

Millions of Indian workers strike against Congress-led government's economic policies

Our correspondents
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Millions of workers throughout India participated in a one-day general strike on Thursday, December 14, to oppose the neo-liberal economic policies that have been implemented single-mindedly by the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government since it came to power in May 2004.

The general strike was called by the trade union centers affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and by other unions representing bank workers, teachers, and employees of various government-owned companies (public sector units).

The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the central union organization aligned with the Congress Party, and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-controlled Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) refused to participate in the strike and denounced it as “politically motivated”. This underscores the fundamental unity of India’s two principal parties in imposing investor-friendly policies.

Thursday’s strike attests to the widespread and mounting opposition of India’s workers and toilers to the slashing of social-welfare and agricultural-price support programs, privatization and the downsizing of the public sector, and other policies aimed at making India a magnet for investment and cheap-labor production for the world market.

However, for the unions and the CPM-led parliamentary coalition—the Left Front—the strike was a maneuver aimed not at mobilizing the working class as an independent political force, but at shackling it to the UPA government. By associating themselves with the popular discontent over the UPA’s economic policies, the Stalinists were also seeking to provide a political cover for their own role in directly implementing neo-liberal reforms in the states where they form the government—West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

While the Left Front criticizes the Congress-led UPA’s economic policies, it continues to provide the votes necessary to sustain the minority UPA coalition in office and urges workers to focus their energies on pressing the UPA to implement the so-called Common Minimum Program (CMP). The government’s ostensible program, the CMP is based on the lie that it is possible to reconcile the bourgeoisie’s incendiary socio-economic program with the needs of the masses—to pursue neo-liberal reforms “but with a human face.”

The strike was total in Stalinist-ruled Kerala, which lies in the south, and in Tripura in the northeast, with businesses and schools

and state-run and private busses and trucks off the road.

In West Bengal, where the Left Front has formed the government since 1977, normal business was effectively shutdown with the exception of the Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled sector.

After the IT and business-processing bosses complained bitterly about the profits they lost due to a similar one-day protest in September 2005, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee vowed his government would ensure that the sector was not effected by any future strikes or protests. Toward that end, the government mobilized security forces to prevent picketing of IT and business-processing operations.

This was just was one of a series of measures taken by the Left Front state government to demonstrate its opposition to the strike. Bhattacharjee ordered that all government workers who failed to report for work December 14 should be docked a day’s pay and his government took steps to force private sector workers who did strike to compensate their employers by working on Saturday.

In most other states, the strike severely affected banking, insurance companies, ports and docks, the textile industry, education and the coal sector.

Teachers are angered by the UPA government’s new pension bill. It introduces a Contributory Pension Scheme to be financed through a 10 percent cut in monthly salaries. The pension money is to be handed over to domestic and foreign investment firms who will invest it, making profits from both the management of the scheme and the return on investment.

Other major demands raised by the strikers included: legislation to restore the right to strike (in 2003 the Supreme Court ruled public sector workers have no constitutional right to strike); scrapping of VRS (Voluntary Retirement Schemes) that have been used to eliminate public sector jobs; and a halt to the government’s policies of contracting-out work and leaving jobs in the public sector, including the railways, vacant. (There are said to be some two million vacancies.)

In Bangalore, the south Indian city dubbed the Silicon Valley of India, workers in various public sector units in and around the city, including the banking and insurance sector, joined the strike. Eighty thousand auto rickshaws were also off the road as auto rickshaw workers joined the strike in protest against the state government’s campaign to penalize drivers for minor violation of permit rules.

There was also strong support for the strike in Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamilnadu. Most of the workers in banks, insurance companies and in several state government departments went on strike, while railway, state transport, and airport workers demonstrated in support of the strike.

In a bid to suppress the protest, Tamilnadu's DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) government arrested thousands of workers across the state when they attempted to block roads and otherwise courted arrest.

