

Indian unions betray Tamil Nadu bus strike

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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In another major betrayal, the trade unions capitulated to a Madras High Court directive and called off an eight-day strike on Thursday by the majority of the 140,000 workers of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC), including bus drivers and conductors.

The unions, including those led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, ordered workers back to work without any of their demands being met. This was despite the fact that workers had continued the strike for more than a week in defiance of the January 5 court order restraining TNSTC employees from striking.

The state-wide strike began on January 4 after eleven rounds of talks between union leaders and officials led by state transport minister M.R. Vijayabaskar failed. While one of their main demands was a minimum basic salary of 19,500 rupees (\$US306) per month and a 2.57 percent wage hike, other demands were on the list. The government only agreed to offer a 2.44 percent increase.

Workers complained that deductions worth 50 million rupees from the salaries of existing employees as a social security scheme are yet to be deposited in the nominated bank accounts. TNSTC authorities have been using this money to run the corporation instead of setting it aside for pensions and other benefits.

The striking workers were demanding the immediate release of terminal benefits for retired transport employees that have been kept pending for more than 15 years. They also wanted an end to discrepancies in pay scale within the corporation. While those in the administrative wing are paid as per the commission's norms, poorly-paid drivers, conductors and maintenance staff are kept outside those norms by recruiting them only on a three-year contract basis.

About 17 trade unions affiliated with various opposition parties called the strike in a bid to deflect mounting anger among workers. These include the

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) Labour Progressive Federation (LPF), the CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress Party.

In a bid to deflect widespread anger over the betrayal, the unions falsely claimed a victory had been won. LPF treasurer K. Natarajan told the *New Indian Express*: "The worker unions fought unitedly and made the government accept our demands," boasting that "unions will resort to strike [action] again if the government fails to address their demands in the next month." LPF general secretary M. Shanmugam claimed that the strike was only being "suspended."

Natarajan also told workers "not to worry about repercussions" over the strike. The police, however, have already arrested hundreds of the strikers during the strike. At the same time, TNSTC has issued show-cause notices to thousands of workers. The *Times of India* on January 9 reported that 20 employees of the TNSTC's Kumbakonam division were suspended. Moreover, strikers have had their wages deducted for the strike days.

CITU state secretary A. Soundararajan cynically told workers that they should continue their work with the "bliss of victory." Not only have the strike demands not been met, but, according to *Hindu*, the government has refused to withdraw criminal cases against transport employees on the grounds that most were charged with damaging public property.

These unions have a long record of betraying strikes. Last September, an alliance of unions, including CITU- and DMK-affiliated unions, again used a court order as the excuse and shut down a strike by 33,000 teachers and other state employees in Tamil Nadu against imposition of a regressive pension scheme. Last February, the same unions played a similar role in calling off a strike by more than 200,000 Tamil Nadu

government employees against a contributory pension scheme.

The treacherous role of the unions flows from the nationalist and class collaborationist politics of the parties to which they are affiliated. The DMK, Congress and the CPM are all committed to a pro-investor economic agenda of transforming India into a cheap labour platform for global capital. The Stalinist CPM is closely integrated into the Indian political establishment and has played a crucial role in propping up bourgeois rule at the central and state level, by backing Congress, the DMK and also the current ruling party in Tamil Nadu—the AIADMK.

All of the unions, including particularly the CPM, have “fought unitedly” to prevent other sections of the working class joining the strike and to block any discussion of the need for a socialist and internationalist program. Union bureaucrats attempted to physically attack supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* when they visited striking workers in the state capital Chennai to report on the strike and discuss the political issues confronting the strike.

The bus strike in Tamil Nadu is not an isolated struggle limited to the southern Indian State. Class struggle is erupting throughout India and internationally. On January 2, the Indian Medical association (IMA), representing 290,000 doctors, called a nationwide suspension of private health care services to protest the government’s privatisation plans. At the beginning of 2018, the WSWS analysed that this year “will be characterized, above, all by an immense intensification of social tensions and escalation of class conflict around the world.”

It is time for Indian workers to break from these reactionary union organizations and build action committees to fight for their fundamental democratic and social rights—decent salaries, proper working condition and secure jobs. In doing so, they should join hands, not only with workers in India, but around the world on the basis of a unified struggle to abolish capitalism and restructure society on socialist lines.



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