

# Tamil Nadu workers speak to WSWS about Indian elections

Our correspondents

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*World Socialist Web Site* correspondents have spoken with workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu about their struggles against state-backed cheap-labor and their attitude toward the ongoing elections to the Lok Sabha, the popularly-elected lower house of India's parliament.

Voters in Tamil Nadu, India's seventh-largest state, went to the polls on April 24, in the sixth phase of India's nine-phase election. The final phase of voting is taking place today in parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, with the votes from all phases to be tabulated this Friday, May 16.

Workers from the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC), a government-owned lignite mining and power generation company, the Madras Export Processing Zone (MEPZ), and the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) in Chennai spoke with the WSWS. Students, housewives and other toilers also voiced their opinions.

The elections are taking place under the conditions of a growing social and political crisis. Working people are angered over years of double-digit increases in the price of food and other essentials, the lack of jobs, especially for school-leavers and college graduates, and the collapse of the public health and education systems.

The Indian bourgeoisie, meanwhile, has responded to a drop in foreign investment and the halving of India's growth rate since 2011 by demanding the speedy imposition of further pro-investor reforms. These include: massive social spending cuts, the rolling back and eventual elimination of energy and fertilizer subsidies, the gutting of restrictions on layoffs and plant closures, and the accelerated privatization of public companies and infrastructure.

Much of corporate India has rallied round the official opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its prime ministerial candidate, the self-styled Hindu

communalist strongman Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. But whatever the political coloration of the next government—whether it is led by the BJP, the Congress Party or a combination of regional parties and the Stalinist Left Front—it will prove completely subservient to domestic and international capital and seek to impose the full burden of the crisis of Indian and world capitalism on working people.

Workers in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere in India, have mounted a series of militant struggles for higher wages and better conditions and in defence of their jobs against both private and public employers and frequently done so in the face of brutal state repression.

About 4,000 workers from Nokia mobile phone company in the Sriperumbudur Special Economic Zone near Chennai held a protest on March 31 against a threatened plant closure that would eliminate nearly 10,000 jobs.

On March 18 both permanent and contract workers of NLC went on strike against the killing on the previous day of a fellow worker, Rajkumar, by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF). Rajkumar was shot dead at point-blank range by CISF personnel in the midst of an argument over his request to see another worker. In recent years NLC has been rocked by labor strife, as workers have rebelled against the company's contract-labor system and impending privatization.

In order to secure super-profits, NLC management denies nearly half of the company's 30,000-strong workforce permanent status. The contract workers receive only a fraction of the wages paid their permanent colleagues for doing the same work and are forced to live in shanties that lack basic facilities such as drinking water and toilets.

The mother of Rajkumar, the NLC worker killed by the CISF, explained to the WSWS how the conditions

of their family have worsened since his death. “My son was trying to repair the house. But now we are in a tent. They [NLC management] said they will help or pay compensation, but we have received nothing. It is very difficult to maintain my grandchildren.”

Selvakumar, a sub-contract worker at NLC, said that he has been working for 13 years as a contract worker with a monthly salary of 5,000 rupees (\$US80). “I have to pay 500 rupees for rent and about 150 for electricity per month. Four of us, including my mother and child, live in this small hut. My wife has no permanent job. She does day-to-day odd jobs for 50 rupees (80 cents) per day. As there are no adequate facilities in government schools we have to send our children to a private school paying 500 rupees per month.”

Ali, an NLC permanent worker, pointed out how the parties contesting the election are promoting caste and religious divisions. “They have no policy for the people. The [ruling] Congress is trying to establish its family rule [a reference to the dynastic nature of the party leadership which for decades has been led by the Nehru-Gandhi family]. The BJP was behind the demolition of the *Babri Masjid* [a 16th Century Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Its razing triggered the worst communal violence in India since Partition]. But without the support of the then Congress government it could not have happened.

“BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi was implicated in [the anti-Muslim] pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. A tense situation will prevail in the country if such leaders and parties come to power.”

Ramu Gangamma, who came to Neyveli searching for a job from Kasanoor, makes cane baskets as jobs are not available. “We have to spend one week to knit a basket, which can be sold for 400 rupees. It is not easy to sell it. Every other day we have to starve. Our daily meal is rice and onion. We have nothing but the water pot and the rice pot. My husband and daughter quarreled often due to the poverty situation we face and finally my daughter committed suicide. We are unable to feed her two children.”

Murugan, a young cleaning worker in a computer company at MEPZ, told the WSWS that out of his monthly salary of 7,000 rupees he has to spend 2,000 rupees on rent for a room which he shares with his mother and sister. With the other expenses such as water, electricity and food he is unable to send his sister

to a private school with facilities.

Venkadeswaran, a young three-wheeler taxi driver, in Orakkadam at Sriperumbudur expressed his contempt for the establishment parties: “The Congress and the BJP have governed this country for several years. The DMK [Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam] and AIADMK [All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam] have governed Tamil Nadu. But these governments have brought no benefits to the people.” Referring to the so-called Third Front, promoted by the main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—he said, “People have no faith in them as they have lined up with Congress and also with AIADMK in the past.”

Vigneswaran, a Nokia engineer, said he did not vote in this election as he has no faith in any of the parties. “They do nothing for the workers or for the ordinary people. Bourgeois parties such as Congress and BJP are not concerned with peoples’ interests. The CPM and CPI, which are pretending to be left, were in alliance with the anti-working class bourgeois parties at the national and states level. In the states, where they were ruling, [West Bengal and Kerala] they followed the bourgeois policy.”

He went on to emphasize that all workers are facing common problems. The eight-hour work day, he noted, no longer exists. “Even administrative officers like me are under permanent threat of layoff, just like contract workers,” added Vigneswaran.

A woman worker from a private company expressed her disgust with the political parties and explained why she did not vote: “They do not work for the people. Only in election time do they come to see us and then they are concerned only with their own interests, not the people.” She works overtime without any payment and trade unions are not allowed in her company. A widow, she has to maintain her two children and a handicapped brother on her monthly salary of 5,500 rupees (\$91.50).



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