

Indian government savagely suppresses oil and truck-driver strikes

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India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has spearheaded a state campaign to break two strikes in the past week. The first involved 50,000 white-collar workers at a dozen government-owned oil and natural gas companies, the second several million truck drivers, most of them owner-operators.

The UPA government quashed the strikes by jailing strike leaders, instructing state governments to invoke draconian antistrike laws (Essential Service Maintenance Acts), urging the oil companies to fire strikers en masse, and threatening to deploy the army to move supplies, impound trucks, and make mass arrests. In both instances, the central government insisted that no negotiations would take place while the strikes continued.

On Monday, the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) ordered an end to an eight-day strike that had paralyzed commercial trucking in much of India in return for a government promise to consider the truckers' grievances.

The central government is setting up a 14-member committee to review the truckers' demands for lower diesel and tire prices, reduced interstate tolls and a single national driving-permit. Its non-binding report is supposed to be issued within eight weeks.

The AIMTC, an umbrella organization of state trucking associations whose leadership has until recently been close to the Congress Party, will have four representatives on the committee, while the All India Confederation of Goods Vehicles Owners Association (AIGVOA), a smaller, rival truckers' organization which opposed the strike will have one. The other nine members of the committee will be central and state government ministers and officials, thus leaving no doubt that the views of India's big business elite will prevail.

As part of the agreement ending the strike, the central government agreed to the early release of the AIMTC's

president, Charan Singh Lohara, and 31 other association leaders. The AIMTC leaders were arrested after many states, including Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan, invoked "essential services" legislation. At least six of the strike leaders, including Lohara, were also detained under the National Security Act (NSA), a catch-all draconian law that empowers authorities to jail anyone deemed a threat to "national security."

The AIMTC's surrender before the UPA-led campaign of threats and repression came on the heels of the collapse of a massive strike mounted by the Oil Sector Officers Association (OSOA), an umbrella body representing white-collar workers at a dozen oil and natural gas PSUs (Public Sector Undertakings).

The OSOA scuttled the strike on its third day, just when it was beginning to cause serious petrol and gas shortages in many of India's big cities, with up to 80 percent of petrol stations reporting that they had run out of supplies.

India's Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Murli Deora had threatened the union leadership with arrest and prosecution under state EMSA laws and the NSA, if the strike, which various High Courts had ruled illegal, was not immediately called off. In 2003, India's Supreme Court declared public sector workers have no constitutional right to strike, endorsing a vicious strikebreaking campaign being mounted by Tamil Nadu's AIADMK government.

To give weight to his threat, Deora, who had claimed the strike had plunged the country into war-like conditions, had begun to mobilize the army to move oil products. The UPA government had also urged the oil companies to fire strike leaders and, if necessary, to dismiss the strikers en masse. By the time the strike was called off, at least 70 strikers had been fired.

Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram soon threatened similar action against the truckers, declaring

that the UPA government was taking "firm action" to force an end to the strike. "I can't go into details but if someone from the army has to be called, they will be called."

The UPA government's savage response to the oil workers' and truckers' strikes was clearly intended to serve as a warning to the working class. The Indian elite fears mounting economic crisis will provoke social struggles and widespread unrest.

The Congress-led UPA's strikebreaking is in keeping with the government's recent lurch far to the right. Last July, the UPA effectively kicked the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front out of the government, so it could implement a civilian nuclear treaty with the US that is meant to underpin a "global, strategic" partnership between Washington and Delhi.

The UPA has used last November's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai to ratchet up pressure on India's arch-rival Pakistan and to introduce sweeping new anti-terrorism laws that undermine basic civil liberties.

The corporate media strongly supported the government's campaign to crush the two strikes. In a January 10 editorial titled "Over a barrel," the *Times of India* denounced the oil workers, who by then had returned to work, as all but treasonous: "The strike couldn't have been timed worse, coming on the heels of Mumbai's 26/11 terror strikes, the financial crisis and consequent economic downturn, the Satyam meltdown [referring to a leading IT company that is on the verge of collapse due to an Enron-style financial scandal] and the truckers' strike. Launched in defiance of restraining orders passed by Delhi and Gauhati high courts, the strike by a well-off section of society—moreover one to which other means for satisfaction of its grievances are available—doesn't say a lot about their sensitivity to the country's plight. Indeed the strike may have been designed to take advantage of it, which amounts to blackmail."

The editorial went on, in the name of eliminating the threat that a future strike could shut down India's oil sector, to urge the industry be privatized. "If changing the status quo," declared the *Times*, "means privatizing oil PSUs, so be it."

Following the collapse of the oil employees' strike, UPA Petroleum Minister Deora postured as a conqueror, saying, "I am glad they are all back and they will now work on Saturday and Sunday to compensate for two lost days." Deora's cabinet colleagues, egged on by the press,

meanwhile set about using similar methods against the truckers.

The truckers' strike involved big trucking companies (small in comparison with trucking companies in Europe and North America) that employ poorly-paid drivers. But the vast majority of those who struck are independent owner-operators. At the protest's height, according to some estimates, as many as 4 million truckers may have pulled their trucks from the road.

The truckers mounted the strike because they are being squeezed by the combined impact of a steep fall in India's growth rate—in October industrial production fell for the first time on a year-to-year basis since 1993—and artificially high fuel and tire prices. Also, the truckers are angered by the high tolls they must pay, and the numerous permits they must acquire, when they cross state lines.

The truckers were seeking a decrease of ten rupees (about 20 US cents) per liter in the price of diesel. The per liter price of diesel was increased to Rs. 35, when the price of a barrel of oil was around \$135. Although prices have since plunged to well under \$50 per barrel, the government has resisted lowering oil prices. Similarly, truckers complain that tire prices do not reflect the collapse in rubber prices.

In response to complaints by the truckers and others that the government and government-owned oil companies are profiteering from the fall in world oil prices, Deora has said the UPA is considering removing all controls on oil and natural gas prices. While such a move would result in a fall in prices in the short-term, it would leave the population, especially the 800 million Indians who struggle to survive on less than \$2 per day, at the mercy of gyrations in the world price of oil.



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