India: The lessons of the NLC betrayal

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The betrayal of the militant 44-day strike by 14,000 contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the southern state of Tamil Nadu has vital political lessons for the working class throughout India.

Despite enormous hardships, NLC workers maintained their strike and challenged the contract system, which is employed in public and private enterprises throughout India for the extraction of super profits. NLC is owned by the Indian central government.

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), shut down the strike after signing a sell-out deal with NLC management on June 3, without meeting any of the workers' demands, which included equal pay with permanent workers and "regularisation" of their employment.

Most striking workers defied the union's return to work order for several days. Hundreds protested outside the local AITUC office in Neyveli and on the following day ransacked the union premises. But lacking an alternative political perspective and leadership, they were unable to sustain their rebellion.

Objectively, the striking workers were in a struggle not only against the NLC management, but also the Congress-led coalition government at the national level and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (AIADMK) government in Tamil Nadu. Both governments were instrumental in defeating the demands of the strikers.

The unions, however, deliberately blocked any political fight against the state and central governments, and a turn to other sections of workers on that basis. The AITUC and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, did everything possible to isolate the strikers. They refused to even call on permanent NLC workers to join the strike.

Throughout the strike, the AITUC and CPI leaders appealed to the AIADMK state government to "settle the strike" in favour of the workers. Just days before the sell-out, CPI state secretary T. Pandian praised Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayram for instituting "various good schemes for the benefit of the people." The CPM and CITU did not object to this political charade.

Chief Minister Jayalalithaa and the right-wing AIADMK are notorious for their anti-working class record, including the mass sacking of 13,000 state welfare workers and the dismissal of nearly 200,000 striking public sector workers in 2003. During the NLC strike, the state government gave the green light for police to crack down on the strikers.

The prostration of the AITUC and CITU leaders to Jayalalithaa flows directly from the opportunist alliances struck by the CPI and CPM with the AIADMK during state elections in Tamil Nadu last year. The union officials did not want to upset these rotten political relations.

Likewise, the union leaders opposed any fight against the Congress-led national government, which backed NLC's refusal to make concessions to the strikers. The Stalinist parties have long supported Congress, directly and indirectly. Between 2004 and 2008, the CPI and CPM were instrumental in propping up the ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and bear political responsibility for its pro-market

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restructuring.

The betrayal of the Stalinist unions has opened the door for a dangerous political development—the promotion of Tamil communalism. From the outset, the AITUC encouraged parochial politics with the slogan, “All power generated in NLC be supplied to Tamil Nadu.”

Seeman, leader of the Naam Thamilar Katchi (NTK), a Tamil political party, took up the theme when addressing NLC contract workers on June 3. He declared that the problem facing strikers was the prejudice of “non-Tamil management” against Tamil workers. He also attacked NLC for investing in other Indian states while there was an acute power shortage in Tamil Nadu.

The interests of the strikers were fundamentally opposed to those of NLC management, whether they were Tamil or non-Tamil. The stirring up of Tamil chauvinism only cuts workers in Tamil Nadu off from their class brothers and sisters throughout India and internationally. The first step in mounting any political struggle is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism.

The NLC strike was one of a series of bitter struggles by workers in India in recent years. Factory occupations by Maruti Suzuki workers in Haryana last year followed strikes at Foxconn, BYD Electronics, Sanmina and Hyundai. This February, millions of workers took part in a nationwide general strike against price hikes, privatisation and the contract work system. In May, there was a general shut down and protests by workers, youth, the rural poor and small businessmen against fuel price hikes.

In every case, the role of the unions, especially those allied with the CPI and CPM, has been to limit and isolate these struggles. The national protests have been confined to one-day affairs to let off steam without disrupting the Stalinists’ political relations with the Indian government. While the CPI and CPM claim to oppose pro-market restructuring and privatisation, CPM-led governments in West Bengal and Kerala have implemented similar anti-working class policies for the benefit of foreign and local investors.

The first lesson from the sell-out of the NLC strike is that workers cannot take a single step forward without a complete break from the trade unions and the establishment of their own independent organisations, such as rank-and-file action committees.

However, militant action alone is not enough. The working class must base itself on a revolutionary socialist perspective to unite workers in India and internationally against the profit system and all its political defenders. Workers around the world confront the same basic problem. Governments of every political complexion, whether in Europe, the US or Asia, are seeking to impose the burdens of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s onto the working class.

Such a political fight requires the building of a mass revolutionary party of the working class. In India, that means above all drawing the necessary political conclusions from the long history of betrayals of the Stalinists. In the past, the CPI and CPM falsely claimed to be socialist and to represent the heritage of the October 1917 Russian Revolution. They are now completely integrated into the Indian political establishment and openly defend bourgeois rule.

A new revolutionary leadership will be built only on the basis of the lessons of the difficult and protracted struggle of the Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International—against Stalinism and its various political apologists. We urge NLC workers to turn to a serious study of the program of the ICFI and to take up the pressing task of constructing a section of the party in India.

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