

India: Unions call off Tamil Nadu government workers strike

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The Tamil Nadu Government Employees Association (TNGEA), a coalition of 68 public sector unions, has called off a 10-day strike of over 200,000 government employees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu without winning a single demand from its 20-point charter of claims.

TNGEA officials attempted to justify the betrayal, claiming that their directive was only “a temporary withdrawal of strike.” The decision to end all industrial action was made by union officials at a TNGEA executive meeting last Saturday. Rank-and-file members of the union had no input or vote on the arbitrary decision.

TNGEA general secretary R. Balasubramanian told the media: “Government employees will be involved in election work, teachers in school exams and pulse polio [immunisation]... We will wait for some more months for the government to react to our demands and after that we will decide.”

Other major unions involved in the strike, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All Indian Trade Union Congress (AITUC), called off all industrial action in line with the TNGEA directive. The CITU and the AITUC are affiliated to the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively.

The CPM, which politically dominates the TNGEA, openly backed the betrayal, claiming it was a voluntary decision. *Theekathir*, the CPM’s Tamil daily, declared: “The government employees and teachers withdrew the strike for the benefit of the public... [The workers] said they will work more to compensate for the impact of the strike. This declaration is [an example of] the high culture of the workers.”

Tamil Nadu government workers began their walkout

on February 10, demanding abolition of the contributory National Pension Scheme (NPS), along with higher wages, the filling of all vacancies in government departments, and various other claims (see: “India: Over 200,000 Tamil Nadu government workers on indefinite strike”).

In 2003, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) sacked 200,000 striking government workers. Facing state elections in April–May this year, she adopted a different tactic and directly used the unions to divide workers and shut down the strike.

On February 9, a day before the strike began, Jayalalithaa sent a ministerial delegation to begin discussions with union officials. The Joint Action Council of Teachers Organisations (JACTO), which represents primary school teachers, higher secondary school teachers and higher secondary and school headmasters, decided not join the state-wide walkout.

On February 19, as the strike continued and protests began spreading throughout the state, the government suddenly announced some meagre concessions. These included: an increase in the monthly pension for Anganwadi (child care) and nutritious meal scheme workers from 1,000 to 1,500 rupees (\$US15 to \$22); retirement benefits for nutritious meal scheme workers lifted from 50,000 to 60,000 rupees (\$726 to \$871); and retirement benefits for cooks and cooking assistants to be increased from 20,000 to 25,000 rupees (\$290 to \$363).

In response to strikers’ demands for the abolition of the NPS, the chief minister promised to establish a committee “to study the new scheme in detail and submit a report.”

TNGEA leader Balasubramanian immediately

welcomed Jayalalithaa's promises and backed the bogus government investigation into the NPS. Attempting to bolster illusions in yet another state government committee, he suggested that the chief minister "could have also announced a committee on the 7th pay commission," a reference to workers' demands for a pay rise.

When Jayalalithaa sacked 200,000 striking state government employees in 2003, the CPM and CPI responded with perfunctory condemnations and directed the sacked employees into futile legal appeals. During the 2011 state elections, these Stalinist parties backed Jayalalithaa's AIADMK.

Now under conditions of growing hostility to the AIADMK and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Tamil Nadu's main bourgeois parties, the CPM and CPI have established another political trap—the so-called People's Welfare Front (PWF). This formation, which involves alliances with right-wing regionalist and caste-ist parties, such as the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, is running candidates in the forthcoming state elections.

The PWF is a desperate attempt to politically demoralise the working class and keep it tied to the bankrupt parliamentary framework (see: "Indian Stalinists form pro-imperialist Third Front in Tamil Nadu").

World Socialist Web Site reporters last week spoke to several state government workers from Ezhilagam in Chennai about the unions' betrayal of the state-wide strike.

Moorthy said: "I am not happy about calling off the strike. This is not a temporary withdrawal of the strike, as the union leadership claims, but a permanent one. The truth is that unions have capitulated to the AIADMK government. Like Jayalalithaa, the unions say the same thing but with a somewhat different tone—that they had to call off the strike because of the elections and that the people are suffering, etc."

Saleem, a revenue department worker, said: "I'm not a member of the TNGEA. Though the TNGEA is not formally affiliated with any political party, it is influenced by the CPM and important office bearers of the union are members of the CPM. Workers know all about this. The striking workers were shocked when they heard about withdrawal of strike by the union

leadership under conditions where none of our main demands were accepted by the government."

Asked about the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in New Delhi, Saleem said there were no differences between the two national parties—the BJP and the Congress. "None of them are for the people. They alternate in government because there is no other real alternative political party."

On the NPS, Saleem said: "It's a fraudulent scheme. So far 1,500 workers retired and died but they weren't paid a single paise [cent]. The money deducted from workers' salary packages for the future pension scheme is rolled into the share market. When it is wiped out in the share market, we won't get any money!"



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