

India: Unions sell out contract workers strike at lignite mining company

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17 November 2010

A militant strike by 13,000 contract workers against the central government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in southern India was sold out late last month, just as the 39-day-old strike was beginning to win significant support from the permanent workforce.

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the largest union among the contract workers, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), and three other unions accepted a deal with the management of the lignite mine and power company that leaves the contract workers still earning only a fraction of the permanent workforce and completely abandons their demand for permanent status. Many of the contract workers have been employed by NLC for years, even decades.

The AITUC and CITU are affiliated respectively to the Stalinist Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Under the settlement signed October 27, NLC has agreed to raise the pay of the contract workers by 1,560 rupees (about US \$35) per month. This is only 520 rupees (\$11) more than the pitiful wage rise that the Labour Progressive Front (LPF)—the union set up by the Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK), the ruling party in Tamil Nadu where NLC is located—and the Union of Dalit Panthers had unsuccessfully sought to impose on the striking contract workers on October 10.

While the 1,560 rupee increase represents a pay hike of 30-50 percent, depending on the contract workers' job classification, the settlement accepted by the Stalinist unions leaves them earning less than one-sixth of what the "regular" workers earn.

A lignite mining and power generation company, centered around open-pit mines in Neyveli, Tamil Nadu, NLC employs 14,000 "regular" workers. In order to maintain profits to the tune of billions of rupees per year, the company has for decades kept nearly half of its work force as contract workers, paying them far less and depriving them of proper pensions, health insurance and other benefits.

This arbitrary division of the workforce into low-paid "regular" workers and an even more brutally exploited group of contract employees is more and more the norm in India, both at private and government-owned companies.

The NLC contract workers demonstrated great determination during the course of their seven-week strike. They organized

road blockades to power plants and protest marches despite immense economic hardship and police repression, organized by Tamil Nadu's DMK government. Ultimately, the DMK-aligned LPF tried to break the strike. When workers rebelled against the separate deal it and the Union of Dalit Panthers signed with management on October 10, some LPF activists returned to work, openly scabbing on the strike.

While the LPF openly line up with NLC management and the DMK government, the other unions systematically isolated the contract workers' struggle. They refused to call on the regular workers to join the strike. Similarly, when the regular workers had mounted their own week-long strike last July, they instructed the contract workers to report to work, so as to ensure the least disruption to NLC's operations.

Nevertheless, the strike won widespread popular support within Neyveli and Cuddalore district, where Neyveli is located. A district-wide *bandh* (general shutdown) in support of the strike that opposition parties called for October 19 was strongly supported throughout Cuddalore despite the deployment of over 3,000 police personnel and anti-strike appeals from DMK ministers.

On October 22, about 750 regular workers expressed their solidarity with the contract workers by launching a hunger strike in a public venue.

Fearing the increasingly militant mood of the workers, the unions launched a joint conspiracy, with the blessing of the various political parties with which they are affiliated, to bring the strike to an abrupt end. Hence, the October 27 sellout.

The WSWS had warned of this conspiracy in advance: "The poorly paid, much abused workers have shown great determination in prosecuting their strike in the face of the unions' refusal to appeal to NLC's 14,000 regular workers to join the strike and the attempts of both government and opposition parties to foist a settlement on them that would leave them as a permanent low-wage workforce." (See, "India: 13,000 contract workers strike at lignite mine and power-company")

The State secretaries of the Stalinist CPI and CPM, D. Pandian and G. Ramakrishnan respectively, denounced the October 10 deal signed by the LPF.

The Stalinists' subsequent actions—their refusal to broaden

the strike; their appeals to the workers to urge Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the architect of the India bourgeoisie's pro-big business "new economic strategy," to intervene in the dispute; and their acceptance of a deal only slightly better than that advocated by the LPF—underscores that their principal objection to the October 10 agreement was that it did not recognize the Stalinist unions as interlocutors between management and the contract workers.

The Stalinist parties and their unions, it must be added, made no attempt to unite the NLC workers' struggle with a wave of strikes and occupations that have erupted over the last few months at plants that are owned by or supply the growing number of transnational manufacturing plants in Tamil Nadu.

On October 22, the Stalinist parties joined with the other opposition parties in Tamil Nadu in staging rallies and demonstrations to protest the "anti-labour and anti-trade union" policies of the DMK government. At the rally in the state capital, Chennai, CPM State Secretary Ramakrishnan demagogically threatened to call a one-day state-wide walkout in support of the NLC workers. "The agitations," said Ramakrishnan, "are now confined to the Cuddalore and [adjoining] Kancheepuram districts. Don't force us to launch a State-wide hartal." CPM parliamentarian T.K. Rangarajan, meanwhile, was anxious to make clear that the Left parties are not against foreign investment, but only want employers to "respect labour laws and trade union rights."

Joining the Stalinist leaders on the platform was a representative of the AIADMK, which when it last held office in Tamil Nadu passed a draconian anti-strike law and used mass firings and blacklegs (scabs) to break a strike of 200,000 government workers. The CPI (M) has been appealing to the AIADMK's mercurial leader, the former movie star Jayalalithaa, to join with it in highlighting "people's issues." The Stalinists hope to form an alliance with the rightwing AIADMK for the coming state elections.

The Stalinists' efforts to woo the AIADMK is further proof, if any were needed, that they are determined to throttle any independent movement of the working class, isolating worker struggles and confining them within the straitjacket of trade union collective bargaining.

When a team of WSWS reporters travelled to Neyveli, they met with many workers angered by the October 27 sell out.

"Workers have returned to work unsatisfied," said one worker, who did not want his name used because of the threat of management reprisals. "So there will be a spontaneous outburst in no time. Whoever offers to lead at that time, the whole army of contract workers will be behind that leadership. The unions have taken up the work of management in dividing and ruling the workers and exploiting us to the core."

The WSWS reporters also learned more about the deplorable conditions in which many of the NLC workers, both contract and regular, live.

About 50,000 people live on NLC lands in thatched roofed-houses that they built themselves over the past forty years. The company charges them ground rent varying from 5,000 rupees to 100,000 rupees (\$113 to \$2250) for nine month periods, yet it has done next to nothing to provide the residents with basic amenities like running water.

There are no health or sanitation facilities. Although people are paying for electricity, the supply is deficient, meaning that the residents must contend with a perpetual "brown-out." School children are forced to study in dim light and many are developing vision problems as a result. Yet, not far away, the tennis courts and other facilities that NLC provides in the area designated to house its managers and their families are flooded in light.

Recently the NLC management branded the workers living on its lands as squatters—"anti-social elements" and "illegal occupants"—and announced that it intends to uproot them.

Many of the residents of the so-called "workers quarter" told the WSWS they intend to boycott next year's state election to resist their threatened expulsion and protest the conditions in which the central government-owned NLC and the Indian and state government authorities force them to live.

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