

India: NLC strike against privatisation continues

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An indefinite strike by around 25,000 permanent and contract Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu against the central Congress-led government's privatisation plans, entered its ninth day yesterday. NLC workers involved in essential services, including water supply, electricity and hospitals, joined the strike.

Expressing the broad public support for the industrial action, a bandh (general shutdown of shops and businesses) was widely observed in the Neyveli area on July 4. The NLC is running out of reserve fuel and 4,500 NLC officers and engineers are being forced to work from 12 to 14 hours to maintain production.

NLC managing director B. Surender Mohan tried to downplay the strike's impact on power supplies in Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states. He told the *Hindu*: "[T]he day-to-day functioning of the mines and the thermal power stations is being managed by the executives and the engineers."

The NLC is involved in lignite mining and power generation. The Indian government is seeking to sell-off 5 percent of the company—a first step toward full privatisation. V. Narayanasamy, a state minister attached to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), condemned the strike as politically motivated and told the strikers to return to work.

The trade unions covering NLC engineers and officers pulled out of the strike at the last moment, citing a Madras High Court restraining order against the action. NLC employees stopped work despite the court order, which was requested by the company's management. Several thousand officers and engineers participated in protest actions by NLC workers up to July 2.

As in 2006, about 13,000 NLC contract workers joined the NLC regular workers in this strike and

demanding the regularisation of their jobs. In response, NLC management has delayed the payment of their wages for last month, in a bid to force the poorly paid workers to end their industrial action.

The Tamil Nadu state government has dispatched 3,000 additional police to bolster the several thousand personnel from the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) deployed on the pretext of providing "core security" within the NLC facilities. On July 9, several hundred NLC workers were arrested as they tried to picket the Thermal Power Station-I. They were later released.

Police have placed the Neyveli township and adjoining areas under a state of siege. When contract workers took part in a protest march on July 11 and attempted block rail traffic at Mantharakuppam in Neyveli, the police arrested hundreds of them.

As the NLC strike continues and wins the support of other workers, the national and state governments are colluding to find a way to end the industrial action. The state government has offered to buy the 5 percent stake in the company and closed-doors talks have taken place with senior central government officials.

Any purchase will inevitably involve restructuring the company at the expense of workers as the prelude to the further sell-off of shares. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank have made electricity privatisation and deregulation a priority as part of their broader demands for pro-business "reforms."

The unions affiliated with the ruling party in Tamil Nadu—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—have indicated their willingness to pull out of the strike if the central government agrees to the state government's offer. All the other NLC unions will undoubtedly fall into line with this conspiracy.

Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) national secretary D. Raja, who claims to oppose disinvestments, declared there was nothing wrong in a formal discussion of the Tamil Nadu purchase. In doing so, he indicated the readiness of his party and its affiliated union to use the AIADMK government's offer as the pretext to end the strike.

All the trade unions are affiliated to political parties that, as part of state and central governments, have been directly responsible for implementing the pro-market agenda of finance capital over the past two decades.

The unions covering NLC permanent workers encompass the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), which is affiliated to the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK), the AIADMK-affiliated Anna Workers and Staff Union, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The NLC Jeeva Contract Workers Union is also tied to the AITUC.

The AITUC and CITU are in turn aligned with India's two Stalinist parliamentary parties, the CPI and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. Both union federations have shamelessly promoted the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa as a defender of workers, despite her notorious anti-working class record, including the suspension of 200,000 striking government employees in 2003. The two Stalinist parties have backed her AIADMK in state elections.

The opposition of the DMK and AIADMK to the central government's measures has nothing to do with defending the interests of workers. Rather these parties are determined to end a strike that threatens to create an electricity crisis in Tamil Nadu and damage the interests of big business and investors in the state. Both the DMK and AIADMK are fully committed to socially regressive, "free market" policies.

NLC workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* strongly opposed the planned privatisation, saying it would impact on their living and working conditions. They expressed contempt for the Madras High Court decision to outlaw the NLC strike at the bidding of management.

Contract workers are a highly exploited section of the NLC workforce. The vast majority are paid only one-tenth the wages of regular employees. Many contract employees have been working for the corporation for between 15 and 30 years without being regularised, in

violation of the country's limited labour laws.

NLC workers can only fight the privatisation and defend jobs and conditions through a complete break from the unions, the formation of rank and file committees and a turn to other sections of workers in India and internationally facing similar attacks. Above all, this involves a political struggle against the agenda of finance capital being imposed by the central Congress-led government and Jayalalithaa's state administration. That means fighting for a workers' and peasants' government to carry out socialist policies, as part of a broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and around the world.



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