

To defeat ruling class assault,

Indian workers need a socialist program

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Tens of millions of workers across India will join a two-day general strike today and Thursday to protest against the socio-economic policies of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, including fuel price increases, promotion of contract labour, massive tax concessions to big business, and privatization.

The Indian ruling class, like its counterparts in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in Asia, is determined to make the working class and rural toilers pay for the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Last September, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh justified his government's imposition of "big bang reforms," including price subsidy cuts and the opening of the retail sector to multi-brand foreign giants like Walmart, by proclaiming that the Indian people must make "sacrifices" to placate domestic and foreign investors.

Subsequently, Finance Minister Chidambaram imposed massive social spending cuts, slashing expenditure by more than 6.5 percent from the 2012-13 budget allocation. In a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, Chidambaram vowed the Congress-led government will make further cuts, including to price subsidies, in next month's budget.

Big business has welcomed these steps, but it is clamoring for much more, including the gutting of restrictions on mass layoffs and plant closures. With a view to pushing the government still further right, many of the titans of India Inc. are championing Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as a prime ministerial candidate in the 2014 election. They gush at the record of this arch-Hindu chauvinist and self-styled "no-nonsense, strongman" in promoting business—i.e. in suppressing strikes and providing them free land and other lucrative concessions.

Today's mass strike attests to the determination of workers to fight the Indian elite's assault on their working and living conditions. But workers must beware. The trade unions have called this action not to develop a working class counter-offensive, but to maintain their control over the working class, divert its growing anger and militancy into harmless protests, and politically harness it to the parties of the bourgeoisie, including the ruling Congress Party and the official opposition, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The political leadership of the strike is largely in the hands of the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union affiliates, respectively, of India's two Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

The Stalinists feign opposition to the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism. They have periodically organized one-day strikes claiming that the current government and the BJP-led one that preceded it could be pressured into adopting "pro-people" policies.

Their role, however, goes far beyond propagating the dangerous and reactionary notion that the working class should direct its energies at pressuring the principal parties of the ruling class so as to compel them to "serve the people." The CPI and CPM have played a pivotal role in the implementation of the Indian ruling class' pro-market reform program. They have propped up a series of rightwing governments at the Centre, including the Congress government of Narasimha Rao that launched India's "new economic policy" and, from 2004-2008, the current UPA government. Moreover, in those states, where they have formed the government, West Bengal and Kerala, the CPI, CPM, and their Left Front have pursued what they frankly admit are "pro-investor" policies, including social spending cuts, outlawing strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sector, and violently suppressing peasant protests against the expropriation of their land for big business.

On the part of the AITUC and CITU and their political mentors in the CPI and CPM, the Feb 20-21 protest strike represents an attempt to deepen their collaboration with a whole series of rightwing political forces.

They are touting it as "historic" that the union arm of the Congress Party, the Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC), and the BJP-aligned Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) are lending support to the strike. In reality, by enlisting the support of the union flunkies of the ruling class' principal parties, the Stalinists are making it crystal clear that this week's protest is not a challenge to the establishment. The discredited, rightwing INTUC and BMS apparatuses, for their part, welcome the Stalinists' offer of collaboration. Under conditions where there is seething popular discontent, it enables

them to burnish their claims to be “worker representatives” and to boost the pretensions of their parties to be concerned with the *aam adami* (common man).

That the Stalinists are seeking to bind the working class to rightwing forces is underscored by the actions of AITUC General Secretary and CPI parliamentarian Gurudas Dasgupta. Dasgupta has boasted about having secured “moral support” for the strike from Karnataka Chief Minister Jagdish Shettar and Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. Shetter heads a BJP government. Patnaik leads the BJD, a regional party that has implemented neo-liberal reforms and that served in the BJP-led NDA government for the six years it was in office. Following Patnaik’s meaningless declaration of “moral support,” Dasgupta publicly thanked him “for his gracious support and the concern showed for the common people and the plight of the poor”.

Dasgupta also traveled to Mumbai to meet with Uddhav Thackeray and secure from him a pledge of support for the strike from his Shiv Sena, a fascist party that rose to prominence by stoking Marathi- and Hindu-chauvinism and organizing goons to break strikes, most notably the 1982 Bombay textile strike.

As a result of the big business policies pursued by the Left Front governments in West Bengal and Kerala, the CPI and CPM suffered a series of electoral debacles. In the 2009 national election their delegation in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India’s parliament) was halved. In the 2011 state elections, they fell from power in West Bengal and Kerala.

By providing, via this week’s protest strike, a demonstration to the ruling class of their usefulness in containing social discontent and their readiness to work with forces aligned with both the Congress and the BJP, the Stalinists are seeking to convince India’s political elite that they remain an important player in establishment politics and should be welcomed to the political horse-trading that will surround next year’s general election.

Giving voice to the pro-capitalist perspective of the unions and the Stalinist parties, Dasgupta lamented earlier this month, “The government is ignoring trade unions, a stakeholder of the economy.”

In taking the measure of the Stalinists, workers should take note that in West Bengal, the CPM has invoked an utterly spurious pretext to justify limiting this week’s strike to just one-day. In so doing, it is seeking to appeal to big business which deems that the new chief minister Mamata Banerjee has not moved quickly enough to jettison the populist pose she adopted to unseat the CPM. The Kolkata-based *Telegraph* cited a CPM state leader as explaining, “Given the state’s condition and [former CPM chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee’s] repeated pitch for industry, a two-day *bandh* (strike) will affect the Left’s image badly.”

Capitalism has failed. In the advanced capitalist countries, the ruling elite is pursuing a veritable social counter-revolution,

seeking to destroy the public services and limited social rights workers won through convulsive struggles in the last century. In India, after twenty years of market reforms that enabled a tiny big business elite to appropriate fantastic wealth while condemning the vast majority to poverty and economic insecurity, the bourgeoisie is now insisting on “sacrifices” that threaten to drive hundreds of millions into hunger and destitution.

To defend their jobs and wages and secure the right to decent public health care and education, the working class must advance a socialist program—the fight, in conjunction with workers across South Asia and around the world—for a workers’ and peasants government. Such a government would expropriate the banks and basic industry and place them under public ownership and workers’ control, so the economy could be organized to meet social need, not enrich a handful of capitalists.

Workers must break from the Stalinist parties and their unions and form new organizations of struggle in their workplaces and localities. These organizations would lead resistance to the attacks of the employers and the government and build an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to the ruling class, all its political representatives, and state apparatus. The role of the government, police, and courts in enforcing the Indian bourgeoisie’s sweatshop exploitation has been exemplified by the plight of the victimized workers from Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar car assembly plant.

The working class must provide leadership to the poor peasants and other sections of the oppressed masses, by advancing a socialist program to mobilize them against the landlords, moneylenders and big business.

Above all the working class needs a new party, based upon the program and perspective of international socialism to lead the struggle against the Indian bourgeoisie and world imperialism. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International—the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the indefatigable opponent of the privileged Stalinist bureaucracy that usurped power from the working class under conditions of the isolation of the first workers’ state—is fighting to build such a revolutionary leadership of the international working class.



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