Indian bus workers strike against privatisation

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Trade unions last Thursday called off a transport workers' strike that had for three days halted public bus services across the northern Indian state of Haryana. After backroom talks, the state government "promised" to temporarily halt permits for new private bus operators and reinstate the 120 workers who were sacked for going on strike without notice.

Due to the halting of the strike, there remains a threat that the government will proceed with privatisation moves in a modified form, with the complicity of the trade unions.

Every day more than 1.3 million passengers travel in the buses of the state-owned Roadways transport service. About 4,200 buses, including 39 luxury ones, mostly plying between Gurugram and Chandigarh, came to a halt as a result of the strike. The Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) state government took repressive measures, including the sacking of at least five workers from each of 24 depots, and deployed police to intimidate strikers.

As a result of talks between state officials and unions, the government agreed to repeal a new transport policy that allows fresh new private operators. Under the privatisation measures announced in February, the transport department received 1,669 new applications for permits for bus operations. Transport workers fear the expanding private bus service will affect their jobs.

Haryana Transport Minister Krishan Panwar declared that the government would withdraw the issuance of new permits. However, it refused to cancel permits granted earlier to 853 buses for 273 routes in the state.

Media outlets reported that the state government would frame a new transport policy that would incorporate suggestions by the Regional Transport Authority and trade unions. This means the government will seek the unions' help to impose privatisation and quell workers' opposition.

When asked by reporters if the government had buckled under pressure of the Roadways unions, Panwar insisted: "That is not the case. The step has been taken in the public interest."

For weeks the unions had held talks with the minister to avert the strike. Haryana Transport Union general secretary Sarbat Poonia expressed "shock" that the government sought to issue new permits despite Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar's assurance to the contrary, made to the union on March 29.

The All India Transport Workers Union, linked to the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)-controlled Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), issued a statement "denouncing the nefarious conspiracy of the state government to privatise the bus service" while appealing to the same government not to engage in "retrograde measures."

The BJP-led state and central governments have been aggressively pushing forward with a pro-big business agenda that features the privatisation of entire public sectors, including road transport.

The policies of the twin Stalinist parties—the CPM and the Communist Party of India—and all their affiliated major trade unions, including the CITU, are based on making futile appeals to the government not to implement such measures for fear of triggering workers' hostility.

In order to deflect the anger of workers, the unions call limited protests but they are thoroughly opposed to the independent mobilisation of workers against the BJP-led governments.

The continuing workers' struggles in Haryana indicate the enormous class tensions developing in India. On March 18, a Haryana court sentenced 13

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workers at the Japanese-owned auto giant Maruti Suzuki to life imprisonment on trumped-up charges related to strikes and protests in 2012. The company's victimisation of the workers has been backed by the police, the judiciary, the Haryana and central governments and the entire political establishment.

Last October, close to 12,000 contract health workers, including several hundred doctors, employed under the National Health Mission went on strike across Haryana demanding permanency and equal wages with state health department employees. At least 150 were sacked and face police charges over their involvement in the strike. Their union ended the strike on the basis of the state health minister's "assurance" to "consider" their demands.

Earlier last year, power workers in the state went on strike to protest against the suspension of contract workers who joined a strike last May 11 against the privatisation of the complaint and maintenance works of 23 subdivisions. When 23,000 contractual and permanent employees held a mass leave campaign on May 11, the government declared emergency regulations and sacked more than 7,000 contractual employees.

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