

Indian union leaders cave in over airport privatisation

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Indian trade union leaders last Saturday shut down a four-day strike by thousands of airport workers against the privatisation of the country's two major airports in New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay). The walkout had erupted on January 31 after the Indian government agreed to grant long-term leases to two private consortia—GMR-Fraport and GV-ASCA—that will come into effect on March 31.

After meeting first with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh then with Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel on Friday, the union leaders promptly ended the strike. Gurudas Dasgupta, head of the Communist Party of India (CPI)-led union, declared the outcome to be “a victory for striking workers”. “Our demands have been conceded... It was a significant win for the trade unions and a jolt to the government on its privatisation policy,” he reiterated.

These claims bear no relation to reality. The agreements on the Mumbai and Delhi airports are still in place. As part of those deals, the consortia have agreed only to employ at least 60 percent of the current workforce following a three-year period of grace. As a result, hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs remain in question as the private companies seek to restructure the two airports and maximise their profits.

In return for ending the strike, the government agreed to the establishment of a tripartite committee, including government officials, representatives of the state-owned Airport Authority of India (AAI) and the Joint Forum of AAI employees' unions. The committee will “look into the issues and proposals of modernisation of airports by the AAI and employment-related issues, including job security”.

In other words, having conceded that Mumbai and Delhi airports will be privatised, the union leaders will now sit on a corporatist committee to oversee the

“modernisation” plans that the government has for 35 other airports throughout the country. “Modernisation” does not mean the much-needed upgrading of facilities, but a far-reaching restructuring to transform the airports into profitable enterprises, no doubt for eventual sale to private companies.

The government plan for the restructuring of airports is simply one aspect of market reforms aimed at significantly boosting foreign direct investment in India. How Singh dealt with the airport strike was viewed in business circles as a key test of his ability to ram through the rest of the package against widespread opposition among sections of workers and the poor. In shutting down the strike, he relied above all on the so-called “left” parties—the CPI and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

From the outset, the trade unions made clear that they did not want a confrontation with the Singh government. With the exception of Kolkata (Calcutta) airport, the key air traffic controllers were not called out on strike, ensuring that all airports were able to still function. Even at Kolkata, flights resumed after the intervention of West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who heads the Left Front government in the state and is a leading CPI-M figure.

None of these Stalinist parties are opposed in principle to the program of privatisation and restructuring that has over the last decade and a half had such a devastating impact on the living standards of working people. In West Bengal, the Left Front government has been seeking to accelerate the pace of market reform as it tries to compete with other states for foreign investment.

The key meeting on Friday took place between Singh and leaders of the Left Front, which, while not part of the Congress-led government, ensure that it has a

parliamentary majority. All the Left Front leaders were there: CPI-M general secretary Prakash Karat, CPI leader A.B. Bardhan, Forward Block leader G. Devrajan and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) leader Abani Roy, along with the allied union leaders—the CPI’s Dasgupta and the CPI-M’s M.K. Pandhe.

While, unsurprisingly, no transcripts of the discussion have been released, there is no doubt that the “left” leaders took the opportunity to again declare their loyalty to the government and their willingness to assist in airport “modernisation”. In return for ensuring that the Mumbai and Delhi airport deals proceed, Singh conceded them a role in the restructuring of the remaining AAI airports—in particular, Chennai (Madras) and Kolkata.

All that remained was to find a formula to appease striking airport workers. Singh offered a completely worthless written guarantee that no one would lose their job and none of the strikers would be victimised. The details were hammered out in subsequent meetings with union leaders, but the means for scuttling the strike was clearly decided at the meeting with Left Front leaders. All that remained was for CPI union leader Dasgupta to cynically declare that “a victory” for workers had been achieved.

However, no one in the media or business circles was in any doubt as to the meaning of the cave-in by “left” union leaders. An article in the *Financial Express* entitled “PM shows ‘spine’, wins key battle with Left” declared: “India’s government has won a crucial victory against its Communist ‘allies’ over airport modernisation, and will now move forward confidently on its own reform agenda.”

The newspaper quotes analyst Mahesh Rangarajan as saying: “This is a major turning point. The left is on the back foot. Congress has stared it down and made it blink.” Fund manager Surjit Bhalla enthusiastically remarked: “Finally he [Singh] has chosen to call their bluff. Now it’s a different ball game.”

A more perceptive comment on the *Rediff* website entitled “The Left’s ‘own goals’” noted that the Left Front’s “opposition” was just so much hot air. “It might be argued that some of this is just shadow play, and the Left didn’t really want to stop the privatisation of airports, since one of its leading lights Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the chief minister of the Left Front-ruled

West Bengal, had said last year that he would like to privatise Kolkata airport.

“Equally, the Left Democratic Front in Kerala has never criticised or come in the way of the privately-run Kochi airport. The Left’s aim, ahead of the elections in West Bengal and Kerala, was probably to demonstrate to the big public sector unions and their members that it still supported them, a sort of Communist equivalent of going to a temple or a church.”

While none of these “left” parties have anything to do with genuine socialism or communism, the article does underline the cynical political calculations of the Left, which are an integral part of the Indian political establishment. The more intelligent layers of the ruling elite recognise that far from “opposing” the Singh government, the Left Front plays a vital role in propping it up by defusing the mounting anger and frustration of working people.

Following the shutdown of the strike, union leader Dasgupta declared: “We don’t trust the capitalist government and we have to continue our agitation to ensure that other airports are not privatised.” This is nothing but empty rhetoric. Having given the green light for the privatisation of Delhi and Mumbai airports, this union official would have workers believe that the unions will oppose the restructuring at other airports.

The lesson that airport workers should draw is that a genuine struggle to defend jobs and conditions will only take place in a rebellion, not only against the capitalist government of Manmohan Singh, but the Left leaders and union bureaucrats who prop it up politically.



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