

India: Union calls off Chennai air cargo strike

Sasi Kumar, Moses Rajkumar
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There is widespread anger among the more than 1,500 contract air cargo workers at Chennai Airport in southern India after the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), sold out their week-long strike.

The airport workers started the stoppage on January 9, demanding regularisation of their jobs, higher wages, bonuses, medical and canteen facilities, and allowances for housing rent and transport. The AITUC-affiliated Airport Authority of India Bhadra Employees Union (AAIBEU) had been forced to call the strike to contain the growing opposition among the workers over their harsh and insecure working conditions.

The government-controlled Airport Authority of India (AAI) contracted out cargo handling at Chennai Airport to Bhadra International India Limited (BIIL) in 2010.

Following talks with AAI and BIIL officials at the Labour Commission in New Delhi on January 15, AITUC leaders ordered workers to return to work without meeting any of their demands. AITUC general secretary Gurudas Dasgupta personally participated in the discussions.

Questioned by WSWs correspondents, AITUC president H. Mahadevan said a 200-rupee (\$3.60) per month wage hike had been agreed, but admitted that the company had signed no written agreement. Instead, “assurances” had been given not to victimise striking workers, and that wages would not be deducted for the strike period. A canteen facility had been “promised” and the management would “reconsider” the bonus issue, if workers were legally entitled to it. Further talks are to be held on January 23 on the bonus issue.

What has been supposedly agreed by management is nowhere near the workers’ demands, which included a 4,000-rupee wage rise for handymen and a 7,000-rupee increase for supervisors. AITUC leaders completely dropped demands for regularisation, medical facilities

and housing rent and transport allowances. There is no guarantee the company will carry out its “assurances” and “promises.”

An air cargo worker told the WSWs: “We only got a pittance of 200 rupees as a wage hike. We demanded a minimum of 10,000 rupees for handymen and 15,000 rupees for supervisors. Currently we are paid nearly 6,000 rupees and 8,000 rupees respectively.” Another worker said: “Workers are not happy to return to work because we haven’t won our chief demands. We will strike again if our demands are not met in the future talks with the management.”

Cargo clearance had been virtually paralysed by the strike, affecting major companies in the area, including telecom and auto manufacturers, leading to heavy losses. On a daily basis, Chennai air cargo clears consignments for nearly 50 flights.

Seeking to break the strike, the airport authorities called for police assistance to bring in new recruits under “special permission” status to replace the strikers. According to the union, the authorities were ready to waive rules that require cargo handlers to have a police clearance for “security reasons.”

Airport officials also warned that the government could use the Essential Services Maintenance Act to outlaw the strike. The AAI went to the courts for a stay order to halt the strike. The case was scheduled to be heard on January 17. Two days before that case, however, the AAI and BIIL relied upon the AITUC leaders to shut down the strike.

Discontent has been mounting among the airport workers for months. One worker explained that BIIL regularly laid-off workers to prevent them raising legal issues regarding their job status. The company had a “pattern of employing workers as daily wage labourers for six months and then laying them off for another six months.” He added: “Even now, after three years of employment by the same Bhadra International, we have

not been regularised.”

Workers also complained that they had been denied transport, even to carry a worker injured in a work-related accident to hospital. They were forced to use a fellow worker’s motor bike.

Manikkam, a worker who had sought to form a union for contract workers, was sacked seven months ago. The company rejected a labour commissioner’s instruction to reinstate him, knowing full well that neither the government nor the union would press for his return. When confronted by the WWS, AITUC Tamil Nadu state secretary Ravi admitted that Manikkam’s reinstatement was not even raised during the January 15 talks.

In another case, Sathish Kumar suffered serious injuries in a work accident last March. He had to be treated for more than 45 days at a government hospital. When he claimed for his medical leave allowance, it was denied because the company had not paid its contribution toward the medical claim.

In a leaflet, the AITUC had rhetorically asked: “How dare the central government-owned AAI and its agency BIIL reject our legal rights?” However, in the January 15 talks, the AITUC leaders agreed to the denial of these rights.

The AITUC has a long record of betrayals. Last June the union federation called off a 44-day strike by 13,000 contract workers at the central government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in southern India. The workers had demanded the regularisation of their jobs, and wage rises, but were sent back to work without those demands being met.

Last year, permanent and contract workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant at Manesar in the northern Indian state of Haryana were involved in months of strikes, occupations and lockouts. The AITUC and other union federations systematically worked to isolate the workers, urging them to turn for support to the Congress state government, which was collaborating with the company.

The AITUC’s role flows from the politics of the Stalinist CPI, which, along with the other main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, has functioned for many years as a central prop of bourgeois rule. These two parties supported the minority Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government from 2004 to

2008, under the guise of keeping the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) out of office, even while admitting that the UPA was carrying out the same pro-market program as the BJP.

Wherever they held power—in the states of West Bengal and Kerala—the CPM and CPI aggressively enforced pro-investor policies and as a result lost office because of the hostility of the working people and rural toilers.

Now the CPI and CPM union leaders have joined hands with the BJP and Congress unions, supposedly to oppose the open market economic “reforms” of the current UPA government. Thus, they are providing credence to these two major parties of the Indian ruling elite, including the right-wing communalist BJP, while suppressing the opposition of workers to the appalling conditions they face.



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