

One million Indian bank employees and thousands of Sri Lankan railway workers strike

Our correspondents

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A million public bank employees in India and thousands of railway workers in Sri Lanka struck this week to demand higher wages and to oppose privatisation.

The walkouts follow a wave of industrial action across the subcontinent and internationally in recent months against government austerity measures.

In India, Tamil Nadu bus workers, Haryana sanitation workers and rural postal workers in Trichy have walked out on strike. In Sri Lanka, postal workers, university non-academic employees and water board workers have taken industrial action to demand wage increases and oppose privatisations and funding cuts.

Workers from 21 Indian public sector banks, or 75 percent of the country's banking industry workforce, struck nationwide on Wednesday and Thursday to demand a 15 percent wage rise. The action involved one million workers. It almost crippled operations, including cash withdrawals and deposits, private bank cheque clearances and money transfers.

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) was forced to call the stoppage in response to workers' mounting anger over the Indian Banks Association's refusal to grant their demands.

The UFBU is an alliance of nine unions, including the All India Bank Officers Confederation (AIBOC), the National Confederation of Bank Employees (NCBE), the All India Bank Officers Association (AIBOA), the All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA) and the Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI).

While the employees received a 15 percent wage increase in 2012, the employers' association only offered a meagre 2 percent increase on May 5, declaring that the public sector banks were in a "poor" financial state. Workers denounced the "offer," pointing out that it failed to keep up with the annual inflation rate, which rose to 4.6 percent in April.

Indian public sector banks (PSBs) have faced major losses in recent years. Last year, 13 state banks lost \$US8.6 billion,

followed by \$6.5 billion in the first quarter of 2018. The managements are determined to place the burden of this crisis on their workforce, demanding increased workloads and other measures to reduce losses and increase bank assets.

The UFBU alliance has responded by deepening its collaboration with the government and bank authorities. AIBEA general secretary C. H. Vekatachalam last week issued a pathetic call for bank managements to accept his members' "legitimate demands for a reasonable and fair increase in wages." He complained that the Indian government was "not paying serious attention." He appealed to the finance minister to "intervene" in the dispute.

Instead of considering bank employees' demands, Prime Minister Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government is moving to privatise the banks and impose further attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. This is in line with the International Monetary Fund's demands. The IMF's December 2017 stability report on India called for "greater participation of the private sector in capitalising the PSBs and full privatisations."

While public sector bank employees are hostile to the government's plans, the unions are attempting to dissipate this opposition via limited protests. This week's two-day national strike was the fourth such action called by the unions since the BJP government took office in 2014.

The trade unions' role is directly related to the pro-investor politics of their affiliated political parties. Both the AIBEA and AIBOA are linked to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI). The BEFI has fraternal relations with the Centre of India Trade Unions, which is affiliated to the other main Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. The INBEF is affiliated with Congress, the Indian national bourgeoisie's traditional ruling party.

All these parties are committed to the retrogressive neo-liberal economic reforms first initiated in 1991 by the then Congress government.

WSWS correspondents spoke this week with strikers in

Kolkata, the West Bengal state capital, and Chennai, the Tamil Nadu capital.

In Chennai, Union Bank of India employee, Ramesh Kumar, 47, said: “The media said when Modi came to power there would be growth for India, but he has been attacking social benefits.”

Referring to the role of the unions and the Stalinist parties, Kumar said: “The unions led by the communist parties are associated with capitalist parties that are implementing austerity measures. All unions are corrupted. They work for management.”

Krishna Moorthy, 56, pointed to the large pay gap between permanent and contract workers: “My salary is 50,000 rupees [\$742] per month but a contract worker only receives 9,000 rupees per month. They can’t live on this income and it’s difficult to lead a family life.”

In Kolkata, a Punjab & Sind Bank striker said: “The political parties are doing nothing for us. They just make bogus promises and turn a blind eye to our demands. They are not providing any constructive perspective toward these issues.

“All the unions with direct or indirect affiliation to these political parties are not attempting to unite the employees across sectors. They divide the workers. Workers across all other sectors should be united and mobilised for a common struggle.”

In Sri Lanka, about 12,000 technical service railway workers began a national strike on Tuesday over a charter of demands, including a 12.1 percent pay rise, a 40-hour working week and no privatisation of rail jobs and services.

The Railway Employees Trade Union Alliance (RETUA) called the strike amid growing working-class unrest over the rising cost of living and attacks on working conditions. The RETUA, however, refused to organise any demonstrations and advised workers to take sick leave and stay at home during the planned two-day walkout.

Government and railway authorities attempted to break the strike by threatening to sack all contract workers and by falsely accusing strikers of vandalism. Railway boss Wijaya Samarasinghe told the media he lodged an official complaint with the police criminal investigation department over “property damage” by strikers.

Workers angrily rejected these bogus allegations, forcing the union to extend the national walkout for another two days. But union leaders met yesterday and cancelled that extension, ending the strike later that day.

In line with IMF dictates, the Sri Lankan government is moving to privatise the railways and other state-owned enterprises, including the Electricity Board, Petroleum Cooperation and Water Supply and Drainage Board.

Railway funding and manning levels have been drastically

cut in recent years. According to a 2016 railway department research paper, manning levels should be over 20,000 people, but there were only 14,865 employees. Annual government funding was slashed from 44,485 million rupees (\$281 million) in 2015 to 29,090 million rupees in 2016 and capital investment has been reduced by 48.44 percent.

While railway workers joined the strike, indicating their readiness to fight, they have no confidence in the unions. Many of those who spoke to WSWS correspondents voiced their discontent.

A worker from Colombo’s Ratmalana railway workshop said: “We didn’t even know the exact date when the strike would be called or its purpose. Previously, union leaders called meetings and spoke with workers. They don’t do that now.”

A clerk referred to the rising cost of essential items. “My basic monthly salary is 25,000 rupees (\$158) and with allowances I get about 36,000 rupees, but I need 18,000 rupees just for food,” he said.

“On top of that, we have to pay for the education of our two children and pay electricity and water bills. Even though my wife has a job, our life is very arduous. We currently rent accommodation and can’t even think about building our own house.”

A worker from Chilaw said: “My gross monthly salary is about 60,000 rupees but with the rising cost of living, this is not enough to manage our family expenses.” He voiced his discontent with the unions, saying: “Even though we’re involved in this protest, we won’t get anything because the union leaders are with the two main political parties [the United National Party and Sri Lanka Freedom Party].”

Hundreds of Water Supply and Drainage Board workers also struck this week—during the Wednesday and Thursday morning shifts—and planned to hold a full-day strike today. The industrial action is in protest against plans to slash a promised 25 percent salary increase. Workers have foreshadowed a major protest on Monday.



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