

India's almond workers mount militant strike

Kranti Kumara
24 December 2009

In what is perhaps the biggest strike in recent years in India's "unorganized" sector, 20,000 to 30,000 almond workers and their families have been mounting a militant strike for the past 11 days in Karwal Nagar, a town in north-eastern Delhi, India's capital territory.

In Indian parlance, the unorganized sector comprises artisanal and small-scale production and much of the trade and service sectors. Although the "unorganized" sector employs the vast majority of India's workers, it is almost entirely unregulated and workers effectively have no rights or social security.

The strike that has paralyzed India's globally-integrated almond processing industry began Dec. 14. Yesterday, Dec. 23, around 2,000 predominantly female workers held a boisterous demonstration near the 18th-Century astronomical observatory Jantar-Mantar located in the centre of New Delhi.

The striking workers, who formed their own union named the Badam Mazdoor Sangh (BMU—Almond Workers Union) about one year ago, are demanding "regularization" (official recognition that grants them certain rights) and an increase in their piece-rate wages roughly comparable to the minimum wage standards set by the Indian government for the "organized sector."

The almond workers are processing nuts from the US, Canada, and Australia largely for re-export.

They endure slave-labour type conditions, earning a meagre Rs. 50 (US \$1) in wages for each 23 Kg. bag of almonds that they process. They are demanding a wage rate of Rs. 80 per bag.

On Dec. 17, when thousands of female workers took to the streets in a peaceful demonstration, they came under attack from goons hired by the petty contractors who directly oversee the processing of the almonds for large corporations. Several workers were injured, but the workers fought back and pelted the thugs with stones and other objects. As a result, four of the

attackers were injured. Predictably, the police responded by going into action against the striking workers.

While taking no action against the contractors and their hired thugs, the Karwal Nagar police hauled several workers, including the BMU leaders, into jail and charged them with several offenses. The police authorities held bleeding and otherwise visibly injured workers in custody for two days without providing them any medical aid. On Dec. 19 the police released the arrested BMU workers on bail, while the real culprits—the company goons—got off without so as much as a warning.

Such open partisanship for the hired thugs of business has become standard practice for Indian police. In July 2005, a large contingent of police brutally and in premeditated fashion attacked striking Honda workers in Gurgaon on the outskirts of Delhi. The sheer brutality of the attack by the police upon these workers who were doing nothing other than making minimal demands for improvement of their working conditions and wages caused widespread shock and outrage across India.

According to the BMU and its sympathizers, the profits on a single bag of 23 Kgs. of almonds amounts to Rs. 7000 (about \$150) most of which is split between the foreign suppliers, the large domestic companies that obtain the processing contracts from the suppliers, and the local petty sub-contractors who oversee the brutal exploitation of the indigent workers who break the shells and prepare the almonds. Since the workers are paid piece-rate, they are driven to process as many bags as possible per day.

Adding insult to injury, the petty subcontractors force the workers to pay for the almond shells, which they use as fuel for cooking.

These most oppressed workers have been spurred into strike action as a result of the intense suffering they are

being subjected to under the twin blows of the ongoing crisis of world capitalism and a callous ruling elite that has totally subordinated its policies to the profit interests of big business.

Food prices in India are soaring under the impact of drought and international speculation in agricultural products. Earlier this month, the Indian government reported that the wholesale food price index was up 19.95 percent from a year ago. According to all reports, the price increases experienced by ordinary consumers are significantly higher.

The almond workers strike is part of a growing wave of militant struggles by Indian workers that is causing concern in corporate boardrooms around the world. Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* carried a report titled “Deadly labor wars hinder India’s rise.”

“Battle lines are being drawn in labor actions across India,” the article declared. “Factory managers, amid the global economic downturn, want to pare labor costs and remove defiant workers. Unions are attempting to stop them, with slowdowns and strikes that have led at times to bloodshed. The disputes are fuelled by the discontent of workers, many of whom say they haven’t partaken of the past decade’s prosperity.”

However these militant struggles are being undercut by the pernicious role played by the Stalinist Communist Parties. Time and again over the past two decades, the Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) have supported central Indian governments that have implemented neo-liberal restructuring, and in those states where they hold office the Stalinists parties have likewise pursued pro-investor policies. Their trade union affiliates, meanwhile, confine workers’ struggles to the narrowest economic demands and encourage workers to pressure various capitalist politicians to intervene on their behalf. The inevitable result of these policies is the smothering of the class struggle to the advantage of big business.

For example on October 23 of this year around 100,000 workers in the Gurgaon industrial belt located in the state of Haryana next to Delhi, walked out in solidarity with striking Rico Automobile Industries workers. The workers were displaying their anger after coming to know that company-hired thugs killed a 26-year-old worker in an unprovoked attack. Despite the militant and determined mood of the workers, the strike was betrayed after the Stalinist Communist Party

of India-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) cut a deal with the company management. (See: “India: Union calls off militant Rico strike”)

Soaring food prices and the increased economic insecurity and social inequality produced by two decades of capitalist restructuring have created explosive class tensions across India and are now giving rise to a wave of militant workers’ struggles. These struggles must be united and imparted with a new political perspective—the struggle for a workers’ and toilers’ government committed to socialist policies and a radical restructuring of agrarian relations in favour of the smaller peasants and agricultural workers.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact