

India: WSWS team attacked as NLC strike enters second month

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A strike by 14,000 contract employees at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has entered its second month. Workers, who are demanding equal pay with permanent workers and the “regularisation” of their employment, have defied management threats, court orders declaring their strike “illegal”, and police repression.

The fear in government and business circles is that the protracted strike could trigger wider industrial action by other sections of workers. NLC permanent workers have already taken part in rallies in support of the striking contract workers. Last Wednesday, about 300 workers attended a sit-in-protest in Neyveli.

At the protest, union officials and thugs connected with the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) physically attacked a WSWS reporting team which was campaigning among the NLC workers. WSWS supporters, not their assailants, were detained by police and interrogated for three hours. (See: “Sri Lankan SEP condemns attack on WSWS supporters in India”)

The attack on the WSWS supporters, who were distributing a leaflet exposing the role of the AIADMK state government and the trade unions, is a clear sign that a betrayal is being prepared.

The NLC management has asked its contractors to sack all strikers and recruit new hands. In line with that appeal, NLC contractors have announced that if contract workers fail to turn up for duty they will be deemed to have abandoned their duty and a new workforce will be inducted in their place.

Like most private and government companies, the NLC maintains a majority of its workforce on a contract basis,

paying them as little as one seventh of the wages for permanent workers for doing the same job. NLC management is adamantly opposed to the contract workers’ demands for parity of pay and conditions with the permanent workforce because it would cut into the company’s profits.

The biggest political obstacle facing the NLC strikers is the trade unions. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated to Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), called the strike in an effort to contain growing opposition to the slave labour conditions facing contract employees.

However, the AITUC and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated to the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM), have deliberately isolated the strikers. The Stalinist unions have made no call for NLC permanent employees to stop work, thus reinforcing management’s division of the workforce.

The AITUC and CITU unions are promoting the dangerous illusion that the AIADMK government will intervene to support the strikers. Addressing a rally last Thursday, Gurudas Dasgupta, a CPI parliamentarian and AITUC leader, falsely declared that the strike had the support of all unions, all political parties and “goodwill of the Tamil Nadu state government.”

The preaching about the “goodwill” of the state government is line with the opportunist alliances of the Stalinist parties with AIADMK. Both the CPI and CPM backed AIADMK to win power in 2011 state assembly election though an electoral alliance with it.

The AIADMK government, however, has deployed the police against the so-called “illegal” strike, leading to

mass arrests. The AIADMK is notorious for its sacking of nearly 200,000 striking government workers in 2003 and the hiring of strike-breakers to replace them. The AIADMK union has refused to officially support the current NLC strike, claiming to be taking a “neutral” stand.

Yet Dasgupta appealed to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalithaa to take up the issue with the central government in order to “find a speedy and an amicable solution.” He also met Coal Minister Sriprakash Jaiswal in New Delhi twice and called on him to convene talks to resolve the issue. The central government, however, owns NLC and is just as intent as management to maximise profits at the expense of workers.

Dasgupta sought to disguise the role of the unions through empty militant appeals. He declared that the striking workers should not give up the fight even if it meant dying from hunger. He told the workers to “intensify their struggle until their demands are met and to prepare for a district-wide general strike and to go to the villages.”

At the same time, the AITUC leader also signalled that the union’s willingness to do a deal to shut down the strike. “We are not unreasonable people,” he declared. “We are ready for negotiations. But the NLC management is not interested in inviting us for talks.” Rather than equal pay for equal work, he declared that contract workers should be paid wages only equivalent to the lowest rung of permanent employees, such as sweepers.

It is under these conditions that the physical attack on the WSWs reporting team took place in an effort to prevent the distribution of a leaflet calling for NLC workers to “break politically and organisationally 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.” (See: “India: Striking NLC contract workers must expand struggle—industrially and politically”)

Speaking to the WSWs, NLC workers denounced the attack on the reporting team, the police arrest and a slanderous article that appeared in the right-wing *Dinamalar* newspaper against the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Samy, a contract worker, said: “If I were there I would question those who attacked you. It was wrong to attack you for whatever criticisms you may have raised against the state government in your leaflet. They [AIADMK] made many promises before coming to power but why didn’t they fulfil those promises?”

“These people have no problem with TV channels and media that wrongly report about the number of people who participate in our regular agitations and get arrested. For instance, when 3,000 workers turned up for protest actions a media report stated that only 500 turned up. You have come all the way from Chennai to support our struggle.”

A young contract worker Senthuran who intervened to protect a WSWs supporter from the attack by a thug, explained: “Although I tried to save him, the union leaders overpowered me. I was sad about the incident. I immediately left the sit-in protest place and informed the WSWs about the incident online. I also read the previous WSWs article which carried interviews from NLC contract workers. I gave a print-out to one of my friends.”

Senthuran said many workers at the protest did not know what happened because it took place so quickly and then the police took the WSWs supporters away.

A permanent employee declared: “They shouldn’t have attacked you. It was a very bad incident.” Referring to the *Dinamalar* article, he said: “It was a deliberate attempt to slander you. With all your personal details published in the report and your photographs, the AIADMK men will be looking out for you to further attack you.”

Mathura, a female activist, also commented on *Dinamalar* report: “If they thought you were ‘mysterious men’ and had links with ‘extremists’ why did they [the police] allow you to leave the police station... You should not ignore this. You should fight against these slanders. You should come here again with a fitting reply to these slanders and I will support your struggle for justice.”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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