While most of the workers were subsequently released without charge, the DMK government's action was a clear message that it will use massive repression in the event of any labor upsurge just like its long-time rival the AIADMK (All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) did. In 2003, the then AIADMK government fired thousand of public employees when they went on strike. This action was later endorsed by the Supreme Court when it ruled that public employees have no inherent constitutional right to strike.

The DMK is among the most important members of the UPA and the DMK state government is supported by the CPM and CPI.

In an attempt to minimize the impact of the strike, the unions refused to call out 1,800,000 employees of the government-owned Indian railways and telecommunication services. But expressing their keenness to fight the UPA government's economic policies workers in those sectors took part in gate meetings and protest rallies.

In West Bengal, the CPM-affiliated Center of Indian Trade Unions obediently went along with the state Chief Minister Bhattacharjee's demand that the workers in the burgeoning information technology (IT) and information technology-enabled service (ITES) sector be kept out of the strike. West Bengal CITU President Shyamal Chakravarty stated that the strike "would not send any wrong message" to prospective investors outside the State."

The CITU ensured that there was no picketing at Kolkata's IT hub, Salt Lake. However, as a result of the shut down of public transport as many half of the IT and ITES workers were unable to go to work. Others were forced by the employers to sleep overnight in workplaces so they could work during the strike.

In an interview given to *Frontline* magazine prior to the strike, Chakravarty declared the CITU's full agreement with Bhattacharjee's "industrialization" policy—that is with the Stalinists' attempt to induce investors to take advantage of the state's abundant supplies of cheap labor by promising them tax concessions, cheap land, and "labor peace."

Said Chakravarty: "Our State government wants industry, the CITU also wants industry. . . . There is no clash of interest here. . . . And like the State government, we don't want to send the wrong signals to investors." He charged: "All these so-called differences between the government and the CITU are a creation of a section of the media."

The corporate media responded to the September 2005 one-day strike with venomous denunciations of the Stalinists for disrupting production and fanning discontent. On this occasion their response has been much more restrained, for they recognize that the Left Front leaders are committed to sustaining the UPA in power,

whatever their bluster.

Communist Party of India (CPI) leader Gurudas Dasgupta told the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian parliament, on the day of the strike: "You have enjoyed the support of the Left, while completely ignoring our views. This cannot go on for long." Speaking in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house, CPI (M) leader Sitaram Yechury "warned" the UPA against not heeding the workers' demands.

But the Left Front leaders have made such statements repeatedly during the past two and a half years, only to then turn around and tell workers that the UPA must be sustained in office as the only way to prevent the BJP's return to power.

WSWS correspondents spoke to several workers in Chennai on day of the strike.

S. Nadan, 45, works at the Carriage Works of the Indian Railway. His union All India Railway Federation did not participate in the strike. "We are not striking we are only demonstrating in support of our raft of 16 demands. The railway minister is talking of raising the profits of the railways to an all-time record of 210 billion [rupees] while there are more than 100,000 vacancies to be filled. They have not paid us the interim allowance which the government promised they will pay within one month when we called off our strike in February demanding the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations."

P. Kamalakkannan, 52, also from Carriage Works, said: "From experience I am saying that the days are over when you can strike and win something. Nowadays you can strike, protest or sit-in *dharna* [sit-down protest] but nothing can be won. The CPI (M) and CPI, if they are serious about what they are telling us, should tell the government, particularly in the railways where it making huge profits out of our sweat, to agree to our demands immediately or they should withdraw their support."

K. Loganathan from Loco Works of Indian Railway, said: "Today if you strike they will send you home or the union leaders will get their suitcases and betray us completely. The prices are going up. Our salaries are not enough. We are forced to borrow from moneylenders to whom we have to pay monthly interests of 10 rupees for every 100 rupees. If you don't pay they catch you by the shirt collar when you come out of the factory gate or will be at your house with their men. This is the situation we are living in. I don't know how my family is going to face the future."



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