

India: Unions suspend Tamil Nadu government workers' strike

Our correspondents
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The Joint Action Committee of the Government Teachers and Government Employees Organisations (JACTO-GEO) capitulated to a Tamil Nadu high court directive yesterday and shut down strike action and protests by 33,000 teachers and other state employees.

The indefinite state-wide strike began on Monday in defiance of a previous court order. The walkout was over long-outstanding demands for the abolition of a regressive pension scheme imposed on all employees who joined the public service after April 2003. Workers want the previous government-guaranteed pension scheme restored.

The strikers were also demanding the removal of pay scale anomalies, a 20 percent interim pay rise and an end to the existing contract employment system. The JACTO-GEO is an alliance of over 100 public sector employee and teacher unions.

The walkout is an indication of the growing determination of Indian workers to push back against the escalating social assaults by the Bharatiya Janatha Party-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Tamil Nadu's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) administration and other state governments.

Yesterday's High Court hearing was in response to a so-called Public Interest Litigation (PIL) and a previous court ruling banning the strike. JACTO-GEO office bearers asked to be allowed to convene a meeting of the general membership body and return to work on Monday. This plea was rejected by the high court judges who declared: "When the court has stayed the strike, there is no question of getting the permission of the general body to withdraw the strike."

According to media reports, the court cited a previous Supreme Court ruling, which asserted that "government employees have no right to go on strike." This was a

reference to an Indian Supreme Court ruling in 2003 which endorsed the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram's sacking of 200,000 striking government workers under the Essential Services Act.

The Stalinist Communist Party (Marxist-CPM)-led left front of trade unions previously called for the overturn of this reactionary ruling, making it one of the demands in the one-day Indian general strike in 2005. It diverted the sacked employees into various futile legal appeals. This time not one trade union, nor any of India's Stalinist parties, challenged yesterday's ruling, let alone mobilised workers in Tamil Nadu or anywhere else to fight it.

The High Court's attack on the democratic rights of Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers signifies an intensification of the ruling class onslaught on all Indian workers.

The Modi government has set in motion a far-reaching assault on the basic rights and living conditions of workers and the poor. This includes job destruction and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, as well as cuts in a range of subsidies to small farmers and traders.

Tamil Nadu's AIADMK government began attacking strikers as soon as the walkout began. On Wednesday alone, more than 5,000 workers were arrested for picketing government offices. While they were released that evening, arrests continued until yesterday.

JACTO-GEO officials attempted to save face by claiming that they were "temporarily" ending the strike. This claim is bogus. The JACTO-GEO and its affiliates have repeatedly "postponed" government workers' strikes and watered down members' demands.

In February last year, government workers walked out for 10 days over the same issues. The unions called

off the strike, without winning a single one of their 20-point charter of demands, after the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa declared she would consider the claims. This August, the unions called limited protests claiming these would pressure the government to grant their demands.

The main union federations in the JACTTO-GEO are the All India Trade Union Centre (AITUC), the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and a Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) affiliated union.

The AITUC and the CITU are controlled by the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist. These formations played a major role in betraying the 10-day Tamil Nadu state workers strike in February 2017 (see: “Unions call off Tamil Nadu government workers strike”).

The CPI and CPM oppose any independent mobilisation of the working class and consistently defend Indian capitalism, backing Congress party governments, central and state, and the regional capitalist parties. In the 2011 Tamil Nadu state elections, they supported the AIADMK.

Striking government workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters this week about the conditions they face and their determination to fight.

Lalith, a teacher, said: “We don’t agree with the contributory pension scheme that has been imposed on workers who joined the service in 2003. We are also demanding that temporary workers be made permanent.

“I’ve been a teacher for 12 years and come under this new pension scheme. My salary is about 45,000 rupees [\$US700] per month but because of the increasing cost of essential commodities, it is not enough to live a decent life. The general sales tax [GST] introduced by the central government has meant that the price of essentials has risen even further. The cost of diesel petrol is increasing daily.

Some contract teachers, he said, were only receiving 7,000–10,000 rupees per month. He commented: “In the villages, nutritious food distribution workers and elementary school teachers get very low salaries.”

Pandithurai, a welfare department worker, said: “I’ve been working for one year and my salary is just 16,000 rupees, which is not enough for me and my family. I work in Chennai and send 8,000 rupees to my family. There are five family members in my home and

they depend on my earnings. If I’d been farming in my village I would have earned the same amount, but I took the government job in the belief that my salary would gradually increase.”

Krishnamurthi told the WSWS, “They are fighting for genuine demands. Nobody can stop their struggle. How can the court ban the strike without hearing the demands of government employees and teachers? The Madurai court should reconsider its decision.

“Why has the 53-year-old pension scheme been abolished and a new pension scheme implemented?” he asked. Senior officers and security personnel receive government-paid pension benefits, he added. “People in the military work for 17 to 20 years and get a pension, but government employees have to work up to 30 years to get pensions. Is this correct?”



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