

India: Strike challenges NLC's decades-long use of contract labor

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A WSWs reporting team spoke to some of the 14,000 contract workers who have been on strike against the central government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Neyveli, Tamil Nadu since April 21

A lignite mining and power generation company, NLC is a major supplier of electricity to Tamil Nadu and to the neighbouring southern Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

The poorly-paid contract workers are demanding full implementation of a contract settlement reached after a more than month-long strike in late 2010. They are also fighting for longstanding demands including regularization of their employment, equal pay with the permanent workers, and an increase in the retirement age from 58 to 60.

All sections of the state—the Congress Party-led central government, Tamil Nadu's AIADMK state government, and the courts and police— have lined up behind NLC management, supporting its refusal to regularize the contract workers' employment and taking repressive measures aimed at breaking the strike.

The Madras High Court has issued an injunction declaring the strike illegal and police are staging mass arrests on almost a daily basis with the aim of intimidating the strikers.

NLC management has demanded that the labour contractors who supply its cheap-labour "casual" workforce sack all the striking contract workers and replace them with new recruits. But fearing a storm of opposition, the contractors have not yet implemented this measure.

In 2010 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 NLC management that leaves the contract workers earning only a fraction of the permanent workforce and completely abandoned their demand for permanent status. Many of the contract workers have been employed by NLC for years, even decades.

The AITUC and CITU are respectively the trade union affiliates of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties.

The current strike has been called by the AITUC and is being supported by the CITU. In a display of reactionary regionalism that can only serve to pit the NLC workers against workers in neighbouring states, the AITUC has made one of its major demands that the electricity generated by the NLC be available only to Tamil Nadu.

Because many of the contract workers interviewed by the WSWs feared victimization, we have changed their names for publication.

Raman, 50, joined the company in 1982 and after 30 years of work-experience is still categorized as "unskilled." He said rising prices, especially for food, had compelled the workers to take strike action. Commenting on the Madras High Court ruling banning the strike, Raman said that the courts and government stand with management.

On the 2010 strike, he said, "The AITUC could have done better had they existed autonomously instead of joining alliances with all the trade unions. The parties and the unions jointly pawned us to management. What we got, a miniscule 60 rupees (\$1.20) pay rise, is equivalent to the pay loss we incurred as a result of 39 days on strike and helped us in no way."

Raman expressed no confidence in the Stalinist leadership of the AITUC. "For the last year the AITUC had never been part of any agitation (by the NLC workers) and even stopped issuing leaflets after the

betrayal of the 2010 strike. The AITUC pleaded with the workers to give them one last chance to lead the strike, though workers were hesitant and demoralized due to the failed struggle waged under the same leadership in 2010.” When we asked about the AITUC’s regionalist-chauvinist demand for the power produced by NLC to be supplied only to Tamil Nadu, he said: “They are just making fools of us. They think that we will come out whenever they call on us.”

When WSWs reporters pointed out how the CPI and CPM had supported either the DMK or AIADMK, that is one or the other of the major Tamil Nadu-based regionalist parties, in recent parliamentary and assembly elections and had propped up the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government between 2004 and 2008, Raman agreed that these were betrayals.

He said he would share WSWs articles and the WSWs Tamil-language magazine with his fellow workers. Commenting on the living conditions of the contract workers employed by one of southern India’s largest power companies, he said, “For many decades we lived in the dark without electricity.”

Sekar, a regular NLC worker, expressed sympathy with the striking contract workers. He said that since 1995 management has had a “non-recruitment policy.” He gave the example of his own department, which had 45 workers in 2000 but has only 15 permanent workers now, although production has increased, raising company’s profits. “Trade unions,” said Sekar, “have their political bosses in the respective political parties and never act independently in workers’ struggles.”

Joe, 49, joined NLC in 1986. His current pay is 303 rupees per day (about \$US 5.80) and 262 rupees (\$5.00) per day after deduction for (savings) Provident Fund. “Working has not really improved my lot. . . I am completely exploited to the core and weakened a lot. I am still an ‘unskilled’ worker after 26 years of service.”

Joe said several of the more than two-dozen workers who had been suspended for their leading role in the 2010 strike had yet to be reinstated. Joe complained that up until 2001 the contractors had not paid Provident Fund (PF) benefits, although money was deducted from their pay for PF. He totally rejected the AITUC’s regionalist demand that the power produced by NLC be exclusively for Tamil Nadu state.

Samy, a contract worker with 29 years’ experience, told the WSWs: “I am suffering now with a kidney stone. The

medical cards NLC issues to the contract workers are a mere token. Although the permanent workers can get operated on in world-class hospitals, we contract workers have no such facility. I have also contracted Eosinophilia as a result of dust in the mines and am under medication now.

“In the mines 75 percent of the work is done only by contract workers. Seniority is all just a farce. School fees for contract-worker children are 600 rupees (\$US11.50) (double that of permanent workers). If 40,000 rupees (\$769) (a permanent worker wage) is not enough, how can we survive with 5,000 rupees (\$96) per month?” Despite his leanings towards the Stalinist CITU, Samy agreed with the WSWs’s criticism of the role the unions play in policing the workforce on behalf of management and big business.

Saroja, a milk vendor, who had worked with NLC for 20 years, commented angrily about the appalling conditions the contract workers face. “The management has no conscience,” she declared.

Rajan, a regular worker, insisted that the “contract workers deserve a wage hike and a minimum of 15,000 rupees (\$US288) in line with the present inflation.” He also expressed concerns that workers are always kept divided by the unions, referring to the fact that the AITUC has not called on the permanent NLC workers to join the strike.

Velu and Palani, both contract workers, described how NLC management has failed to implement even the meagre improvements promised in the 2010 settlement: “Even the minimal wage hike promised in 2010 has not been given to many of the contract workers.”

A house wife who agreed with our comments and criticism about the unions’ and Stalinist parties’ betrayal of the 2010 strike said, “If there is an organization for the workers we will definitely give our thorough and complete support to them.”



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