

100 million workers join India's September 7 general strike

A WSWS reporting team
9 September 2010

An estimated one hundred million workers participated in a one-day all-India strike Tuesday to protest soaring prices, privatization and public sector disinvestment, the casualization and contracting out of work, and the failure of India's governments to enforce even the inadequate protections accorded workers by the country's labor laws.

The strike was called by nine major union federations under the umbrella of the Coordination Committee of Central Trade Unions and crippled much of the country's economic life.

Industries and services affected by the strike included auto-making, coal mining, power generation, banking and insurance, aviation, transport, shipping, and munitions.

Recent months have seen a mounting wave of militant worker struggles in India—strikes for union recognition in India's expanding auto sector, including a two-day occupation of a Hyundai plant, a wildcat strike by Air India personnel, and walkouts by telecom workers and coal miners against the central government's privatization plans.

According to union and media reports, Tuesday's strike was joined by large numbers of contract workers in the engineering, power loom (textile), fertilizer, chemical, and ship-building industries, as well as in the hospital and transport sectors. There was also widespread participation by workers in the unregulated "informal sector," which employs 90 percent of the workforce and where unions traditionally have had little presence. In some cities, including Delhi, many auto-rickshaw drivers walked off the job. Some construction laborers, brick-kiln workers and domestics also joined the protest.

One of the unions' demands was for the Congress Party-led central government to contribute 50,000 crore rupees (US \$10 billion) to a recently created social security fund for workers in the informal sector. To date, the government has pledged a miniscule 1,000 crore rupees (\$200 million).

The strike was especially successful in West Bengal and Kerala, where it enjoyed the support of Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led state governments. By contrast, in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh only a minority of unionized

workers participated.

Except for the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which is aligned with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), all the country's major trade unions federations supported the strike, including after a fractious debate within its top leadership, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which has functioned as a subordinate ally of the Congress Party ever since its foundation six decades ago.

Joining the BMS in opposing the strike was the West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress (TMC) and its allied unions. The TMC is a right wing party, but in recent years it has demagogically sought to take advantage of peasant and worker opposition to the pro-investor policies being carried out by the state's Stalinist Left Front government. On Tuesday, however, the TMC reverted to flying its true colors.

The strike was bitterly denounced by Indian big business. Swati Piramal, the president of Assocham (the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India) called it "totally unjustified." Making clear that big business intends to press forward with its program of making India a cheap labour producer for world capitalism, Piramal declared, "Foreign investment and disinvestment are realities of the day to survive in a competitive economy and opposing them through nationwide *bandh* (political strike) hardly makes a sense."

Unquestionably Tuesday's strike was testimony to growing anger and militancy in the working class. While the Indian and foreign press touts India's economic rise, the meagre incomes of working people have been increasingly squeezed by rising prices, including government dictated fuel price hikes. Moreover, the same Congress-led coalition government that has lavished billions of dollars worth of tax cuts on big business and the rich in the name of economic stimulus is now reducing social spending and pressing ahead with disinvestment so as to appease the international money-markets, which have been demanding India sharply curtail its budget deficit.

Tuesday's protest gave an inkling of the potential for a working class counter-offensive against Indian big business and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. But those who called and officially led it, India's labor federations, have a diametrically opposed agenda.

The Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

and Communist Party of India—and their allied labor federations, respectively the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) routinely organize one-day strikes with the aim of harnessing the working class to their reactionary manoeuvres with the Indian bourgeoisie.

The Stalinists called several such one day *bandhs* during the four years, from May 2004 through July 2008, that they propped up the UPA government in parliament. Even now, long after they Congress Party broke its alliance with the Left Front so as to cement a Indo-US strategic partnership, they continue to insist that India's workers and toilers must strive to pressure the government into pursuing "pro-people" policies. At the same time, they are promoting a Third Front alliance with rightwing caste-ist and regionalist parties like the Tamil Nadu-based AIADMK and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP).

In keeping with this perspective, the CITU and AITUC have insisted that the key to defending worker rights is the forging of trade union unity—that is the formation of alliances with the bureaucratic labor organizations that are affiliated with their big business political rivals.

Toward that end, the CITU issued an apologia for the BJP-aligned BMS after it announced it would not participate in the September 7 strike. Declared the CITU, "Though the BMS expressed its inability to join the strike on September 7, it had been part of the campaign all along and supported the decision for a joint all India strike on the five point charter of demands..."

The Stalinists are presenting it as a major victory that the Congress Party-allied INTUC joined this week's protest.

In fact, the circumstances under which this occurred should serve as a lesson to the working class as to the true relations that exist between the Stalinists parties, their union affiliates, and the Indian bourgeoisie.

Far from the INTUC's participation in the strike marking a "left turn," it was carried out on the orders of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, the power behind the throne of the UPA government! (Although Gandhi does not hold a formal position in the government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly stated publicly that he serves at her pleasure.)

The INTUC, which has never before participated with other unions in a national protest strike, was bitterly divided over the decision taken by the Coordination Committee of Central Trade Unions to stage the September 7 walkout.

Finally, at the beginning of this month it announced that it would not participate, because it did not want to be seen as opposing the Congress-led government. But only a few days later, the INTUC leadership reversed course after Sonia Gandhi told them that they should join the protest strike. According to an unnamed INTUC leader, Gandhi said the "INTUC is meant for that ... INTUC must take up workers' issues."

If Gandhi sanctioned a strike "against" her own government, it is because she is well aware that on the part of those leading

it, the *bandh* was a stunt, not a means of developing an independent political movement of the working class.

By sanctioning the INTUC's participation she hopes to bolster its dwindling authority among workers under conditions of growing worker militancy. But just as importantly she wants to use the INTUC to keep open the governments' channels of communication and cooperation with the Stalinist parliamentary parties, with a view to using them to police the working class, as they have done so faithfully for decades.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several striking workers who rallied near Chennai's Memorial Hall Tuesday under the banner of the United Labour Federation.

Ramesh, 25, a worker at RSB Transmission India Ltd told the WWS: "We are participating in this strike to protest against price rises, low wages and non recognition of unions. Tens of thousands of workers working in various industries in Irunkatukotai were not granted union recognition. Workers get Rs.3,500 (\$76) to Rs. 4,000 (\$86) as monthly wages. There are not sufficient toilet facilities—only one for 400 workers. There is no canteen and no first aid facility. Due to lack of safety measures many workers suffer accidents. Also workers are being compelled to work for very long hours. We workers from Sri Perambabudur industrial area (where large number of foreign companies have set up their plants) participate in this strike. If our demands are not met we will stage further agitations."

Ragupathi, 36 a Madras Rubber Factory (MRF) worker said: "We have been struggling to form a union in the MRF since 1992 but we could not do it. We get lower wages. Many workers were dismissed because they were trying to form a union in MRF. Subsequently they were thrown into poverty conditions and some of them committed suicide. If this situation continues we will join hands with workers from other industries to fight against it."

Manimaran, an autorickshaw driver told the WWS: "I was a member of the youth wing of the CPM. I have participated in many struggles but to no use. Those struggles concluded with offering tea and biscuits. There was no benefit for the people. I earn Rs.300 (\$6.50) per day but out of this I have to pay the owner of autorickshaw Rs.150 (\$3.25) and I take home Rs.150. I pay monthly rent of Rs.1000 (\$22) for my residence. It is very difficult to run a family and send my children to school with my little income. I left the CPM union because there was no gain in the struggles they organize."



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact