

Stalinist union calls off Indian coal strike

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After just one day, the All India Coal Workers Federation (AICWF) last week ended its three-day strike against government plans to sell off a 10 percent stake in the state-owned Coal India Limited (CIL). The union, which is affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), has no plans for further industrial action.

The strike was originally called by five major trade unions. However, three unions—affiliated to the ruling Congress party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—withdrew after reaching a deal with Coal Minister Sriprakash Jaiswal on April 16. Just days before the strike was to begin, the “independent” Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) also backed out.

The AICWF half-heartedly proceeded with the strike on May 5, but waged no public campaign against the government’s plans. Neither the union, the CPM nor the CPM’s Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) made any statement countering CIL management’s claims that the strike had been called off after a negotiated settlement was reached.

Clearly the government and the business elite were not concerned that a strike potentially involving 700,000 miners in a key industry was proceeding. The Indian press had virtually no coverage of the stoppage in the days before, during or after. Rather than a media blackout, the silence was a recognition in ruling circles that the AICWF had no intention of conducting any genuine campaign against the disinvestment plans.

It is not clear how many workers took part. A CITU statement claimed around 60 percent of CIL workers participated, but a HMS official told the WSWs that “zero percent” took part. Obviously both unions were

exaggerating for their own political purposes. CIL chairman Partha S. Bhattacharyya admitted daily production dropped to 306,000 tonnes of coal on May 5, compared to an average 326,000 tonnes in the previous four days.

Whatever the exact numbers, the AICWF went ahead with the strike only as a means of defusing widespread concern and anger among workers about the implications of the government’s plans for their jobs and conditions.

The state-owned coal mines already have been drastically restructured, with poorly-paid contract workers now making up 40 percent of the workforce. Last month CIL chairman Bhattacharyya announced plans to slash the permanent work force from 416,000 to 380,000 in the next two years and close “unviable” mines.

CITU secretary Dipankar Mukherjee told the WSWs that the union had called the “one day token strike to send a message of protest to the government”. Asked why the strike was cut from three days to one, he blamed the other unions for pulling out. CITU, however, has conducted no campaign against their deal with the coal minister.

The Congress-aligned Indian National Trade Union Congress claimed that the government had agreed to the unions’ main demand—to maintain a majority stake in CIL. But the minister’s only tangible offer was a bribe—to distribute 1 percent of CIL shares to miners at a discount rate. None of the workers’ concerns about jobs and conditions was addressed.

CITU has made no attempt to challenge this sell-out. In fact, CITU secretary Mukherjee told the WSWs that

the next step would be a convention of all trade unions in July to “fight against the government moves to disinvest and privatise the public sector industries”. In the coal industry, this means a “joint struggle” with the very unions that have already agreed to disinvestment.

The proposal for a July convention of trade unions is a sham. The sell-off of CIL shares is part of broad plans by the Congress-led government in New Delhi for “an aggressive program of disinvestment” in state-owned enterprises as part of efforts to slash the budget deficit from 6.7 percent of GDP to 4.8 percent in 2011-12. CITU is no more going to “fight” against the government’s wider plans than it did in the coal industry or telecommunications.

Last month, telecom unions shut down within hours an “indefinite strike” by 300,000 workers against an announcement that 30 percent of the state-owned telecom company, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), would be sold off and the workforce downsized by 100,000 jobs. The CPM-affiliated BSNL Employees Union led the joint union committee that negotiated with the government and accepted its vague promises.

Most of the trade unions are linked to parties that have been directly involved in implementing pro-market restructuring over the past two decades. Congress and the BJP have both led national governments that took steps toward the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and the opening up of areas such as telecommunications to private corporations.

The CPM supported the Congress-led national government for four years when it initially came to power in 2004. In the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, CPM-led Left Front administrations have carried out similar pro-market agendas in a bid to attract foreign investment. The CPI is also part of these “left” coalitions in West Bengal and Kerala.

More broadly the CPM is playing a key role in defusing mounting anger among working people.

In recent weeks, the Left Front has claimed that by joining forces with various regional and caste-based parties—all of them former allies of the Congress and/or

BJP—it will be possible to pressure the Congress-led government into adopting “pro-people” policies.

On April 27, the Left Front joined with nine “secular non-Congress, non BJP” parties in staging a one-day *hartal* (strike) to protest spiralling food prices, while simultaneously presenting a “cut motion” in parliament that instructed the government to rescind the recent increase in the gasoline tax.

In the run up to the parliamentary vote on the cut motion, the two Stalinist parties—the CPM and CPI—were at pains to insist that they did not want to “destabilise” the government, frankly admitting that if that were their aim they would have presented a “non-confidence” motion. As it was, two of the Stalinists’ allies, the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal, failed to even vote in favour of the cut motion, which was defeated 289-201.

Coal miners, telecom employees and other sections of the working class can only defend their jobs and conditions through a complete break with all the trade unions and their respective political parties. The entire political establishment, including the Stalinist parties, has a common agenda: to make the working class bear the burdens of the deepening global economic crisis.

Workers must begin to establish their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and to turn to sections of the urban and rural poor. Such an independent movement of broad layers of the working class can only go forward on the basis of a socialist perspective to refashion society from top to bottom to meet the needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a wealthy few.



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