

Tens of millions of Indian workers join general strike

Arun Kumar
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On the first day of a two-day general strike, tens of millions of Indian workers joined stoppages yesterday to protest against rising prices and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's accelerating agenda of pro-market restructuring.

The strike affected road transport, the banking and insurance sectors, industrial production and educational institutions in many parts of India, despite threats of disciplinary action by the national and state governments. Workers from private industries, including in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), participated alongside public-sector workers.

The widespread support for the strike indicates the anger felt by broad layers of workers over deteriorating living standards and widening social inequality. Large numbers of public-sector bank and finance employees participated because they are facing restructuring and privatisation that will lead to sweeping job losses. Workers are also incensed over the frequent violation of labour laws and the undermining of job security through the increased use of low-paid contract workers.

However, the two major union federations—the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)—called the strike in order to let off steam and forge closer political ties with bourgeois parties, including those of the extreme right. The CITU and AITUC unions, which are aligned with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively, have used the strike to align with unions connected to the ruling Congress Party, as well as the Hindu supremacist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP). The Stalinists also courted and openly boasted about support from fascistic parties like the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena.

The response to the strike varied across the country.

The southern India state of Kerala was largely shut down, with buses off the roads, and shops, educational institutions and factories closed, despite threats by the Congress-led state government to deduct two days' pay for strikers. The impact in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu was partial. More than 200,000 garment workers in the Tamil Nadu industrial city of Tirupur went on strike. Coal miners from the state-run Singareni Collieries Company Ltd (SCCL) in Andhra Pradesh walked off the job.

In northern India, the states of Haryana, Punjab and Chandigarh were all heavily affected. Auto workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, including at Maruti Suzuki, Hero MotoCorp and Suzuki Motorcycle India, did not go on strike yesterday, but were preparing to stop work today. The capital of New Delhi was virtually paralysed. In the western state of Gujarat, nearly 8,000 state-owned buses were off the road and much of the banking sector was hit.

In the city of Ambala in Harayana, Narender Singh, a bus driver, the treasurer of an AITUC-affiliated union, was killed yesterday when a bus hit him while he was trying to prevent it from operating. Angry protesters clashed with the police after the incident. More than a dozen union activists were injured, five seriously.

In the industrial areas of Noida, near New Delhi, hundreds of factories and vehicles, including more than a dozen police cars, were damaged after workers blocked roads and clashed with police. Police were brought in from Ghaziabad and Meerut, along with the Provincial Armed Constabulary, to suppress protesting workers. By the end of the day, 65 people had been arrested.

Across the country's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, the media reported that the strike was total in the cities of Meerut, Ghaziabad, Noida, Kanpur,

Varanasi, Lucknow, Saharanpur, Unnao, Moradabad and Allahabad. Major markets in Lucknow, like Aminabad and Hazratganj, were deserted, and operations at post offices and state-run banks were disrupted.

Fearing that the two-day strike could slip out of the control of the unions, the UPA government made a last ditch attempt to avert the stoppage. The unions took part in talks on Monday, indicating that they were more than willing to call it off, but they needed a face-saving concession, which the government was not prepared to make.

One union leader, INTUC president G. Sanjeeva Reddy, explained: “However we told the government that it should at least accept some of the ten demands put forth by us. As the government was not willing to further discuss any of the demands, the talks failed and we have no option except to go ahead with the strike as announced.”

Big business and the corporate media bitterly opposed the strike. Assocham president Rajkumar Dhoot declared: “The national economy, battling a slowdown, can ill-afford this situation.” Assocham estimated total losses to the economy at 150-200 billion rupees (\$US2,770-3,695 million). The *Times of India* denounced the stoppages as “unwarranted and deplorable.”

A *New Indian Express* editorial called on the UPA government to deal with the strike “sternly.” After talks failed, the government threatened “consequences” for any government employee who stopped work. The Department of Personnel and Training instructed all ministries not to grant any type of leave during the strike.

In West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s state government took measures to break the strike. It sent a circular to all state government offices banning leave for any employee on February 20 and 21 except for compelling reasons. It also warned shops and markets to remain open or face administrative penalties, including cancellation of their trade licenses. Operators of private buses and taxis were warned not to join the protest action.

Under those conditions, state government offices mostly opened, with some employees remaining overnight to report for work. Government and private buses and taxis operated in state capital of Kolkata. But

private vehicles were withdrawn later in the day because of the lack of passengers as a result of the strike. Most shops and market areas were closed in defiance of the government’s threats.

The strike has certainly highlighted the widespread hostility among working people toward the government and its regressive policies. However, the Stalinist-led unions are ensuring that the strike remains confined politically within the existing parliamentary set-up and does not seriously threaten the government. Workers need a socialist and internationalist perspective to fight for their basic rights.

In its statement yesterday, the WSWWS explained: “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.”



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