

India: Striking NLC contract workers must expand struggle—industrially and politically

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On strike since April 21, the 14,000 contract workers at the Indian government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) are challenging a cheap-labour and repressive work-regime that has become the norm in India's public and private sectors alike.

The ruling elite and its institutions have responded to this challenge with threats and violence. Up until late last week, the Tamil Nadu-based mining and power generation company steadfastly refused to have any discussions with the striking workers, while urging its contractors to fire the strikers and replace them. The courts have declared the strike illegal on the grounds that the workers signed a contract after a 39-day strike in 2010—an agreement that NLC and the contractors have systematically violated. Tamil Nadu's AIADMK state government has set the police upon the strikers, resulting in repeated mass arrests. The management of the central government-owned NLC is now threatening to use these arrests as a pretext for firing many of the most militant workers.

However, it is the pro-capitalist unions—the organizations that ostensibly represent the impoverished NLC contract workers—that constitute the biggest obstacle to their successfully prosecuting their struggle for equal wages and “regularisation” of their employment.

The unions—beginning with the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC), the union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI)—are systematically isolating the NLC workers' struggle, just as they have isolated the many other militant strikes that have erupted in Tamil Nadu and across India over the past two years.

The AITUC, the CPI, and its sister Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India

(Marxist) or CPM, are urging the workers to appeal to the Congress Party-led central government and the AIADMK state government to “intervene” in the strike. As if these big business governments are not already deeply involved in supporting NLC and in upholding and promoting the use of contract labour!

The AITUC, the CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), and the other unions will not even call on the permanent workers at NLC to undertake strike action in support of the contract workers.

There is no question that an appeal from the striking NLC workers for an industrial and political offensive of the working class against contract labour and low wages and for worker rights would galvanize support across India.

Over the course of the past two decades, both public sector enterprises, like NLC, and private sector companies in India's new, globally-integrated auto and electronics industries have systematically expanded contract labour. Their aim has been to swell profits by driving down wages and benefits, to divide workers the better to exploit them, and to create a pliant, “flexible” workforce. In most cases these contract workers are permanent—except that their wages are far lower and they do not enjoy even the minimal protections accorded regular workers.

Many of the contract workers at NLC have fifteen, twenty, and in some cases thirty years of service. One of India's most profitable public sector enterprises, NLC pays some of these contract workers as little as 10 percent of the compensation paid regular workers.

The issue of equal pay and permanent status for contract workers has been the main or a key issue in numerous

recent strikes and occupations, including those at Foxconn and BYD

Electronics in Tamil Nadu and at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant. In every case, employers, with the support of the government, police and courts have bitterly resisted the demand for "regularisation" of contract employees. Indeed, big business has long been pressing the central government to "reform" labour laws so as to make it easier to lay off permanent workers and close down plants; i.e., to make the conditions of "regular workers" more like those of the super-exploited contract workers.

The unions recognize that a genuine struggle against contract labour would require the mass mobilization of the working class and mean a head-on collision with the entire ruling establishment, its courts and police. As defenders of the capitalist order with a state-recognized role as enforcers of the government- and employer-designed collective bargaining regime, the unions are determined to prevent such a struggle. They far prefer the defeat of the NLC strike to it becoming the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive.

In 2010, they suppressed an NLC contract workers' strike at the very point when the regular workers were beginning to be drawn into the struggle. After the DMK-aligned union failed to impose a sellout, the AITUC agreed to call off the struggle for a meagre 60 Rupees (\$1.15) per day pay increase, while contractually pledging not to raise any further wage demands until 2015.

The CPI and CPM are parties of the Indian establishment, committed to upholding the capitalist order. They and their Left Front have propped up a succession of big business governments at the Center, including, from 2004-8, the current Congress Party-led UPA regime. In West Bengal and Kerala, where they formed the state governments till May 2011, they pursued what they themselves called "pro-investor" policies, slashing social spending, banning strikes in the IT sector, and violently expropriating peasants for big business mage-projects. In Tamil Nadu, the CPI and CPM seesaw between supporting the DMK and AIADMK.

They have systematically subordinated the struggles of the working class to their reactionary alliances with the parties of big business. The Stalinist led CITU urged the BYD Electronics workers to end their militant strike in

November 2010, with the claim that things would improve when Tamil Nadu's rightwing DMK government was replaced by the AIADMK—a party which when it had last been in power broke a government workers' strike through mass arrests and mass firings. Having secured a parliamentary majority in electoral alliance with the CPI and CPM, the AIADMK is now mobilizing the police against the striking NLC workers.

As part of the CPI's maneuvers with the parties of the Tamil regional bourgeois elite, the AITUC has foisted on the NLC workers the reactionary demand that the power generated by NLC should be used exclusively by that state.

If the NLC workers are to prevail, they must make break politically and organizationally from the unions and Left parties and make their struggle the spearhead of an offensive of the entire working class against contract labour and poverty wages. Militant industrial action, including strikes and occupations, must be tied to the development of a political offensive of the working class, aimed at rallying the poor peasants and all toilers, behind the struggle for a workers' government. Such a government would place the key economic levers under the democratic control of the working class, so economic life can be organized to meet social needs, not produce profits for a tiny corporate elite.

The authors also recommend:

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