tipped canes as they attempted to enter the Mumbai airport. On the same day, strikers in New Delhi attempted to set up pickets outside the airport. In response, the government

obtained a court order banning strikers from coming within 500 metres of any airport in the country.

The Singh government's plans may include the invoking of emergency powers. An article on the *Asia Times* website explained: "All AIF [Indian Air Force] air-traffic controllers and ground-control staff have been told to be on 24-hour standby in case the unions carry out their threat and disrupt civil flight operations. Though Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel has since denied the reports, some officials have been quoted as saying that the government could impose the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to prevent the disruption of air traffic. If ESMA is enforced, agitating employees can lose their jobs and benefits if they remain on strike."

The government's determination to proceed was underscored by the cabinet's decision on Wednesday to approve the planned privatisation. The restructuring of the airports is just one aspect of the UPA's efforts to accelerate India's market reforms and substantially increase foreign investment. Currently India attracts about \$6 billion in investment annually, just one tenth of the amount flowing into rival China.

The government has estimated that it needs \$150 billion over the next 10 years to revamp the country's outdated, rundown and overstretched infrastructure. The airports are a case in point. As part of India's growing integration into the global economy, demand for air passenger and cargo services has risen substantially. Passenger traffic is likely to grow by 12 percent each year between now and 2009. The government calculates that \$4.5 billion is needed over the next five years to bring Delhi and Mumbai airports up to international standards.

Corporate leaders are backing a decisive confrontation with airport workers as the means for ramming through the rest of the restructuring agenda. The *Indian Express* called for something akin to a "Thatcherite revolution": "India's political and social complexity means there will be no Maggie Thatcher. But we do need to understand once and for all the social and economic costs of being blackmailed by a militant labour aristocracy."

The real obstacle to the acceleration of market reform is not a "militant labour aristocracy". The trade union leaders, including those of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), only reluctantly called the strike and

have, from the outset, attempted to head off any direct confrontation with the Singh government.

CPI (M) Politburo member Sitaram Yechuri declared on Tuesday that the unions would fight tooth and nail to oppose the airport decision. The CPI (M) is, however, part of the Left Front which is supporting the Singh government in parliament. Yechuri's empty rhetoric is designed to disguise the fact that, behind the scenes, the trade union leaders are seeking a formula to defuse the anger of workers, while allowing the government plan to proceed in all its essentials.

The leaders of various "left" parties, including the CPI (M), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), met yesterday and called for a meeting with the prime minister today. CPI general secretary A.B. Bardhan warned the government that it "cannot deal with the strike using the Essential Services Maintenance Act, the Indian Air Force and by 'oppressive measures'." He called for negotiations as the "only way out for modernisation of Delhi and Mumbai airports".

In other words, Bardhan, on behalf of the left parties and unions, is offering to assist the government to "modernise" the two airports through other methods. While the plan might be somewhat different, the results would be the same—the slashing of jobs and conditions to meet the requirements of international capital. There is no indication, however, that the Singh government is prepared to back down and accept such an offer.

Indian workers should draw the necessary conclusions. If it is able to crush the airport workers, the government will accelerate its onslaught on jobs, conditions and democratic rights. No faith can be placed in the trade unions or their bureaucrats. A different road has to be opened up: the building of an independent political movement of the working class based on genuine socialism rather than the class collaboration that thoroughly imbues the outlook of the so-called "left" parties.



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