India’s unions to hold two-day “general strike” next week

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Tens of millions of workers are expected to participate in a two-day, India-wide protest strike next Tuesday and Wednesday (January 8 and 9), to voice their opposition to the pro-investor “reforms” of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, and to demand an increase in the minimum wage, and job-creation measures.

Led by Narendra Modi, the four-and-a-half year-old BJP government has promoted communal reaction, expanded India’s military-strategic alliance with US imperialism, and intensified the ruling class’ drive to make India a cheap-labor haven for global capitalism. This has included: measures that promote the further casualization of the workforce and gut work and environmental standards; a fire sale of government-owned infrastructure and other Public Sector Units or businesses; cuts to the minimal benefits provided workers such as provident funds; and brutal social spending cuts and tax changes aimed at placing the burden of the government’s fiscal crisis on working people, while maintaining ultra-low tax rates for big business and the rich.

Broad and diverse sections of the working class are expected to participate in the January 8-9 protest strike, including longshoremen, coal miners, central government workers, bank employees, and in some cities and towns, auto-rickshaw drivers and beedi-makers.

There is, however, a fundamental dichotomy between the aspirations and interests of the workers and youth who will join next week’s “general strike,” and the cynical and reactionary political aims of the trade unions and political parties that have called or are backing it. The latter are sponsoring next week’s action not to further the independent political mobilization of the working class against the hated BJP government and the Indian bourgeoisie, but to suppress it.

The strike call was initiated by India’s central trade union federations at a “National Convention of Workers” last September, with only the BJP-aligned Bharatiya Mazadoor Sangh (BMS) standing apart. It has since been endorsed by numerous individual unions. But the political perspective that underlies the protest strike and its call for the Indian bourgeoisie to adopt “pro-people policies” has been provided by the principal Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the smaller, older Communist Party of India (CPI), and their respective union affiliates, the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

The Stalinists have functioned as an integral part of India’s political establishment for decades. From 1991 through 2008 they propped up a succession of Indian governments, most of them led by the Congress Party—the Indian bourgeoisie’s traditional governing party—that implemented neo-liberal reform and pursued close ties with Washington. In those states where they have formed the government, West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the Stalinists have enacted what they themselves describe as “pro-investor” policies, while dismissing socialism, to use the words of the longtime Communist Party of India (Marxist) Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu, as “a far off cry.”

For the Stalinists, next week’s protest is a political maneuver aimed at containing mounting social opposition within the working class and rural poor, and diverting it behind the push of sections of the bourgeoisie to bring to power an alternate rightwing government following the April-May general election.

As they have for the past three decades, the Stalinists point to the crimes of the BJP and its Hindu right allies not to indict Indian capitalism and alert the working class to the ruling class’ embrace of reaction and the malignancy of Indian democracy; but rather as a phony justification for their systematic subordination of the working class to the Congress and a host of rightwing regional and caste-based parties.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the CITU, the smaller parties that participate in the CPM-led Left Front, and their various union affiliates are all promoting the “general strike” as a means of building the “popular unity” needed to oust the BJP in the coming elections.

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That the Stalinists view next week's strike as part of their campaign to ensure the defeat of the BJP at the polls and the forming of "an alternative government," most likely Congress-led," is spelled out in black and white in the editorial of the December 30 issue of the CPM's English-language weekly, *People's Democracy*. Headlined "2019: Big Battle Ahead," the editorial hails the recent defeat of the BJP at the hands of the Congress Party in state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, adding that a protest movement among farmers that was politically led by the CPM "helped to channelise the popular discontent against the BJP." It goes on to argue next week's protest strike must play a like role. "As we enter the new year," declares *People's Democracy*, "all efforts must be directed towards building a strong unity of the people to fight the BJP and to defeat the Modi government. The two-day general strike call by the Central Trade Unions on January 8-9, 2019 will be an important step in this direction."

The strike is being organized in close cooperation with the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the trade union affiliate of the big business Congress Party, and the Labour Progressive Front, the trade union of the DMK, a rightwing regional party based in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The DMK has previously participated in BJP-led governments. Today, however, it is one of the most important and closest allies of the Congress Party.

The Stalinists are also seeking to use next week's protest strike to burnish their much tattered "leftist" credentials. As a result of their rightwing policies, electoral support for the CPM and CPI has hemorrhaged over the last decade. The Left Front, which was the third largest force in parliament as recently as 2009, now holds less than a dozen seats. By demonstrating to the bourgeoisie their utility in taming and dissipating social opposition, the Stalinists hope to regain political influence within the establishment.

As around the world, the recent period has been marked by the growth of working class opposition, including strikes by auto workers in Tamil Nadu and transport workers in Delhi and Haryana. There has also been a wave of popular protests against agrarian distress and environmental devastation. In May, police savagely suppressed a demonstration against the Sterlite copper smelter in Tuticorin, shooting down 13 protesters in cold blood.

These struggles are being fueled not only by opposition to the BJP government but to the social devastation wrought by three decades of India's "new economic policy"—the unbridled "free market" agenda that the Indian bourgeoisie adopted following the shipwreck of its post-independence state-led capitalist development project.

While the number of Indian billionaires has soared from 2 in the mid-1990s to some 130 today, giving it the fourth largest total in the world, 70 percent of India's 1.3 billion people eke out their existence on less than $2 per day. When canvassing for foreign investments, Modi boasts that wages in India are no more than a quarter of those in China. According to a recent report, 46 million Indian children are stunted due to malnutrition and a further 25 million are "wasted." In pursuit of the Indian bourgeoisie's great power ambitions, India now has the fourth largest military budget in the world, even as it spends a miniscule 1.15 percent of GDP on health care and 2.7 percent on education.

Needless to say, the Congress Party, which did much of the heavy-lifting in implementing the policies that have produced this social catastrophe, recognizes that any protest strike under the political control of the Stalinists and the pro-capitalist unions, including its own INTUC, is harmless.

According to INTUC President and former Congress parliamentarian G. Sanjeeva Reddy, Rahul Gandhi, the dynastic heir to the Congress party leadership, "has extended wholehearted support for the strike." Shamelessly exploiting the political cover and support the Stalinists are providing the INTUC and thereby its master, the Congress Party, Reddy went on to stump for votes: "We will ask workers to elect a progressive government at the Center, which will address the problems of workers."

The unbridgeable class gulf between the tens millions of workers and young people who will join next week's strike and the organizations sponsoring it is exemplified by the striking contract between the unions' total silence on the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers and the vehemence with which they are demanding the revival of "dialogue" with the government and the tripartite (union-state-big business) Indian Labour Conference (ILC).

Nowhere in the strike demands or propaganda does the fight for the freedom of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers figure. Yet these workers have been jailed for life on frame-up charges for leading resistance to contract labour and sweatshop working conditions.

On the other hand, the unions, with the Stalinist CITU and AITUC leading the chorus, are adamant that the INTUC be restored to its traditional place on various corporatist bodies and that the BJP government call the ILC into session for the first time since 2015.

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