

Tens of millions of Indian workers to join one-day protest strike

Sathish Simon and Kranti Kumara
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Tens of millions of workers are expected to heed the call of a Joint Trade Union Committee (JTUC) and join a one-day, all-India general strike this Friday to protest the “anti-labour and anti-people” policies of the right-wing, Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

The widespread support for the September strike 2 is an expression of mounting working-class anger and militancy. But the JTUC is comprised of ten pro-capitalist union federations, virtually all of them like the Congress Party-allied Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) that are directly tied to political parties that over the past quarter-century have implemented the Indian bourgeoisie’s agenda of privatization, deregulation, social spending cuts, and tax breaks and other concessions for investors.

This is true of the union federations that are effectively providing the strike’s political leadership—the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is the trade union wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI) aligned All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC.) Since the Indian elite repudiated its bankrupt national capitalist development strategy in 1991, the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties have repeatedly propped up governments at the Centre, most of them Congress Party-led, that have pursued neoliberal policies with the aim of making India a cheap-labour haven for world capital. And in the states where the Stalinists have formed the government, they have implemented what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies.

The JTUC has submitted a 12-point charter of demands to the government, which it not surprisingly has rejected out of hand. The demands include “urgent measures for containing price rise,” a “reduction of

unemployment through employment generation,” “strict enforcement of all basic labour laws,” “universal social security cover,” “stopping disinvestment in central/state public sector units,” and a “minimum wage of not less than 18,000 Rupees (about \$260) per month”.

The two-year-old BJP government has slashed social spending, including funding for the country’s dilapidated public health care system and the National Rural Employment Guarantee program, which is supposed to provide at least 100 days of work per year to one member from every rural household that requests it. At the same time, the BJP government has hiked military spending, accelerated disinvestment (privatization), and reduced or eliminated caps on foreign investment in numerous economic sectors.

Recently it rammed through an 18 percent national Goods and Services Tax (GST) that will be used to further shift the burden of taxation onto working people. It has also brought forward legislation to gut restrictions on layoffs and plant closures in factories employing less than 300 workers and, pending passage of this “reform,” it is encouraging BJP state governments to introduce laws circumventing national labour regulations.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley boast about having restored India to 7 percent-plus growth, the reality is the incomes of workers and toilers are being squeezed by food price rises and a colossal jobs crisis. Although some 10 million young people are entering India’s labour force yearly, an economic report found that in a recent 12-month period little more than a hundred thousand jobs were created in 8 key, especially labour-intensive, sectors. According to the 2016 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report of the United Nations

Development Program, of the 300 million Indians who entered the job market between 1991 and 2013, only 140 million were able to find jobs.

So grave is the jobs crisis that when the Amroha Municipality in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh advertised for 114 street-sweeper jobs that required no educational qualifications, 19,000 people, many of them with Engineering, Bachelor of Science, MBAs, or other college degrees, applied.

Hunger stalks rural India where more than sixty percent of the country's 1.2 billion people reside. Almost half of all Indian children under five are stunted, a condition rooted in chronic malnutrition and that adversely impacts physical and cognitive development. According to a recent government survey, rural caloric consumption has fallen sharply. The average rural person now consumes 550 calories less than they consumed in 1975-79, including 13 grams less of protein, 5 mg. less of iron, 250 mg. less of calcium and about 500 mg less of vitamin A.

For the unions and the political parties with which they are allied, Friday's strike is a maneuver aimed at burnishing their oppositional claims in the hopes of securing more votes and at dissipating rank-and-file anger.

On the part of the Stalinists such one-day strikes have taken on something of a ritual character. Since the early 1990s, they have organized one such national protest strike virtually every year. This is true even of the period between 2004 and 2008, when they were effectively the Congress Party's most important coalition partner, although they did not formally join the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government.

In the run-up to last year's strike, also held on September 2, the CITU and AITUC courted the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the union federation affiliated with the fascistic RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), which for decades has provided the BJP with most of its leading cadre and both its prime ministers. The Stalinists claimed it would be a major advance in working class "unity" if the BMS joined the Congress-affiliated INTUC in supporting the one-day protest. Predictably, the BMS withdrew its support for the strike after the leaders of the various union federations met with the government in the run-up to last year's walkout.

This year, the JTUC announced its plans for a one-day strike on September 2 at the end of March. It did so with the hope of pursuing negotiations with the government, but the BJP ignored their pleas for consultation. On August 18, the JTUC issued a statement that expressed outrage that the big-business, virulently anti-working class BJP had spurned their calls for talks and that "during the past one year, the group of ministers appointed for discussion with (the unions) on (their) 12-point charter has not convened a single meeting." The government did make a show in recent weeks of meeting with the BMS leadership, then this week announced a series of ostensible "pro-worker" measures, which are either outright hoaxes or derisory.

The BJP leadership knows full well that the Stalinists are an integral part of the political establishment, who can be counted on to deflect social anger into parliamentary channels and impotent protests. Asked this week about the impending strike, Jaitley said, "I think we have responsible trade unions."

Nevertheless, there is apprehension within the ruling elite about the strike's economic impact, as wide sectors of the economy including coal mining, the auto industry, banks, and most public sector enterprises and central and state government services will be impacted, and more fundamentally about the growth of oppositional sentiment within the working class.

All sections of the establishment were stunned last April when tens of thousands of garment and other workers in the southern city of Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) mounted a strike, outside of union control, to oppose the BJP government's attempt to restrict their right to withdraw money from their pension funds and for several days defied attempts to break their strike through police violence.



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