

State repression beats back Jammu and Kashmir public sector strike

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Unions representing 450,000 public sector workers in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) bowed Wednesday before an escalating campaign of state repression and called off a militant twelve day-old strike.

For days the strikers—teachers, civil servants, hospital workers, and employees of state-owned enterprises, including an electrical utility—had defied an order issued by the state government declaring their strike illegal under India's anti-worker Essential Services Maintenance Act (EMSA).

On Tuesday, the J&K High Court instructed the state government to intensify its efforts to break the strike. "The state," ruled the court, "must take all necessary steps to take stern legal action against the employees who have proceeded on strike."

The High Court based its judgment on an infamous 2002 Supreme Court ruling that public sector employees in India do not have a constitutional right to strike. This ruling empowers India's Union and state governments to declare strikes illegal at will, arrest strikers and strike leaders, and threaten draconian reprisals, including mass firings.

Before the court ruling, the state government—a coalition between the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, a Kashmiri regional party, and the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's coalition government—had already resorted to extreme threats and measures to break the strike.

These included:

- The arrest of at least 6 union leaders and more than 100 strikers.
- Orders from the state government for local authorities to videotape picket lines so militant workers could be identified for future reprisals.
- A violent police attack, using water cannon and baton-charges, on a crowd of strikers in the state capital Srinagar

which left more than 20 workers injured.

- A threat from the government to begin firing strikers, starting last Monday.

- A "leak" by senior government officials to *Greater Kashmir* that the J and K Chief Minister and National Conference head Omar Abdullah had asked the General Administration Department to prepare a list of "troublemakers" spearheading the agitation so that they could "be dealt with severely."

On April 12, the President of the Jammu and Kashmir Pradesh (state) Congress Committee, Prof Saifuddin Soz, said that if the government workers did not soon return to work he would organize for scabs or blacklegs to replace them "We don't say," Soz declared, "that their demands are not genuine, but to go on strike and hold the entire state as hostage is not justified. If they fail to return within next 3-days, I will mobilize the party workers to replace them."

To lend weight to his threat, Soz pointed to the large number of unemployed in the state, which has among the highest unemployment rates in all of India. "There are thousands of educated unemployed youth waiting for jobs," said Soz. If the public sector workers "don't mend their ways, government will be left with no other option other than to bring in new people."

Within hours of Tuesday's court ruling at least one union had announced it was ending the strike. On Wednesday, the others followed suit, claiming that Chief Minister Abdullah had agreed to meet with their leaders to discuss the workers' demands.

These include: the back-dating of a wage increase granted last July 31 to Jan. 2006 as was recommended by the Sixth (National) Pay Commission; an increase in the retirement age from 58 to 60 years; and permanent jobs for ad-hoc, daily and temporary employees.

"We have decided to suspend the agitation on the assurances of the chief minister and hope all our arrested

colleagues would soon be released by the government," said Khurshid Alam, president of the Employees' Joint Action Committee.

Alam's statement underscores that the strike has been called off by the unions without even obtaining guarantees from the government that all reprisals against the strikers will be withdrawn, let alone winning any binding commitment from the government to meet the workers' demands.

The strike, which began April 3, brought together Hindu and Muslim workers in a common struggle, thus underscoring the objective unity of the working class in a state that has long been highly communally polarized.

India's only Muslim majority state, Kashmir has been convulsed by an insurgency against Indian rule for the past twenty years—an insurgency provoked by Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government's brazen fraud in the 1987 state elections and the rise of Hindu supremacism in northern India.

In suppressing the insurgency, Indian authorities have imposed sweeping restrictions on civil liberties, frequently targeting the entire Muslim population, and employed great violence, including summary executions and torture. The insurgents, for their part, have carried out communal attacks on Hindus and other non-Muslims.

An Indian newspaper took note of the unity between Hindu and Muslim workers exhibited in the strike, saying that unlike the demands raised in other agitations in recent years the strikers' were not "confined to one particular group only."

Despite the significance of the strike and the savage repression launched against it, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner in the Left Front, did nothing to mobilize support for it across India or prepare workers for a political struggle against the government and state. The CPI (M) website made no mention of the strike, while the local unit of the CPI (M) issued an appeal to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to lead an all-party delegation to New Delhi to appeal to the central government for increased funds.



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