

India: NLC workers angered by sell-out of their anti-privatisation strike

Arun Kumar, Sasi Kumar, Moses Rajkumar
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There is growing discontent among the 25,000 permanent and contract workers employed by the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) over the unions' sell-out of their indefinite strike against the Indian government's plans to privatise the Tamil Nadu-based coal-mining and power-generation company.

India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government is disinvesting 5 percent of the highly-profitable NLC, as a first step in the company's privatisation and as part of its plans to restructure India's economy so as to produce bigger profits for Indian and foreign investors.

With the NLC strike in its thirteenth day, the unions seized on an offer by Tamil Nadu's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government to buy the 5 percent share of NLC currently up for sale to shut down the strike.

No sooner was it announced on July 15 that Tamil Nadu state government officials had begun talks with the Securities and Exchange Board of India over buying NLC shares, than the union leaders declared it a "major victory" and terminated the strike. The striking workers were ordered to return to their jobs without any meeting, discussion or vote.

Should the sale to the Tamil Nadu government go through, it will in no way represent a blow to the central government's privatisation plans. The Tamil Nadu state government is no less committed than New Delhi to operating NLC as a capitalist profit-making enterprise.

Moreover, the unions' torpedoing of the strike once again left in the lurch NLC's brutally-exploited contract workers. Nearly half of the company workforce have been fighting for years to have their employment regularized and to receive pay and benefits on a par with the permanent workers. Recognizing that the government's privatisation plans are a threat to all NLC workers, the contract workers had supported the strike called by the

unions that bargain on behalf of the permanent workers and the two groups of workers jointly defied court threats to punish them for mounting an "illegal" strike.

The NLC unions are affiliated with Tamil Nadu's principal political parties. They include the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), which is affiliated to the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the AIADMK-affiliated Anna Workers and Staff Union (AWSU), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The latter two union federations are respectively the trade union affiliates of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties. The majority union among the contract workers, the NLC Jeeva Contract Workers Union, is part of the CPI-led AITUC.

The sell-out of the NLC workers' anti-privatisation strike has again laid bare the phony nature of the NLC unions' "opposition" to privatisation. The various parties to which they are affiliated—the DMK, AIADMK, CPI and CPM—are all committed to the Indian elite's program of "developing" India as a cheap-labour platform for global capital and all have participated in governments in the Center and the states that have ruthlessly implemented pro-market "reforms."

The DMK and AIADMK, twin Tamil-regional parties, have a long history of explicitly supporting privatisation. If they oppose the sell-off of NLC to private investors this has nothing to do with defending the interests of the NLC workers or working people in general. The DMK and AIADMK favour keeping the NLC as a public sector company, because they view it as a valuable asset that can be used to boost the interests of the Tamil Nadu regional elite that they represent. They have gone so far as to demand that Tamil Nadu-based companies should have privileged, if not exclusive access, to the power generated by NLC.

Confronted with mass anger among the rank-and-file workers they purport to represent, the NLC unions reluctantly sanctioned strike action against the central government's privatisation plans. But as they have done repeatedly over the past decade, they worked systematically to isolate the NLC workers' struggle, while working to perpetuate the divide among the permanent and contract workers and promoting the lie that the capitalist politicians in New Delhi and Chennai can be pressured to uphold workers' interests.

The unions' greatest fear was that the strike at NLC, which has long been a centre of worker militancy, could become the catalyst for a broader movement of the working class against the big business policies of the central and state governments.

In ending the strike, the leaders of the various NLC unions joined together to heap praise on Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jalalalithaa, a notorious reactionary who a decade ago used mass firings and mass arrests to break a strike of state government workers.

The Stalinist CPM and CPI leaders sought to use her offer to buy the NLC shares to send out feelers about the possibility of renewing their reactionary electoral bloc with the AIADMK. In the 2011 state elections, the two Stalinist parties supported the AIADMK and in return had its support in contesting a limited number of seats.

Chief Minister Jayalalithaa contacted CPM state secretary G. Ramakrishnan by cellphone while he was visiting Neyveli on July 15 and asked him to urge the strikers to return to work. He immediately complied. CPI state secretary D. Pandian also congratulated Jayalalithaa for her intervention to end the strike.

Its hand strengthened by the unions' sellout of the strike, NLC management has gone on the offensive since production resumed, pushing for speed-up and threatening workers with disciplinary action. In response, the permanent workers started a "work-to-rule" campaign last week. Management then suspended two workers and is clearly laying the groundwork for a broader witch hunt.

A *World Socialist Web Site* article circulated among the NLC workers during the strike warned that that the AIADMK-affiliated unions were preparing "to pull out of the strike if the central government agrees to the state government's offer" to buy a share of NLC and predicted that "all the other NLC unions will undoubtedly fall into line with this conspiracy". (See: "India: NLC strike against privatization continues")

The article went on to argue that if workers are to defeat the socially regressive policies of big business and their

representatives in government, they must break from the pro-capitalist unions and political parties, build new organizations of struggle, and develop the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government.

In discussion with the WSWS, several NLC workers voiced their opposition to the unions' sell-out.

Rajan a permanent worker said: "This is like holding a tiger's tail. All unions have stopped the strike as they wanted to stop the strike. The danger still remains to workers. About 60 percent of NLC workers didn't like the withdrawal of the strike". Commenting on the High Court declaring the NLC strike illegal, Rajan said the High Court is an institution that serves the interests of the capitalists, not working people.

Abdul, another permanent worker, said: "All the unions together have betrayed us. There is no job security for us. None of the political parties including AIADMK, DMK, Congress, BJP [Bharatiya Janatha Party], CPI and CPM are for the workers. They promote economic reforms in favour of capitalists. As part of these economic reforms the governments carry out dismantling of public sector industries, abolishing subsidies and jobs. Trade unions declare handing over NLC shares to state government as a victory. But this is also part of the process towards privatisation."

Sanmugam said: "We can't say this is a victory for us. This is a defeat. They only put the privatisation plan on hold. It cannot be prevented. Trade unions, particularly Communist [CPI and CPM] unions, collaborated with the government to bring an end to the strike. CPI leader Raja said there was nothing wrong in discussing with the Tamil Nadu government about buying NLC shares and through this talk he hinted on bringing the indefinite strike to an end. These Communist Parties are not parties of the working class."



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