

India: Bus strike cripples Tamil Nadu transport services

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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A statewide strike by bus drivers and conductors in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu entered its seventh day today. Defying court orders, the majority of the 140,000 Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) bus workers are on strike, demanding salary increases.

The striking workers and their families staged a dharna (sit-in protest) in front of the divisional offices of the state-owned TNSTC throughout Tamil Nadu yesterday.

More than 15,000 buses are reportedly off the road, out of a fleet of 22,500. In the TNSTC's Coimbatore division, only 400 buses out of 1,070 are operating, staffed by some members of Thozhir Sangham (ATS), a union affiliated with the state's ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government. Over 20 million people use the government bus service every day.

Strikers have not only disregarded the state government's threats to hire outside drivers and conductors. They have stood firm against a media campaign accusing them of causing "immense hardship to passengers." In interviews with the WSWs, strikers denounced the government-media propaganda.

Trade unions affiliated with opposition parties called the strike in a bid to deflect mounting anger among workers. These include the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) Progressive Labour Front (PLF), the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)-controlled Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress Party.

Several small unions are also involved. Despite the ruling AIADMK opposing the action, many of its members have joined the strike.

The unions are demanding a minimum monthly basic salary of 19,500 rupees (\$US306) and a 2.57 percent wage hike. The strike began after eleven rounds of talks between union leaders and officials led by Transport Minister M.R. Vijayabaskar failed.

CITU branch leader A. Soundararajan said: "Though we are not in favour of a strike, we have no other option except to resort to striking." All the other unions share this stance. Indicating their readiness to compromise, Soundararajan said they were "open to negotiation." He warned of "disastrous consequences" if the government sought to crush the strike.

Last May, these unions ended a three-day strike by TNSTC workers, claiming they reached an "agreement" with the government on various issues, but nothing was solved. Workers joined state-wide agitations on December 13 and 14, demanding a higher minimum wage.

After talks failed, M. Shanmugham, a leader of the DMK, the main opposition party in the state assembly, told the *Hindu* that the government had agreed to a 2.44 percent wage rise formula. This means the unions have already lowered the demand for 2.57 percent. The DMK, which governed Tamil Nadu in the past, also has a record of acting ruthlessly against workers.

The government has proposed to fix the minimum wage at 17,700 rupees, 1,800 rupees less than the unions' demand. Transport Minister Vijayabaskar cited the "poor financial status" of the transport corporation, complaining that even the proposed increase would cost the state's coffers 10,000 million rupees.

On January 5, the Madras High Court issued an interim order restraining employees from striking. It declared the strike illegal and warned that workers would be dismissed if they refused to return to work. On January 8, after workers defied the ruling, the High

Court rejected an application to lift the order. It claimed no striking worker could be dismissed without its permission.

Indian courts have a record of issuing ultimatums to end strikes. Last September, judges ordered 33,000 striking workers to return to work immediately, an order the unions obediently enforced.

Fearing it will trigger action by workers in other sectors, the Tamil Nadu government is preparing to unleash a major attack on the strike. The TNSTC has issued “show cause” notices to striking workers yesterday, asking why they had failed to report for work. If workers refuse to comply, “stringent action will be taken against them,” one official told the *Times of India*.

According to the *Hindu*, as many as 11,819 TNSTC Coimbatore Division employees were handed show cause notices, and given one week to reply. In Madurai, as many as 4,500 workers were served with notices, with 72 hours to reply.

Police repression has mounted in recent days. Police in Thoothukudi detained over 139 people after they staged protests in support of the striking workers. Police had denied permission for the protests.

In Tirunelveli, 495 workers were detained after more than 1,000 staged a protest in front of the Tirunelveli Junction Railway Station. In Thanjavur, 400 workers were arrested as they marched to a rally. In Pudukkottai, a striking conductor was arrested and accused of damaging a bus windshield.

On January 9, police arrested about 900 employees staging demonstrations at Ariyalur, Thanjavur and Nagapattinam.

Support for the strikers is growing among other sections of workers. The Tamil Nadu Government Employees Union held a demonstration where members demanded that the government address the strikers’ demands rather than try to suppress the agitation.

However, the transport unions have refused to call other workers out in support of the strikers, even after the government’s threats. Instead, the CPM-led unions are staging limited protests. CITU district secretary S. Parasuraman said: “We have received instructions to conduct ‘dharna’ near all regional offices of the TNSTC, along with our family members, on Tuesday.”

The CPM, the Communist Party of India, and their

unions are thoroughly integrated into the Indian political establishment. In Tamil Nadu, the CPM has supported governments led by both the AIADMK and DMK. At the national level, it has a record of backing Congress Party rule.

Far from defending the interests of workers, these Stalinist parties and their unions are seeking to contain and suppress any independent action, as they prepare to betray the strike.



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