

India: Unions betray contract workers' strike

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The recent 53-day strike by 11,000 impoverished contract workers employed by the Indian government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) was betrayed by all the trade unions that claim to represent them.

The strikers demanded regularisation of their employment and equal wages with their permanent colleagues at the NLC, a lignite mining and power generation company based at Neyveli in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. They also demanded higher bonuses.

The strike was called off by the Joint Action Committee (JAC), comprised of 10 trade unions. These include the Anna Workers and Staff Union (AWSU), affiliated with AIADMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu; the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), affiliated with the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK); and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

The unions were in such a hurry to stop the strike that the JAC called it off on October 24 without even formally signing an agreement with the NLC. The main demand for regularisation of contract jobs was completely abandoned, along with the demand for an increase in bonuses from 8.33 percent to 20 percent of monthly wages.

The sellout deal will raise the daily wage of contract workers by just 110 rupees (\$US1.80). Even that rise was postponed by one year because the NLC claimed that a previous wage agreement signed in 2010 with the Jeeva Contract Workers Union (JCWU), remained valid until November 2015. The JCWU, which is not part of the JAC, is affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress, led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI).

Accordingly, the highest monthly wage for a contract worker will be around 15,000 rupees (\$242). This is far

short of what the strikers demanded: an immediate increase in the minimum wage to 25,000 rupees, the wage paid to the lowest classification of regular workers.

Until the new wage agreement comes into effect, the NLC “offered” to pay half the wage rise in two instalments, the first on November 1 and the second a year later. Workers strongly opposed this sham, however, forcing the unions to try to strike a bargain with the management to change the timeframe for implementing the pay rise. Due to NLC’s intransigence, the formal signing of the new agreement has dragged on since October 24.

In order to try to blunt the anger of workers, the NLC offered to pay a total of 10,000 rupees—3,500 rupees for the strike period, an ex-gratia payment of 3,000 rupees and a bonus of 3,500 rupees. So far, contract workers have been paid only 3,500 rupees.

Knowing full well the widespread opposition of workers to the sellout, the JAC did not call for a general meeting of striking workers to vote on the deal.

“There is a deep discontent among contract workers,” one contract worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They are very tense as they feel greatly betrayed by the agreement reached by the unions with the NLC management,” he said. “In spite of the 53-day strike, workers gained very little. Workers were left stranded. Our main demands—regularisation of contract jobs and a wage hike—were rejected. I and some other workers have begun to realise that we need a new program to fight for our demands.”

Another NLC contract worker commented: “We are shocked by this agreement. All the trade unions have betrayed us. We are not going to trust unions any more. They have become anti-worker.”

The WSWs warned from the outset that the JAC unions called the strike only to head off growing unrest among the workers and “because they fear the loss of

their influence among the workers, who have repeatedly demonstrated their keen desire to fight for their rights in spite of repeated betrayals by the trade unions.”

As in previous strikes by the NLC contract workers, the trade unions refused to call out permanent workers in support of the strikers. For this treachery, the NLC management praised them during the strike, while hardening its stand against the contract workers.

Despite the NLC being backed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government, the unions confined the strikers to issuing futile appeals to the same government, as well as the state government and the district Collector, to intervene on their behalf.

Equal pay and permanent status for contract workers have been the key issues in numerous strikes and occupations in recent years, including at Foxconn, BYD Electronics, Sanmina, Hyundai and Ford in Tamil Nadu, Maruti Suzuki in Haryana, and Toyota and Bosch in Karnataka. In every case, employers, backed by the national and state governments, police and courts, have adamantly rejected the demands.

The Modi government’s “Make in India” campaign aims to transform India into a globally competitive sweatshop to attract foreign investment. Aggressive drives are underway to satisfy corporate demands for drastic change in labour laws to make it easier to lay off permanent workers and close down plants. In other words, the conditions of “regular workers” are to be reduced to those of the super-exploited contract workers.

A genuine struggle against the contract labour system requires the political mobilisation of the working class in the fight for a socialist program against the entire ruling establishment, its courts and police. As defenders of the capitalist order, with roles as enforcers of the official collective bargaining regime, the unions are determined to prevent such a struggle.

The role of the NLC unions, in particular, is directly connected to the politics of the parties to which they are affiliated. The DMK and AIADMK both have records of ruthlessly carrying out socially regressive economic “reforms” in Tamil Nadu on behalf of local and foreign investors, along with attacks on the basic rights of the working class and rural toilers.

While the trade unions attached to the Stalinist CPI and CPM claim to oppose pro-market restructuring and

privatisation, the state governments led or joined by the CPM and CPI in West Bengal and Kerala implemented similar anti-working class policies.



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