

Striking Tamil Nadu bus workers speak out

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WSWS reporters spoke with several striking bus workers in Chennai who are engaged in the bitter struggle with the Tamil Nadu state government for higher wages. Strikers were angry about the government's rejection of their demands, as well as the trade unions' role.

Chandrasekhar, 48, a bus conductor, scoffed at the government and corporate media propaganda that common people are suffering due to the strike. "It is the state government that is solely responsible for the strike," he said. "Public transport is a service sector. The government should not count on profits."

The conductor explained that the government also owed retired workers millions of rupees in unpaid pensions. "Workers are fighting for their legitimate demands. Even after several years of their retirement, workers have not received their pension funds. Many of them are impoverished. They can't even afford to pay for their medical expenses."

Workers were angry because the courts had declared that transport workers could look for another job if they found the salary was not sufficient. The judges had also suggested to the state government that if it could not run the public transport system, it should be privatised.

"As you say, all the public and state sectors are facing the risk of privatisation. In this case, as you explain, there is a need to unite with international workers to fight for our rights. I will visit your web site and would like to meet you again."

Vivekananda, a technical department worker, commented: "On the whole, nearly 90 percent of the workers have not gone to work, but the state government has declared that 80 percent of the buses were running.

"I belong to the technical department. The buses often break down as they are not properly maintained. A bus should run only up to 600,000 kilometres, and then it should be abandoned. But the bus drivers are

confronting enormous difficulties as the buses are being run up to 1,500,000 kilometres."

Because management does not use quality components, he continued, it is doing more damage to the vehicles. "The buses that go out of the city to other districts frequently risk accidents. During the rainy season, water drips inside the buses."

Vivekananda said the bus stoppage was part of a wider fight. "Like us, state government employees have been involved in strike action. They are demanding pay parity with central government employees and revocation of a new participatory pension scheme implemented since 2003. They are also planning to hold protests in support of our demands.

"On January 8, when the central trade unions planned to hold a protest to support our strike, the state police at the eleventh hour withdrew permission and began to arrest the protesters. This is undemocratic."

Vivekananda voiced disgust toward the trade unions and warned that workers would defy them if they agreed to the state government's proposals. "So far, the transport workers have been involved in many struggles but the trade unions always betrayed in the end."

Mohan Raj, a technical worker, said: "The main trade union, CITU, insisted that the Tamil Nadu chief minister should intervene in this strike and find a solution. But the AIADMK government has said that, while it's willing to increase workers' wages, it is not possible due to the state's financial crisis. As you say, the hostile attitude of the government reveals that it wants to push ahead with the austerity measures dictated by the World Bank and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and ultimately to go for privatisation."

Kumar, another striker, said: "The ruling state government has forged an alliance with the BJP government at the centre and is acting against the workers. The state government spends a lot of money celebrating the centenary of former chief ministers,

M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa. It has a financial crisis only when it comes to spending for workers. While refusing wage rises for its hardworking employees, the state government pays a monthly salary of 100,500 rupees to state legislators. Yet the ministers and state assembly members also earn money by inappropriate means.”

Commenting on the Stalinist communist parties and their unions, Kumar said: “The communist parties appeal to the state government. There has been a history of CITU betrayals of transport workers struggles, several times. We have no confidence in the trade unions. I agree with you that only through the struggle for socialism could a permanent solution be realised.”

A transport worker who was a member of the ruling AIADMK’s trade union was critical of the state government’s attitude toward the strikers. “If the unions were to call off the strike without winning our demands, as they did before, workers would give a fitting reply to the trade unions. Not only that, they would reject the unions and act independently.”



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