

250,000 jute workers continue indefinite strike in West Bengal

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Two hundred and fifty thousand jute workers in West Bengal have been on indefinite strike since Dec. 14 to force their employers to pay back wages and other arrears, some of them dating back years.

Some 20 union federations were forced to call the strike under mounting rank-and-file pressure after the failure of five rounds of tripartite negotiations involving officials from West Bengal's Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front state government.

The strike has shut 52 of the 54 jute mills in West Bengal currently in operation. Another 10 or more have been shut because their owners are making no or insufficient profit.

Unions supporting the strike include those associated with the Left Front, as well as the Congress Party-aligned Indian National Trade Union Congress and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, which is an offshoot of the Hindu supremacist RSS. Workers at the two mills that are not participating in the strike belong to unions affiliated with West Bengal's official opposition, the Trinamool Congress. Over the past three years, the Trinamool Congress has cynically sought to exploit popular anger with the pro-investor policies of the Stalinist-led state government. But, as its scabbing on the jute strike underlines, it is a rightwing capitalist party.

Union leaders have said they will not call off the strike until at least some of the workers' minimum demands are met.

Workers in West Bengal's jute industry have repeatedly been forced on strike over the past decade, including in 2002, 2004, and for 63 days in 2007 and 18 days in 2008. As in other industries in India, the jute bosses have increasingly resorted to temporary or

contract laborers and made wage compensation ever more dependent on productivity targets. They have also repeatedly reneged on prior agreements and used lockouts and the non-payment of wages and benefits as a means to extort concessions mill by mill.

The Left Front government has facilitated this attack by failing to vigorously enforce the state's labor regulations and by introducing contract labor in other sectors, including education and health care.

According to Gurudas Dasgupta, a leader of the Communist Party of India and the All India Trades Union Congress, the unions are not asking for a wage increase but for the payment of monies owed and full implementation of the January 5, 2002, "benchmark" settlement that was reached under the mediation of the Left Front government.

The employers have repeatedly flouted the provisions of the 2002 settlement. But when it was drawn up, the settlement was condemned as a sell out by many jute workers, because it sanctioned a productivity-linked wage system and several new categories of contract labourers. Whether called "voucher," "temporary" or "zero" employees, the contract workers receive less than half of the 200 rupees (\$4 US) or more daily wage paid permanent workers, have no access to the Provident Fund (a retirement scheme) or ESI (health insurance), and have no guarantees as to the numbers of days they will work annually.

The jute workers are owed on average 35,000 rupees (\$750) in wages, the equivalent of almost half a year's work for permanent employees. There are also substantial sums outstanding for the Provident Fund, gratuity (a second pension scheme), and ESI.

The state of West Bengal contributes half of the world's production of jute, a fibre used to make bags and other packaging materials. There are nearly four

million farmers involved in raw jute production in West Bengal. Across India, twenty-five million people are said to be dependent on the jute industry for their livelihood, including 5 million farmers and 600,000 workers, traders and brokers.

The industry has been in long term decline due to the development of synthetic packaging materials. Sections of Indian big business have been pressing for years for the government to weaken or scrap regulations that stipulate that some goods must be made of jute.

Last September the national Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs decided to uphold the existing regulation that only jute bags be used in packaging sugar and food grains purchased by government procuring agencies. This regulation, enacted under the 1987 *Jute Packaging Material (Compulsory use in Packing Commodities) Act*, is estimated to be responsible for 58 percent of India's total jute consumption.

Anticipating that the government would allow up to a quarter of sugar and food grain bags to be made out of synthetic materials—as a committee headed by the Union Textile Ministry had recommended—jute traders last summer were cutting prices, resulting in a sharp decline of both raw jute and jute bag prices.

Another factor contributing to the decline in jute prices was the recession in the Middle East and Europe.

In recent weeks, raw jute prices have suddenly risen, at least in part because speculators have been buying up futures.

The employers, needless to say, are citing the gyrations in the price of jute and jute products and more generally the crisis in the world capitalist economy as justification for refusing to meet the workers' just and very minimal demands.



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