

India: Over 200,000 Tamil Nadu government workers on indefinite strike

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Over 200,000 state government employees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu remain on indefinite strike, after walking out on February 10 over 20 demands. The workers want the abolition of the contributory National Pension Scheme (NPS), a pay rise and the filling of all vacancies in various government departments.

The striking workers intensified their action this week, picketing divisional and district administrative offices across the state and holding protest rallies and marches in several district centres. Government offices in rural development, land survey, commercial tax, local government offices and the education department have all been hit by the industrial action.

Tamil Nadu's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government arrested tens of thousands of protesting workers on Tuesday, releasing most later that day.

The NPS was first introduced by India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in August 2003 and came into effect from January 2004. Under the scheme all central and state government employees hired after January 1, 2004 were deprived of previously existing pension rights and forced to pay 10 percent of their salaries into the NPS, with an equivalent contribution from the government.

Workers are deeply opposed to the decision of the current BJP-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to allow the pension fund to invest in the share market.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram is notorious for her brutal crackdowns on striking government employees. In 2003 she sacked nearly 200,000 striking workers using draconian Essential Services laws.

The AIADMK government, however, is facing

elections in April-May and may be calculating that an open crackdown will undermine its electoral prospects. Jayalalithaa is depending on the trade unions to divide workers and undermine the strike. She sent a ministerial delegation led by Finance Minister O. Paneerselvam to hold talks with the unions on February 9.

Desperate for any face-saving "promise" from the state government, the Tamil Nadu Government Employees Association (TNGEA), a front of 68 unions, demanded a "written assurance" from the ministers on their claims. When the ministers refused, declaring they had to speak with the chief minister, the TNGEA was forced to proceed with its scheduled February 10 walkout.

The Joint Action Council of Teachers Organisations (JACTO), which represents primary school teachers, higher secondary school teachers and higher secondary and school headmasters, initially decided not to strike, declaring that it would await the state government's interim budget on February 16.

However, when the budget failed to grant any of the state government workers' demands, the JACTO called a "human chain protest" in major cities across the state on February 20 and a protest march in Chennai on February 25. JACTO has threatened to call an indefinite strike on February 26.

The Tamil Nadu walkout reflects the growing opposition of Indian workers to attacks on basic democratic rights and living standards by successive central and state governments. Since 1991, central and state governments have imposed far-reaching "market reform" measures to open up the economy to foreign investment, slash public spending and privatise state-owned enterprises, as dictated by big business and the International Monetary Fund.

The unions have no fundamental differences with these measures and are determined to divert workers' anger into empty protests and harmless appeals to the federal and state governments.

Tamil Nadu workers should recall the brutal repression and mass sacking of state government employees by the AIADMK administration in July 2003 and the treacherous role played by the unions and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI).

The Stalinist CPM and CPI responded to the mass sackings—the largest in India history—with perfunctory condemnations and directed the sacked employees into futile legal appeals (see: “Tamil Nadu sackings signal new offensive against Indian workers”).

For decades, the CPI and CPM have worked to subordinate the working class to Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and then AIADMK state administrations, hailing one, and then the other, as “secular” parties with a “pro-people” agenda. The CPM and CPI backed the AIADMK in the 2011 state assembly elections and share full responsibility for all the state government attacks on the working class.

World Socialist Web Site reporters in Chennai spoke to some of the striking workers this week, who voiced their opposition to the contributory pension scheme.

Prem said: “I have been working as a junior clerk for the last two-and-a-half years but have no idea when I’ll be made permanent. Governments are spending a lot of money on infrastructure development and claim that they don’t have money to give us a pay rise.

“The Modi government is also allocating substantial amounts of money to the military. This also affects us because the government claims it doesn’t have enough money for a wage increase for workers.”

Child-care centre or Anganwadi workers who spoke to the WSWs used pseudonyms, fearing victimisation.

Rani, who has been working for 25 years, and is only paid 8,000 rupees (\$US119) per month, said: “Most of the workers in this scheme have not been regularised [given permanent jobs]. We’ve also been told to do various other duties, including recording births and deaths, giving polio drops to children and other work related to the elections.

“Although we’re supposed to have a half-day holiday on Saturday and a full day on Sunday, we are often told to do extra work during the weekends but not given any

extra payment.

“Both Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi [leader of the opposition DMK] don’t care about the people. They’re only concerned about their own interests. They do these things for publicity and to gain votes at the election.”

Ammu, a helper, said: “None of the political parties fight for the interests of workers and I’ve seen all of them. I’ve also seen how the AIADMK and DMK governments operated against the workers.

“The Jayalalithaa government hasn’t given us any benefits. [Under the NPS] Jayalalithaa gives us a 1,000-rupee pension once every three months. So after working very hard for a long time this is all we get from the pension fund!”

Lalitha, a teacher, voiced her frustration about her low monthly pay. “There is not much difference between the DMK and the AIADMK governments,” she said.

“Many people said Modi would be a good prime minister but after he came to power he laid his hands on the gas cylinder [i.e., slashed the government gas subsidy]. Now we pay more for the cylinder.”



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