

Indian workers, youth, rural poor join bandh against fuel price hikes

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2 June 2012

On Thursday, workers, youth and rural poor throughout India joined the nationwide *bandh* (shut down of commercial, industrial and educational establishments) and protests against fuel price hikes imposed by Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

The price of petrol was increased by 7.54 rupees per liter on May 23. Government officials hinted at further hikes in diesel and kerosene oil prices in the near future. Fuel price hikes will push up inflation throughout the economy, imposing further burdens on working people.

The May 31 actions were called by the main right-wing opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPM-led Left Front. Some regional-based parties, like the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh and Biju Janatha Dal (BJD) in Orissa also called *bandhs* against fuel price hikes in their respective states. These parties called the protests hoping to let off steam as anger mounts among workers and the poor against the government.

The *bandh*'s impact varied widely from state to state. However, its effect spread far beyond the nine BJP-ruled states and CPM-ruled Tripura; even in Congress-ruled states including Andhra Pradesh and Assam, normal life was paralyzed by protests.

In the capital city of New Delhi, 55,000 three wheelers and 15,000 taxis stayed off the roads. In the financial capital, Mumbai, public transport stayed off the roads. In most of the western Indian state of Maharashtra, three wheeler taxi drivers participated in the shutdown.

In the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, several million textile workers in Coimbatore and garment

workers in Tripur struck. Similarly, in the neighboring state of Karnataka, a large number of workers in the industrial regions including Bommasandra walked off their jobs. This happened even though neither the NDA nor the Left Front had called on workers to strike on Thursday.

In BJP-ruled Karnataka, public transport was affected and shops and business establishments were shut in several parts of the state. In an apparent attempt to keep students from taking part in protests and boycotting their classes, the state government declared a holiday for schools and colleges. To minimize the effect on the IT sector in the state capital Bangalore, India's main information technology (IT) hub, most IT firms declared a holiday for May 31 and turned Saturday June 9 into a working day.

In the Congress-ruled state of Andhra Pradesh, the shutdown was partial in the capital Hyderabad but was near total outside of it. State-owned buses and auto rickshaws stayed off the roads, while shops, petrol stations, business establishments and educational institutions remained closed. The state government levies a 33 percent value-added tax (VAT) on petroleum products, the highest in the country.

In the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, buses, cars, taxis and trams ran in smaller numbers in the capital, Kolkata. However, other cities of the state were impacted, despite moves by the right-wing Trinamool Congress (TMC), which rules the state, to prevent working people and rural toilers from joining the protests. Roads and railway tracks were blocked in some parts of the state. Due to blockades at the two main railway stations of Kolkata, Howrah and Sealdha, most of the local trains and long distance trains were affected in the morning.

TMC, a major partner of ruling UPA at the centre,

while claiming to oppose fuel price hikes, took repressive measures to break the *bandh*. Just two days before, State Chief Secretary Samar Ghosh issued a circular ordering all government officers and employees to “report for duty” on May 3 and warning that they “will not be granted any leave on May 31”.

TMC Chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee led a protest march on May 26 against fuel price hikes, in an attempt to preempt public support for the May 31 *bandh* against price hikes.

TMC leader Madan Mitra who is the state transport and sports minister, told reporters: “We did not go for *bandh* or road blockade to oppose the hike. We are registering our opposition through street protest at the instruction of our leader Mamata Banerjee”.

The southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu was not so affected by the *bandh*. A few hundred Stalinist Left Front and BJP members organized road and rail blockades in parts of the state.

The ruling AIADMK of Chief Minister Jayalathaa and the opposition DMK both worked to break the *bandh*. Claiming to oppose price hikes, AIADMK organised protest demonstrations across the state on May 29, and the DMK on following day. The DMK is a partner of the UPA government and thus an active collaborator in imposing austerity measures, including fuel price hikes.

While the BJP-led NDA and CPM-led Left Front made their calls for the May 31 *bandh* separately, the Stalinists made no attempt to politically demarcate their call from the Hindu-chauvinist BJP.

During the *bandh*, moreover, the Stalinists could be seen coordinating their agitation with the BJP. In Andhra Pradesh, at many places, Left Front and BJP activists were seen together, stopping busses or staging road blocks. The Stalinists are thus offering political cover for right-wing BJP as it postures as an opponent of UPA government’s austerity measures.

On last February 28, unions affiliated to the Stalinist CPM and to the Communist Party of India (CPI) openly collaborated with unions affiliated to the BJP and also to the ruling Congress Party in an all-India general strike against the UPA government’s economic policies.

CPM and CPI leaders have repeatedly hailed their joining hands with unions led by the BJP and the Congress party as a “historic” event.

The Stalinists’ support for the chauvinist right testifies to their political bankruptcy. The BJP-led NDA government enthusiastically carried out the same neo-liberal economic reforms and austerity measures during 1988-2004. It ran for re-election in 2004 on the “India shining” campaign, i.e., its hailing economic reform measures citing high growth rates, but faced a humiliating defeat as a result of public anger towards poverty and social inequality created by those economic policies.

None of the parties, who called the Thursday protests or similar actions days before, has any fundamental disagreement with UPA government’s austerity program. They try to exploit the public anger over the price hikes to boost their own political fortunes. The NDA and Stalinists are working to limit the opposition to a one-day protest, trying to prevent an eruption of the class struggle beyond the narrow confines of a one-day protest controlled by the political establishment.

A Left Front statement issued on May 31, pointing to widespread support for the protest, appealed to the UPA government to “heed this popular protests and roll back the price increase forthwith”.



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