

Indian telecom unions sell out major strike

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Within hours of 300,000 employees of the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) beginning an indefinite strike on Tuesday to defend jobs and conditions, the unions involved entered talks with India's Telecommunication Minister A. Raja, reached a sell-out deal and called off the industrial action.

V. A. N. Namboodiri, convener of the Joint Action Committee (JAC), had issued an initial press release reporting that the "glorious indefinite strike" was "a big success" and sending "revolutionary greetings to all striking comrades". The strike began at 6 a.m. and support was overwhelming.

The press statement declared: "In Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Trivandrum, Patna and other major cities hundreds of striking workers are conducting demonstrations and shouting slogans. Reports are pouring in from other centres also. Prominent trade unions leaders are addressing striking workers. Many members of parliament have agreed to raise the strike issue in parliament."

Workers' support for the strike expressed deep concerns over the government's plans to sell off 30 percent of the company's shares, shed 100,000 jobs through a so-called voluntary redundancy scheme (VRS) and outsource work to private contractors. For the unions, however, the strike was a means of letting off steam while they continued to collaborate in the implementation of the plans.

By 11 a.m., Namboodiri and his fellow union bureaucrats were in talks with the minister and other top officials. Two hours later they agreed to end the strike. None of the concerns of workers has been met. Telecommunication Minister Raja only agreed to refer the proposed disinvestment to a group of ministers and

to consult with the unions before any decisions were finally taken.

In other words, the government has made no concessions on partial privatisation, job losses or outsourcing. Yet in its record of the meeting, the JAC "expressed satisfaction" and thanked the minister "for his kind intervention in resolving the issue". In a second circular, Namboodiri declared that the deal was an "impressive achievement".

In reality, the only achievement is a closer involvement of the unions in implementing the government's plans. The minister promised to take the unions "into confidence" and hold "consultations" with them. The JAC all along declared that its aim was to "save BSNL," which has been making losses. Now the unions will directly collaborate with the government and management in transforming the company into a profitable entity.

The JAC is comprised of BSNL unions aligned to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the ruling Congress party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK). All these parties, including the Stalinist CPM and CPI, have been involved in imposing the pro-market agenda demanded by business leaders and foreign investors over the past two decades.

In 1991, the Congress government of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao began the process of dismantling longstanding economic regulation and opening up the Indian economy to foreign investors. The Rao government paved the way for joint ventures in which foreign firms could hold stakes of up to 49 percent and opened the local phone and mobile phone markets up to

private bidders.

In 2000, the BJP-led government accelerated the telecommunications restructuring, establishing most functions of the Department of Telecommunications as a separate state-owned, profit-making corporation—BSNL. At the same, it increased the allowable stake of foreign companies to 74 percent and ended its majority stake in Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) which dealt in long distance and business services. The huge Tata Group took a major stake in VSNL and renamed it Tata Communications Limited in 2008.

Throughout this restructuring process, the unions played the major role in containing the opposition of workers. The unions called a strike to oppose the BSNL corporatisation in 2000 but quickly caved in and accepted the minister's assurances that the pension rights, jobs and other benefits would not be affected. Over the past decade, BSNL has wiped out around 200,000 jobs, mainly by not replacing retired workers.

Last year the current Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a far-reaching program of disinvesting in public sector undertakings (PSU), with BSNL high on the list of priorities. The company invited bids to outsource wireless customer services to private call centres. It also announced plans to outsource the management of 50,000 mobile phone towers and 100,000 kilometres of optical fibre network.

In January, a government-appointed committee headed by prominent businessman Sam Pitroda released the current disinvestment and restructuring proposals in an effort to make the state-owned corporation viable in the country's competitive telecommunications market. Any fight to defend BSNL jobs and conditions necessarily has to be linked to a broader struggle against the profit system—that is, to a socialist program, which all the unions, including those affiliated to the Stalinist CPI and CPM, oppose.

The WSWs spoke to BSNL workers taking part in protest in the southern city of Chennai on Tuesday. They had been kept in the dark about the negotiations

underway between union leaders and the ministers. Despite the efforts of union bureaucrats to prevent a discussion, several workers expressed their deep suspicion of the unions and anger at their past betrayals.

Periyasamy said: “The leadership of our unions, whether they are from the CPM or CPI, even though they say they are communists, they are not communists, for they don't follow communist policies. The communist theory is a wonderful and rich theory. They don't follow this theory at all.

“Look at this strike. They have not organised the workers. They have not discussed with the workers whom they have called to strike. They should have discussed all the issues of the strike in detail and should have come to a consensus. As you can see, there is so much confusion, disgust and dissatisfaction among the workers who are on strike about the union leaderships as a whole.”

Narasiman, a BSNL telecom mechanic who belongs to a union affiliated to the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK), pointed out that two DMK ministers played a major role in the downsizing of the workforce from 500,000 under Department of Telecommunications in 2000 to 300,000 now. “Now this is to be further downsized by another 100,000 so that the number of BSNL workers will be less than 200,000 and the BSNL is cannibalised into parts for big business. It is against these things that we are fighting. Therefore we have to be vigilant about the union leadership. We workers must preserve our unity against all the union leaderships.”



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