

Indian transit workers in Mumbai defy authorities, continue strike

Kranti Kumara
16 January 2019

Over 32,000 Mumbai bus drivers and other transit workers are now in their ninth day of an “indefinite” strike against the municipal government-owned Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport Undertaking (BEST).

The strike has forced BEST’s entire fleet of 3,380 buses off the road, shutting down a public transit system that normally provides service to 4.5 million riders daily.

Early on, the authorities declared the strike illegal. But workers have defied threats of state reprisals and a media campaign aimed at vilifying them for disrupting daily life in India’s second largest urban center and financial capital.

The workers timed the beginning of their strike to coincide with the first day of last week’s two-day (January 8-9) nationwide general strike. Tens of millions of workers joined the all-India strike to protest the savage anti-working class policies that India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has implemented in the name of attracting investment and promoting development.

The BEST workers are demanding: the scrapping of plans to privatize municipal transit; the end of what has effectively been a decade-long wage freeze; regular and timely bonuses; and more employer-provided housing.

The workers are also calling for BEST, which operates at a loss, to be merged with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), Mumbai’s municipal government, so as to provide the financial resources to both improve their pay and benefits and provide better transit service.

The majority of the BEST workers are paid less than Rs. 15,000 (about US \$210) per month, a poverty wage in what is considered to be India’s most expensive city.

The workers are demanding a minimum salary of Rs

22,000 (\$305) which would bring it to par with their counterparts employed by the BMC. This would cost Rs. 5.4 billion (\$75 million) annually, a small fraction of the BMC’s total budget of Rs. 273 billion (\$3.8 billion).

In a court hearing called to discuss judicial action to force an end the strike, the lawyer representing the union said workers’ base pay has been slashed to a mere Rs. 5,430 (\$75) per month, from the already miserable base rate of Rs. 7,930 (\$198 at the prevailing exchange rate) that existed in 2007.

Government authorities and the corporate press are demanding an immediate end to the strike, with the latter constantly harping upon the “inconvenience” that the strike is causing the city.

This same media pumps out articles on a daily basis celebrating Bollywood stars and India’s new class of billionaires, including Mukesh Ambani, whose Mumbai home (a 27-floor skyscraper) is valued at \$2 billion, making it the world’s most expensive private residence. About the “inconveniences” that are faced daily by the millions living in Mumbai’s slums, the press and television channels have little to nothing to say.

As soon as the strike began, Maharashtra’s Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party state government invoked the Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (MESMA), threatening the striking workers with mass incarceration, fines and dismissals. Subsequently an industrial court also declared the strike “illegal”.

On the top of this, the trade union associated with the Shiv Sena, that fascistic BJP ally that rules Mumbai and claims the allegiance of 11,000 of the BEST strikers, “called off” its participation in the walkout on its second day, Jan. 9. However, this completely fell

flat, since all of the workers it claimed to represent have remained on strike.

The Bombay High Court (BHC) intervened last Thursday after a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) petition was filed asking the court to end the strike.

Fearing that immediate court action to smash the strike would fail, given the strikers' solidarity and resolve, the court has maneuvered, hoping to induce the union to scuttle the strike through a combination of threats and phony concessions. The court is well aware that despite the press campaign there is widespread sympathy for the strikers and anger over the cuts BEST has made to bus service.

Over the years, both the BJP-led state government and the Shiv Sena-controlled BMC have slashed subsidies to BEST. As a result, the company has eliminated routes, reduced the fleet, and laid off workers. Starved for funding, this crowded but still relatively efficient bus service has even had to borrow funds to pay workers' wages.

Now both the BJP and Shiv Sena are citing BEST's losses to argue for privatization of the principal means of transit for much of Mumbai's working and middle classes.

During the 2017 municipal election, the Shiv Sena's autocratic leader, Uddav Thackeray, promised to incorporate the BEST budget with that of the municipality. Nevertheless, he has taken no steps to do this, so as to deliberately bleed the public transport system and thereby provide grist for its privatization.

In response to the strike, Thackeray is now "promising" to fulfill his 2017 election pledge, but he has combined this with a "warning" that "unreasonable demands [by the workers] would create more problems."

The Bombay High Court directed the BMC government to constitute a "high-powered" committee to come up with proposals to address the BEST workers' demands and grievances. Stacked with BMC officials viscerally hostile to even the minimal demands of the long-suffering workers, the committee submitted a provocative proposal that included the freezing of the dearness allowance, cuts in the medical allowance, and further bus-route and staffing cuts.

Yesterday, the court gave the union "time," in reality an ultimatum, to "decide" on the strike by noon today, Wednesday, January 16—with the implicit threat that it

will move against the workers if the union doesn't end the strike.

Union officials had indicated they would be willing to end the job action well short of a full agreement, let alone one addressing all the workers' grievances.

But the proposal from the BMC committee has clearly angered the strikers.

Calling the authorities' counter-proposal a "death warrant that will push BEST workers in the same direction as farmers in the state," thousands of whom have committed suicide over the past decade, the union declared late Tuesday that the strike will continue until the workers' core demands are met.

The strikers have displayed enormous courage and have endured extraordinary privations over the past nine days. A sense of this is provided by the comment a BEST striker made to the press Monday: "We have not gone to our homes since the strike began and have been sleeping on the footpaths and bathing in public bathrooms. We do not know if our families are safe at home."

According to a report in *Times Now*, workers at the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC), which provides intrastate transportation between cities and towns in Maharashtra, are now also threatening to go on strike.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact