

Millions of Indian workers strike against Modi government's pro-market reforms

Our correspondents
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Tens of millions of workers throughout India joined a one-day general strike yesterday organised by ten trade union federations against the socially-regressive pro-market reforms of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government.

The measures include changes to labour laws to make sackings and plant closures easier, a land acquisition bill for releasing large tracts of land for big business at the expense of farmers, further privatisation, cutbacks to price subsidies and the slashing of social spending.

According to union estimates, more than 150 million workers participated making the strike one of the largest in recent years. Employees in both the public and private sectors stopped work, including in the banking, insurance, postal, telecom, electricity, ports, coal, steel and jute industries as well as construction and transport. Taxi cab and auto rickshaw driver took part, along with farm workers and poor peasants.

Banks, insurance and road transport were the most-affected in many parts of the country, including major cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore. An estimated 1.3 million employees from 25 public sector banks, 11 private banks and nine foreign banks stopped work. Workers from the Reserve Bank, India's central bank, as well as cooperative, regional and rural banks, joined the action.

In the north, public transport was affected in Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh and several other states. Workers from a number of industries, including in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, also participated in the strike.

In West Bengal, the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) attempted to prevent the strike by mobilising the police and its own thugs against strikers. It also sent out a circular to state government employees warning that any absentees on September 2 would lose pay and

entitlements.

Despite the intimidation, millions of Bengali workers took strike action, shutting down public transport in much of the state and leaving government offices with low staff levels. In the state capital Kolkata, police baton-charged strikers leading to clashes. Television footage showed women involved in a sit-in being dragged away by police. The Press Trust of India reported that nearly 200 arrests were made across the state.

In southern India, entire industries, banks, government offices, and commercial establishments in the state of Kerala shut down, along with the Cochin Port and IT firms in Technopark and Infopark. Various state universities postponed examinations scheduled for yesterday. In Tamil Nadu, the state government tried to break the transport strike using workers from its affiliated unions, but road transport was far from normal. Private sector workers from MRF, Ashok Leyland, Hinduja and Eveready along with bank workers joined the strike.

The widespread participation in yesterday's strike has demonstrated the mounting outrage towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government, as well as the determination of workers and rural toilers to defend their jobs and living conditions.

However, the decision of the trade unions to call yesterday's strike has nothing to do with waging a political struggle against the Modi government and its anti-working class policies. Rather, their aim was to defuse mounting popular anger and channel it behind the other major party of the Indian bourgeoisie—Congress and its allies.

The leading political role in the strike was played by the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated to the

country's two main Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively. Both the CPM and CPI have been instrumental at the state and central levels in implementing pro-business policies at the expense of workers, either directly or by propping up Congress-led coalition governments.

The Stalinists used the general strike to enhance their standing with Congress and other bourgeois parties, by collaborating closely with their union federations in organising the strike. These included not only the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), but also the unions affiliated with the fascistic regional party, Shiv Sena, as well as the Bharatiya Mazhdour Sangh (BMS) which is connected to Modi's BJP.

All of this only boosts the credibility of the union arms of these bourgeois parties and keeps the Indian working class tied to the political establishment. Even after the BMS withdrew from the strike, claiming the government had made concessions, the Stalinist union leaders met with their BMS counterparts to convince them to reverse their decision.

A CPM politburo statement hailing the outcome of the strike fostered the illusion that the Modi government could be pressured to drop its pro-market policies. The CPM declared that the government must "at least now realise that the entire working class in the country rejects the anti-labour proposals that it is considering and demands that the workers be provided with a decent livelihood and economic security."

The Modi government, however, is not going to change the central thrust of its policies. The Indian economy is slowing under the impact of the continuing global economic crisis and the government is under pressure from big business to accelerate the pro-market agenda. The only way to defend jobs and living conditions is to make a political break with the CPM and the CPI and all factions of the ruling class and to wage an independent struggle based on the socialist strategy outlined by the Socialist Equality Party in its statement of September 2.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking workers in the Tamil Nadu capital of Chennai near the city's central railway station and at the Ambattur Industrial estate bus depot.

Rajesh, a hospital worker, said: "Most of the public sectors are facing the risk of privatisation. In our hospital, staffing and infrastructure problems are getting worse. The health sector, education and agriculture all depend upon government subsidies. If these sectors are privatised many ordinary people will be affected."

Parthasarathy explained: "I have been working in the railway sector for nearly 32 years. We are all opposed to privatisation. Both the Congress party and the BJP took the initiative in implementing policies against workers. This government intends to dismantle the public sector and create conditions of mass unemployment. So the future of the young generation is called into question. Workers will not allow this. We are vigorously opposed to it."

Sankar said: "This government has only further intensified what the previous Congress-led government was doing previously. I agree with your point that the same unions that have organised this strike are refusing to call out the railway workers. They are playing politics. I would welcome the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies."

Munusamy, a construction worker, commented: "Here most of the employers wish to hire workers from northern India because they are cheap labour. I used to get 500 rupees per day whereas a worker from northern India doing the same job would get 300 rupees and also works longer hours than us. I think the northern Indian workers should be paid the same wage and work for just eight hours. But the unions are not raising this issue."



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