

India: Nationwide protests against fuel price hikes

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Workers, youth and the rural poor will join mass protests tomorrow throughout India against the recent fuel price hikes imposed by the central United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

Government-owned oil companies announced an increase of 7.54 rupees per litre in petrol prices on May 23. This is the third rise over the past year and the largest one-time increase. Government officials have hinted that prices for diesel and kerosene are also likely to increase. The price rises will push up inflation placing further intolerable burdens on working people and rural toilers.

The protests will take place amid a growing wave of class struggles in India and internationally. These include militant strikes and factory occupations by Maruti Suzuki workers in Haryana in northern India last year and strikes at the Foxconn, BYD Electronics, Sanmina, Hyundai plants in Tamil Nadu. About 14,000 contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation are currently engaged in a protracted strike for equal pay and conditions with permanent staff.

Despite the widespread opposition to the price rises, the UPA government is insisting that they must proceed in order to rein in the budget deficit. Oil minister Jaipal Reddy declared last Friday that the oil companies had exhausted all options. “All political parties, including my own party [Congress], are populist ... [but] we cannot run the country on populist sentiments.”

The government is under pressure from big business to accelerate pro-market restructuring amid growing signs of economic crisis. The rupee has hit its lowest-ever level against the US dollar and inflation is in

double digits. Growth has fallen to 6.9 percent in 2011-12—down by 1.5 percent from the previous year. The budget deficit has risen to 5.9 percent of the GDP, well above the government’s own limit of 4.6 percent.

C. Rangarajan, the chairman of the prime minister’s economic advisory council, said last Friday that by raising petrol prices, “the government has indicated that it is committed on fiscal consolidation.” He indicated that price rises for diesel and cooking gas were also needed to demonstrate to foreign investors that the government would continue to cut the budget deficit.

The main opposition parties calling tomorrow’s protests have no fundamental disagreement with the government’s austerity agenda. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM are both seeking to exploit the anger of the masses to boost their own political fortunes.

Neither the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) nor the CPM-led Left Front has called strikes for tomorrow. Both alliances are seeking to ensure that the opposition to the price hikes is limited to a one-day protest and confined politically to putting pressure on the government.

Speaking at the party’s national executive meeting in Mumbai last week, BJP president Nitin Gadkari declared that the time had come for the “BJP to come back to clear the mess created by the Congress.” As reported to the media, Gadkari demagogically declared: “The Congress is the problem ... and the BJP will be the solution.”

The BJP lost office at the national level in 2004 after implementing a program of pro-market restructuring that impacted heavily on working people. It failed to win the 2009 election despite growing popular alienation and anger with the Congress-led UPA government over its regressive policies.

The BJP is only able to posture as a defender of working people with the aid of the Stalinist parties. The CPM and its Left Front do not challenge the right-wing Hindu chauvinist party and its empty populist pretensions. To do so, would invite criticism of the CPM's own record in propping up the Congress-led government in parliament between 2004 and 2008 and supporting its attacks on working people.

The CPM is based on the same capitalist program of open market "reform" as Congress and the BJP. In power in West Bengal and Kerala, CPM-led governments sought to transform those states into cheap labour platforms for foreign investors and ruthlessly suppressed the resistance of workers and peasants. As a result it lost office last year in both states.

The CPM, along with the Communist Party of India (CPI), collaborated with the BJP and Congress trade unions in an all-India general strike on February 28 against the UPA government's economic policies. CPM and CPI leaders repeatedly hailed their collaboration with BJP and Congress trade union leaders as a "historical" event, signalling their willingness for broader political collaboration.

In a brief statement about tomorrow's protest, the Left Front announced that it had set the target of building "a sustained movement to demand a rollback of the price hike." In reality, the Stalinists, while exploiting popular anger over the price rises for their own political purposes, are working might and main to block a mass movement of the working class against capitalism. In doing so, the CPM is hoping to prove its worth to big business in pushing through the austerity agenda.

Millions of people will no doubt take part in tomorrow's protests, but their demands will not be

realised by trying to put pressure on the ruling UPA. The government has already made absolutely clear that it intends not only to proceed with the petrol price rises but to implement further price increases as part of a broad assault on the social position of working people. Like governments around the world, the UPA regime is seeking to impose the burden of the worsening global crisis of capitalism onto the backs of the working class and rural poor.

The government's attacks can only be successfully defeated through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, rallying behind it the oppressed masses, on the basis of a struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. That requires a fundamental break with all of the parties of the Indian political establishment, especially the CPI and CPM that block any genuine struggle against the profit system.

Above all what is needed is the building of an Indian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International based on all of the strategic lessons of the international Trotskyist movement against the betrayals of Stalinism and its apologists over the past century.



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