

Unions scuttle half-million strong Coal India strike

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After using militant rhetoric to urge India's coal miners to join a five-day national walkout opposing the government's plans to privatize the industry, union leaders abruptly called the strike off Wednesday after just two days of job action.

The unions shut the strike down just as it was beginning to have a major impact on the country's coal supply, especially the provisioning of the country's coal-fired electric generating plants.

The strike, which began on Tuesday, January 6, involved as many as a half million coal miners, with both regular and contract workers walking off the job at operations of the giant government-owned Coal India Ltd (CIL) in all regions of the country. The strike was called in response to a recent executive ordinance issued by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government authorizing the auctioning off of the country's undeveloped coal deposits to private companies, as well as the government's plans to further reduce the government's ownership stake in CIL. (See: "India's Modi regime imposes big business 'reforms' by executive fiat")

Currently CIL has a monopoly on the nation's coal mining and is the world's largest coal producer, with an annual output of over 450 million tons.

The "five-day" strike was called by the major national union federations with the aim of containing and defusing mounting anger among coal miners. Joining in the strike call were the Congress Party-affiliated INTUC; the CITU, which is the union affiliate of the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist, or CPM; the AITUC, which is the trade union arm of the smaller but older Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI); and the "independent" Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS).

So strong was the support for the strike that even the

BJP's own trade union wing, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), felt compelled to feign support for it. The *Economic Times* quoted the CITU general secretary voicing disagreement with the decision of the other unions to end the strike—a decision which was announced at the conclusion of a lengthy meeting between union leaders and Coal and Power Minister Piyush Goya.

"We disagree with the stand of the other four unions," said the CITU's Tapan Sen. "And our opposition to the coal ordinance will continue in the form of demonstrations tomorrow (Thursday). There is no reason why the five-day strike should have been called off in two days by the other unions since nothing concrete has been assured to the workers."

Despite this dissent, the CITU has a long and sordid history of isolating and betraying strikes and entirely shares the other unions' reactionary perspective of pressuring the state to adopt "pro-people policies," i.e., to slightly temper the ruling class drive to intensify the exploitation of the working class.

The scuttling of the strike was entirely predictable. The major complaint of the union leadership was that the Modi government passed the ordinance with "arrogance" and "without any consultations." In other words it was miffed at not being made a partner in the plans of the BJP government, led by the arch Hindu chauvinist and big business lackey Narendra Modi, to restructure the industry.

India's coal mining industry was taken into government hands in 1971 by Indira Gandhi's government. Four years later CIL was formed as a fully state-owned holding company, with five subsidiaries, which together produce most of the country's coal.

Coal is the principal fuel used in electricity generation and whilst India has ample coal reserves

there are increasing shortages of coal due to the lack of capital investment. This has prompted warnings that India may soon have to start importing coal.

The Modi government has seized upon this impending coal shortage to justify its plans to throw open the coal sector to private companies, claiming this is needed to boost the coal supply.

Over the past two decades, under successive Congress Party and BJP-led coalition governments, public sector coal mines underwent drastic restructuring. Poorly-paid contract workers, who are denied all statutory benefits, now make up 40 percent of CIL's workforce.

India's coal miners and ancillary workers rightly fear that the handing over of coal deposits to profit-hungry private entities will result in a drive to further downgrade their already deplorable working conditions and low wages. Indian coal miners work in some of the worst conditions in the world. They are not even provided helmets. Cave-ins and other workplace accidents are routine. Most miners develop asthma, tuberculosis and other chronic, debilitating diseases.

In 2010, under the Congress Party-led UPA government, coal miners mounted a one-day national strike in protest against the government's divestment or partial privatization plan. On the part of the unions, the strike was a hollow gesture, as investors, who soon after made CIL's IPO (initial public offering) India's biggest to date, clearly recognized.

This week CIL's then chairman, Partha S. Bhattacharyya, counselled the BJP government to work more closely with the unions. "Trade union leaders in the coal sector are mature [individuals] who work in the interest of workers," Partha Bhattacharyya told *Quartz India*. "But [they] understand what's good for the country, the economy and the coal sector. The best way [to solve any crisis] is to engage with them at the right time, to the right extent."

Bhattacharyya is speaking from long experience. Under his leadership, CIL successfully pressed forward with its drive to slash its permanent workforce and close "unviable" mines.

This week's two-day strike reportedly disrupted 75 percent of CIL's production. Its impact was felt immediately in all of the country's major coalfields.

In the western state of Maharashtra all 36 mines were shut down. In the eastern state of Jharkhand, over 40

percent of miners joined the strike. At the Telangana-based Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), a union affiliated to the TRS, the ruling regional party in the state of Telengana (newly carved out of Andhra Pradesh) scabbed on the strike.

There was press speculation that if the strike continued, the Modi government might invoke the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to intimidate and drive the striking miners back to work. In the end this didn't prove necessary, since the unions chose to scuttle the strike on the basis of an empty and palpably untrue government claim that it has no plans to privatize the industry.

None of the coal unions or their affiliated parties has any fundamental difference with the pro-market agenda of the Modi government. The now-defeated CPM governments in West Bengal and Kerala for years pursued what even the Stalinists themselves termed "pro-investor" policies.

Miners must establish their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and establishment political parties and based on a class struggle perspective of industrial and political action. An independent socialist movement of the working class must rally behind it poor farmers and other toilers to establish a workers and farmers' government in solidarity with the international working class.



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