West Bengal government threatens savage reprisals if state workers join one-day strike

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West Bengal's Trinamul Congress (TMC) government, which came to power last May by posturing as a "pro-people" alternative to the utterly discredited Stalinist Left Front government, has openly displayed its class character by threatening draconian sanctions against any state worker who takes part in the national one-day general strike called for Tuesday, Feb. 28.

The one-day strike has been called by all eleven national trade union federations, including those affiliated with the ruling Congress Party, the opposition Hindu Supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Stalinist parties. It is meant to pressure India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to take action against soaring prices and contract labour, abandon its privatization drive, and improve the conditions of workers in the "informal" sector.

Led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the TMC government has mounted an offensive aimed at derailing the strike in the state. She has appealed to both organized and unorganized workers not to take part, while threatening state workers with draconian sanctions should they be absent from work on that day.

Banerjee has said that government workers who fail to report for work on the 28th may be deemed to have committed a "break in service". This sanction is the equivalent to cancelling all of a worker's accumulated pension benefits. Should it be imposed, workers who have not completed the mandatory 20 years' service to receive full pension (one half of their final salary) by Feb. 27, would have to complete a further 20 years of service starting from Feb. 29 to receive full pension.

Banerjee has also instructed senior police officers to "prevent any breach of peace," that is to use violence to break up pro-strike demonstrations.

Banerjee's threat to cancel workers' pension benefits should they join Tuesday's protest strike comes only weeks after her government served notice that it is preparing to illegalize all job action and even protests by state employees and will legally bar them from belonging to political parties.

Banerjee's TMC government has already effectively banned police unions, by transforming them into "police welfare boards."

Banerjee's ministers have publicly browbeat state employees, accusing them of lacking a proper work ethic and of having contributed, along with the working class as a whole, in promoting a culture of strikes and disruption that has brought disrepute to West Bengal in the eyes of private investors.

In a comment made to *The Week*, Labour Minister Purnendu Bose, a former trade union bureaucrat, thundered: "Bengal is being portrayed as a state without work ethics and with a bad administrative system. We have to change it at any cost. It takes months to move a file from one department to another. Many employees do not come to office by 10 A.M., but they use every opportunity to declare strikes against the government they serve."

He went on to state that "even the Supreme Court has ruled from time to time that government employees should not cripple the state by agitating." In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled workers have no constitutional right to strike and endorsed a vicious strikebreaking campaign that was being mounted by then AIADMK Tamil Nadu government. But governments have generally shied away from trying to enforce the Court's claim that *bandhs* and protest strikes are illegal, out of fear that implementing such a repressive, antidemocratic measure would spark widespread unrest.

Banerjee, however, has threatened to do just that. Last

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August she went on a tirade against a “Bandh” (total shutdown) organized to demand a wage increases for the state’s poverty-stricken tea workers: “In the name of *bandh*, hooliganism is going on there. I will not allow this. I have taken a vow that while we ourselves will not indulge in *bandhs* and strikes, we will not allow others to do this. I will enact a law to enforce this.”

A virulent right-winger and political also-ran , Banerjee was able to resurrect her political career starting in 2007, because of the Left Front government’s ruthless pursuit of pro-investor policies and the support she received from a coterie of petty bourgeois forces. Various NGOs, the Stalinist Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) and the Maoists all embraced her as a progressive alternative to the Stalinists.

In a calculated display of political ruthlessness, late last year Banerjee orchestrated the murder of a top Maoist leader despite having used their political support, including a quasi-electoral endorsement during the assembly election, to posture as a friend of the poor. (See: “West Bengal government orchestrates murder of top Maoist leader”)

Mamata Banerjee has now cast aside any pretention of being an ally of indigent peasants and workers. Her reaction to the upcoming strike is nothing other than a naked display of her class fear and hostility.

In response the Stalinists pleaded with her to withdraw her threat, claiming that Tuesday’s strike is not directed against her government—no matter that Banerjee is clearly preparing an all-out assault on the working class and that her TMC is itself a leading partner in the United Progressive Alliance government.

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