

India: Demanding pay rise, 200,000 power-loom operators continue strike

Sasi Kumar and Moses Rajkumar
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Over 200,000 textile workers employed at about 38,000 small to medium power-loom units in Coimbatore and Tirupur districts have been on indefinite strike since February 21 to demand better pay and working conditions. These districts located in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu are known as the “Manchester of India” because of their massive concentration of textile industries.

The workers, who receive a pittance for back-breaking work, are demanding an 80 percent rise in their piece-rate pay. They are also demanding the establishment of a retirement saving fund scheme (Provident Fund), medical benefits known as ESI, and paid festival holidays. Workers often work twelve hours per day with a workweek of six days in cramped, dusty and unsafe working conditions.

The strike was called by the Coimbatore and Tirupur Districts’ Job Work Weavers Association. The workers took this action after eight rounds of talks with the big textile manufactures in the presence of state labor department officials who failed to make any progress on their demands. Around 12 million meters of grey cloth worth about \$8 million are produced every day by these workers.

Small power-loom owner operators have also stopped work in solidarity with strikers.

Almost a million people depend directly and indirectly for their livelihood on the power-loom industries in these two districts. Work in neighbouring districts that are tied in one way or another to textile manufacturing in Coimbatore and Tirupur have also come to a halt as a result of the strike.

Wage agreements in the local power-loom industry are renewed every three years and no agreement has been reached in recent years without a bitter struggle, sometimes lasting months. The previous agreement of a forty percent increase in piece rates was won after a three

month-long strike from August through October 2011.

The striking workers form the bottommost and hence most exploited layer in a complex economic nexus which ties big mills to the world market and small power-loom operators.

Large mills—which produce yarn, often from cotton, and export at least part of their production of finished garments to giant western retailers such as GAP and IZOD—outsource a major portion of the weaving to small and medium power-loom owners since it is more profitable for them as they pay by piece rate. The power-loom industry is itself based upon shuttle looms, an obsolete technology.

The power-loom owners often work themselves as well as hiring other workers. The big mills pay a pittance to these power-loom owners for the weaving and they in turn pay measly wages to the workers. An average-sized power-loom shop owns 10 to 12 looms and employs about five to six workers.

The big mills have refused to accept the strikers’ demands citing competition, contraction of the market due to the ongoing world economic crisis, and the increased price of raw cotton.

The CITU and AITUC union federations—which are affiliated respectively with the two main Stalinist parties, the CPI (M) (Communist Party of India – Marxist) and the CPI (Communist Party of India)—are seeking to contain and suppress the power-loom workers’ struggle. After the strike had erupted independently of them, they formed a joint committee to “organize” the strike. This so called joint committee has mounted no campaign to mobilize support among the working class in this industrial area, let alone in the rest of Tamil Nadu and India.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently travelled to Tirupur and spoke to striking power-loom workers and small-loom owners.

Selvan, a 35 year-old power-loom worker told the WSWs: "My employer owns 16 looms. There are another seven workers who work along with me. I run eight looms. I get paid about Rupees (Rs.) 300 (US \$4.90) per day. It takes 12 hours of work for me to earn this since I am paid by piece rate. There is no provident fund or medical facility for us. They pursue 'No work No pay' policy. We don't get any paid holidays for festivals. Some workers who are provided with accommodation are compelled to work even longer hours since they are paid less because they are provided with lodging."

Murugan, a 45-year old striker, said, "Though we are paid Rs. 300 per day, we only end up making Rs. 1,500 per week on average, because of holidays for which we are not paid, and because of equipment stoppages down due to power cuts and mechanical breakdowns. For night shift work that lasts from 9 P.M. to 9A.M. we end up earning even less since we cannot work as efficiently as during the day. We cannot even afford to provide decent education to our children. We feel terrible that we have to send our children to low quality schools."

"All of us are living from hand to mouth" Murugan continued. "We have long experience with the rule of both the DMK and AIADMK (the reactionary regional parties that for decades have long alternated as the state government). Neither of them have brought any changes for the better in our living conditions. Like you said, it would be nice if a workers' government came to power."

"Despite hard labor of 12 to 14 hours a day we don't make enough to live," said 52-year-old Kathirvelan. He continued, "Therefore, many are trying to find alternate employment and migrate to the cities. Most of the workers are indebted. I too have a debt of Rs. 100,000 (Approximately \$1,650)."

A load-lifting worker was critical of trade unions, saying they always end up betraying the workers. He said, "Trade union leaders instigate the workers to go on strike and then bargain behind our backs with the capitalists. We are then left stranded and betrayed."

The working small power-loom owners have also been thrown into crisis, as the big textile mills are not prepared to compensate them for increases in electricity rates and other production costs.

Govindasamy, a small working power-loom owner, told the WSWs: "Currently we get Rs.4.30 (7 US cents) per meter. Out of this we pay a labourer Rs.1.40 (2.3 cents) per meter. After paying for other expenses, including electricity bills, spare parts and so on, there is very little profit left for us."

Many of the working power-loom owners are indebted to the banks and many have had to shut down due to bankruptcy.

When WSWs reporters confronted the AITUC's Tirupur district secretary, Sekar, over the Stalinists' failure to mobilize support for the strike, he brushed aside our criticisms, declaring the dispute would soon be resolved: "We are anticipating with confidence a positive outcome of (the ongoing) talks"

The CITU deputy leader for Tirupur, Veluchamy, for his part blamed the workers. "Although hundreds of thousands of workers are supporting the strike," Veluchamy claimed, "there is only a few thousands of workers who actively participate in the protest struggle."

When asked to explain on what basis did the CPI(M) and the CPI form an electoral alliance with an arch-reactionary and anti-working class party like the AIADMK, Veluchamy said, "There is a host of divergences in India, especially the caste problem. Under this situation, it is not possible to fight alone and win the struggle. That's why we fight along with democratic forces. In 2003 our support to Jayalalitha's AIADMK was to prevent communal forces from raising their head!" This canard of fighting communalism by joining hands with reactionary big business parties is always advanced by the Stalinists. The AIADMK recently repudiated its electoral understanding with the CPI and CPM so it can keep its hands free to enter into a coalition government led by the Hindu supremacist BJP after this spring's national election.

Veluchamy added, "Socialist revolution is on our agenda, however it is not possible."

The power-loom workers' militant struggle for decent pay and working conditions is in fundamental conflict with the profit interests of the corporations. Confronted with global slump, big business in India and around the world has been waging a relentless drive to slash workers' wages and benefits and accelerate production so as to offset their shrinking profit rates. Only by arming themselves with a socialist internationalist political program can workers mount a long-delayed counteroffensive.



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