

# Indian Telecom workers commence national strike

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20 April 2010

Around 300,000 workers employed by Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL), are due to start an indefinite national strike today against the Indian government's plans to restructure the state-owned telecommunications corporation and sell off a 30 percent share in its stock. The restructuring includes a massive downsizing by 100,000 employees, which the government claims will take place through a so-called Volunteer Retirement Scheme (VRS).

The strike has been called by the Joint Action Committee (JAC), which includes BSNL unions aligned to India's ruling Congress party, as well as the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). The JAC has been involved in talks with the government and management since January when the restructuring plans were announced.

JAC representatives met on Friday with Telecommunication Minister Shri A. Raja who made clear that the proposals would be implemented with only minor changes. According to the unions, Raja recommended that the 30 percent disinvestment be referred to a ministerial committee. He claimed that the VRS was "purely voluntary" and that a revision would be considered on pensions and communicated within four months. The unions had called for an end to privatisation, the retrenchments and the proposed outsourcing of aspects of the business.

The BSNL restructuring constitutes a major attack on jobs and working conditions. A government-appointed committee headed by prominent businessman Sam Pitroda drew up the plans in an effort to make the state-

owned corporation viable in the country's highly competitive telecommunications market. BSNL has slipped to fifth position behind the privately owned Bharti Airtel. The company is expected to make losses for the first time in 2009-10.

The BSNL measures are part of the government's broader plans to cut public spending. The national budget presented by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee in February aims to reduce the deficit from 6.7 percent of GDP to 4.8 percent in 2011-12. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is preparing to disinvest by 10 percent in all profitable public sector undertakings (PSUs) and to sell shares in as many as 60 PSUs in the next couple of years.

A mid-term appraisal report of the 11th Five-Year Plan submitted by the Indian Planning Commission to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on March 23, insisted on "an aggressive program of disinvestment in PSUs" to curtail the fiscal deficit. As finance minister in 1991, Singh was responsible for launching the pro-market agenda that has been followed by successive Indian governments and led to widespread privatisation, deregulation and restructuring.

A genuine struggle against the far-reaching BSNL restructuring involves a political struggle against the UPA government. But all the unions involved are affiliated with political parties that support the government's pro-market policies. Congress is the leading party in the UPA coalition, while the opposition right-wing BJP pursued a similar economic program before losing the 2004 national election. The Stalinist parties—the CPI and CPM—backed the incoming Congress-led government for four years, claiming that

it would be susceptible to mass pressure. In order to attract foreign investors, the CPM-led state government in West Bengal pursues policies that are in line with those of the UPA.

The unions have called the strike in response to a groundswell of opposition from workers who are deeply concerned about their jobs and conditions. But the JAC will seek a formula to end the campaign as quickly as possible.

The first step toward privatisation was taken in 2000 when the BJP-led government proposed to establish BSNL as a state-owned, profit-making corporation separate from the Department of Telecommunications. The National Federation of Telecom Employees (NFTE), the Federation of National Telecom Organizations (FNTO) and Bharatiya Telecom Employees Federation (BTEF)—affiliated to the CPI, Congress and the BJP respectively—were instrumental in allowing the government’s plan to proceed.

The three unions organised a one-day strike, but caved in when a group of ministers under communication minister Ram Vilas Paswan promised to guarantee jobs and pension rights along with a monthly pay rise of 1,000 rupees. With the complicity of the unions, BSNL was established in October 2000, six months ahead of plan.

The CPM-aligned BSNL Employees Union (BSNLEU) was formed in March 2001 through the merger of eight small unions operating inside the company. The BSNLEU exploited the betrayal of the other three major unions to posture as a militant organisation fighting for the rights of workers. BSNLEU general secretary V.A.N. Namboodiri is the convener of the joint committee of all BSNL unions.

After the Pitroda committee proposals were announced in January, the unions held a series of talks with Department of Telecommunications officials and BSNL management. Facing widespread anger among workers, the JAC held protests on March 13 and 26, then announced the indefinite strike on March 23.

The JAC’s slogan of “save BSNL” is a clear

indication that the unions are prepared to collaborate with management and the government to make the company profitable—as long as it remains in government hands. In March, the company reported a loss of 36 billion rupees (\$US810 million). Inevitably, to “save BSNL” will mean major inroads into the jobs, pay and conditions of workers along the lines of the Pitroda committee.

Workers looking for a way to defend their basic rights must begin to take their own independent action by establishing rank-and-file committees and turning to other sections of the working class in India and internationally facing similar attacks. Such a struggle can go forward only if it is based on a socialist program to abolish the capitalist system that puts private profit ahead of the basic social needs of working people.



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