

India: Unions shut down two-month jute workers strike

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Indian unions in the state of West Bengal called off a two-month strike of around 250,000 jute mill workers on February 12 without any of the basic demands of the strikers being met. This betrayal will inevitably set the stage for a further assault on the working class within the state and more broadly.

The Congress-led government in New Delhi and the Left Front state government led by Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) collaborated in undermining the strike. The sell-out agreement was the outcome of tripartite negotiations involving 15 unions, the state labour ministry and mill owners' representatives. West Bengal's labour minister, Anadi Kumar Sahu, was present at the signing.

The lengthy strike involving 52 jute mills was having a significant economic impact in West Bengal, where the growing and processing of jute for sacks and other purposes has traditionally been a major industry. Since the 1990s, Indian jute producers have faced growing competition from other countries and also synthetic packaging. After the global economic downturn hit in 2008, mill owners sought to impose new burdens on their poorly paid workers.

As the strike continued, the state and central government came under pressure from employers to intervene. The *Business Standard* reported on February 16 that the 61-day strike had cost a total of 22 billion rupees or \$US475 million. Business groups were also concerned that the strike could trigger militancy among other sections of workers who have been hit as a result of India's deteriorating economy.

The impetus for talks came from Textile Minister Dayanidhi Maran and Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee

in New Delhi. Banerjee is also leader of the Trinamul Congress (TC), the main opposition party in West Bengal. On February 5, following talks with Banerjee, Maran called a press conference to announce that the government would take steps to reopen the jute mills within a week.

Not to be left out, the state government also joined the marathon negotiations. Biman Bose, CPI-M leader and Left Front chairman, publicly stated on February 9 that the state government would "have to play a more active role in seeking a solution to the stalemate".

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Chattarjee had already advised Gobinda Guha, the leader of CPI-M controlled Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union (BCMU), the largest jute trade union, not to press all of its demands. As Guha told the press: "The chief minister heard our demands when we met him and said that it would be difficult to have the entire settlement in one stroke, suggesting that we should examine the scope of a phase-wise settlement".

The right-wing Trinamul Congress (TC), which has been posturing as an opponent of the CPI-M's pro-market policies, also joined in. The party instructed its affiliated union to scab on the striking jute workers, saying that it did not subscribe to "work disruptions". TC leader Banerjee is already trying to capitalise on her intervention in the jute strike to solicit support from big business for a bid to oust the Left Front at state elections in 2011.

Officials from the Textile Ministry held marathon meetings with jute mill owners, the unions and labour ministry officials from the central and state level on February 9 and 10 to draw up an agreement to shut down the strike.

The unions had put forward a series of demands on behalf of workers. These included permanency for contract workers and ending the practice of keeping a large portion of the workforce as casuals for years. Money deducted from wages had to be deposited, as legally required, into the Provident Fund (a retirement scheme) and health insurance (ESI). Arrears had to be paid on a cost-of-living allowance known as the Dearness Allowance (DA) as well as the provident fund, gratuities and bonuses.

The tripartite agreement was a sell-out in every aspect. Contract workers will receive a rise in their daily wage from 100 to 157 rupees—that is, from \$US2.20 to \$US3.40. The demand for DA arrears to be paid within three months has been watered down to six instalments over three years. Furthermore, future DA payments will be made quarterly, not monthly. Employers only agreed to “consider” all the other demands, but made no commitments.

In return, the unions agreed to enforce a no-strike clause for the next three years. BCMU leader Guha told the media: “Most of the demands have been considered... There will be no strike for the next three years.” The guarantee ensures that employers will have a free hand to make further inroads into the jobs, pay and conditions of jute workers.

Of the 20 unions covering jute workers, 15 were part of the negotiations and signed the deal. Five others—including the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), affiliated to Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI)—did not formally sign. However, while declaring the agreement did not benefit workers much, they nevertheless agreed to end the strike.

Mill owners are notorious for not depositing deductions from workers’ pay into government accounts established for the Provident Fund and health insurance. As a result of what amounts to theft, workers are short-changed on their retirement and health care entitlements. In some cases, they are unable to get the medical treatment they need at ESI-funded hospitals.

The strike is not the first industrial action in West Bengal’s jute industry. Major strikes took place in 2002,

2004, for 63 days in 2007 and 18 days in 2008. Even when collective agreements have been reached, employers simply resort to lockouts and non-payment of wages to force more onerous productivity targets on workers. Employers have been able to act with impunity because of the collusion of the Left Front government which refuses to enforce its own limited state labour regulations.

The WSWS spoke to workers at the Mathkal jute mill in Titagarh, a few days before the strike was called off. As in many other mills only one-third of the workforce of 3,500 workers is permanent, receiving a daily wage of 250 rupees. Contract workers receive the 2002 benchmark of 100 rupees a day. Many workers were sceptical about the unions and the outcome of negotiations.

One worker said: “The Provident Fund is deducted from workers wages, but not paid properly to the retiring workers. From 1997 to 2009, nearly 3,000 workers retired from this mill. Each worker is supposed to get hundreds of thousands of rupees, depending on their service. Most of the workers had worked at the mill more than 30 years. Out of the 3,000, less than 100 workers got 90,000 rupees from the PF, and the others got less than that.”

Subhas Jana retired after 42 years in 2007 and received just 62,000 rupees from the provident fund. He argued with management but was told: “Take it or leave it, if you don’t take it now you may not get it even in the future”.

Chandan Seth, 25, who has been working in the mill since 2001, said: “We need a minimum of food to live. But with our poor wages we find it very difficult to manage our life.” His wage is 138 rupees per day.

Sarat, 40, who has been working in Mathkal Jute mill for 17 years, said: “None of the unions are working for the workers’ interest. We know the Congress government is for the industrialists. But what about the Left? This Left CPI and CPI-M are mainly responsible for the present conditions of workers.”



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