

# Nine million truck drivers across India strike over increasing fuel prices

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Millions of truck drivers across India began an indefinite strike yesterday over rising fuel prices, sharp hikes in third-party insurance premiums and increases in tolls across the country's states.

The strike was called by the All India Confederation of Goods Vehicle Owners' Associations (AICGVOA), a Delhi-based national umbrella organisation for nearly 600 truck owner associations covering eight million goods vehicles.

AICGVOA president Channa Reddy told the media on Monday that about nine million trucks would be off the road. "As of now," Reddy said, "over 60 percent of trucks are not plying the roads across India."

According to the *Business Standard*, as a result of the strike, supplies of essential commodities were "partly disrupted at most mandis [rural markets] across the country on Monday."

Quoting data compiled by the National Horticultural Research & Development Foundation, the article shows onion supply in the benchmark Lasalgaon mandi at 1,400 tonnes on Monday, down from 1,717 tonnes on Friday. The supply in the Pimpalgaon mandi also declined to 1,980 tonnes on Monday, from 2,510.5 tonnes on Friday.

"The government is levying abnormal taxes on diesel and needs to make it affordable," Reddy said. "In 2013, the price of diesel was 53 rupees per litre, when the international crude price was \$US110 per barrel. However, the current rate is \$70 per barrel, yet the diesel price is 74 rupees per litre,"

AICGVOA secretary general S. Rajinder Singh told the *Hindu* on May 29 that the practice of daily price revisions for fuel "will bankrupt truckers and destroy the trucking industry. We are sure that the impact on small operators has been considered by you."

Singh said: "Considering that a vehicle on an average

consumes 50 to 150 litres of diesel a day, this means an increased spending of about 970 million rupees [\$US14,246,781] every day [across the trucking industry]."

AICGVOA president Reddy complained that third party insurance premiums had "steadily increased year after year."

Throughout the past year, millions of truck drivers have struck time and again over the same demands.

In early April 2017, nearly half the commercial vehicles in Tamil Nadu were off the road to protest against a 50 percent hike in insurance premiums, increased penalties and a four-fold hike in Regional Transport Office fees.

Again, on October 9, 2017, more than 9 million truck operators launched a two-day strike over the goods and services tax (GST), diesel prices, the harassment of truck operators and corruption in relation to roads and toll policies.

In February 2018, more than 4,500 LPG tanker operators struck against a new state-level tender process introduced by the national petroleum ministry and major oil corporations for fixing the hire charges for operating LPG tankers.

In May, more than 4,000 transporters hauling containers to and from the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), India's biggest container port, stopped work. They were protesting against the JNPT granting exclusive rights to four transport operators to move import containers—a threat to small transporters at the port.

AICGVOA general secretary R. S. Bhasin told the media that "the truckers are a harassed lot, as the government charges 8 rupees per litre on diesel as a cess [tax] for road building, and another 8 rupees per litre as a toll from multi-axle vehicles for using roads,

which is unfair.”

The main issues for lorry owners, who are mostly small business people, are the rise in toll gate costs, diesel prices and the GST, which has cut into their profits. However, those most affected are the lorry drivers, who are not covered by any social security schemes, such as pensions, health care or insurance.

The wages of drivers are quite stagnant despite their oppressive and tiring work conditions. They get a wage of 15 paise (cents) per 100 rupees worth of load, which is not enough to cover their medical, lodging and travel expenses.

The key issue in the truckers’ strike, fuel price hikes, is also affecting the working people and rural toilers. But the union bureaucrats prevent any united struggle of the working class against fuel price increases and other austerity measures imposed by governments at the central and state levels.

The transport sector unions keep workers divided. The All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), for example, decided against taking part in the current strike. AIMTC Core Committee chairman Bal Malkit Singh told the media that the strike was “a flop show” because it had no support from the AIMTC. Instead, the AIMTC, which according to its website, represents approximately 9.3 million truckers and five million bus and tourist operators, has announced a separate strike on July 20 on the same issue.



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