

Indian teachers, government workers launch indefinite strike in Tamil Nadu

Deepal Jayasekera
25 January 2019

In another outbreak of massive working class struggles in India, about 700,000 teachers and state government employees in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have been on indefinite strike since Tuesday. They walked out over a list of demands that includes reversal of retirement pension cuts, pay increases and permanency for school teachers and anganwadi (day care centres) workers.

More than 20,000 strikers have been arrested for participating in street demonstrations throughout the state, defying threats of disciplinary action by the right-wing communalist All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government. On Wednesday, the Madras High Court ordered them to return to work by today—a warning of further government retaliation.

The strike is a part of a growing upsurge of the international working class after decades of worsening conditions and widening social inequality. The revolt includes the strike by tens of thousands of Matamoros maquiladora workers on the Mexico-US border, the teachers' strikes in Los Angeles and across the US and the Yellow Vest protests across France.

Workers throughout South Asia have taken determined industrial action, as seen in last month's nine-day strike by Sri Lankan plantation workers demanding a doubling of their wages, and this month's eight-day strike by garment workers in Bangladesh for higher pay.

Just two weeks ago, workers across India joined a two-day strike on January 8 and 9 against the pro-investor "reform" and austerity measures of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government. Late last year, over 3,000 workers from three major auto factories in Oragadam, near the Tamil Nadu state capital Chennai—Yamaha, Royal Enfield and Myoung Shin India Automotive—participated in two-month-long strikes.

Teachers and other state government employees want to

roll back the Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) and reverse the imposition of the National Pension Scheme (NPS), which have cut salaries and placed their pension funds in the hands of the stock markets.

The NPS, introduced by the last BJP-led central government, was imposed in 2014. Since then, all new central and state government employees have been deprived of the previous pension rights and 10 percent of their salaries have been diverted into a pension fund that fattens the profits of share market investors.

The seven-point list of strike demands includes payment of 21-month pay arrears, permanent jobs for part-time employees and anganwadi teachers and increased pay for secondary school teachers. Non-permanent workers are increasingly exploited, under various categories like "contract," "part time," "trainee" and "apprentice," in both the public and private sectors, to impose poverty-level wages and divide the working class.

The strike has shut down many schools throughout the state. Workers in other state government departments, such as Revenue, Health, Rural Development and Agriculture, have joined the strike.

Despite mass arrests, strikers participated in protests in the capital Chennai and other major cities like Mudurai, Coimbatore, Virudhungan, Ramanathapuram, Sivaganga, Theni, Vellore and Dindigul.

However, the trade unions, which were forced to call the action due to the growing militancy among workers, are totally opposed to any mobilisation of the working class against the government's attacks. The Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisations and Government Employees Organisations (JACTTO and GEO), an alliance of teachers and government unions, claims that the AIADMK government can be pressured to reverse its policies.

What workers have experienced is the opposite—a government crackdown. On Monday, the day before the

indefinite strike began, state Chief Secretary Girija Vaidyanathan threatened to cut off strikers' wages and cancelled all leave, except for medical reasons, during the strike. The state education department moved to hire strike breakers, offering temporary appointees a meagre 7,500 rupees (\$US106) a month.

The last state AIADMK government unleashed brutal repression against striking government employees in 2003, sacking hundreds of thousands.

The striking workers also have had bitter experiences with the unions. Workers have repeatedly come forward to fight against the CPS. In February 2016, for example, they started an indefinite strike, but the Tamil Nadu Government Employees Association (TNGEA), an alliance of 68 unions, ended the strike after 10 days without meeting their demands.

The unions justified that betrayal by citing election and school examination duties that government employees needed to perform, and by supposedly giving the government time to think over workers' demands. JACTTO refused to join the strike, claiming that the incoming state government's 2016 budget would concede the demands.

Successive governments at both central and state levels have continued such socially-incendiary "economic reforms," imposing on workers the burden of the deepening crisis of Indian and world capitalism since the 2008 global financial breakdown.

Major "reform" measures similar to the CPS have been introduced around the world at the dictates of the International Monetary Fund. They will not be reversed by replacing the BJP-led Modi government at the Indian general election due to be held in April-May. The opposition Congress—the traditional party of Indian ruling elite—and the regional capitalist parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [DMK], the AIADMK's current Tamil Nadu rival, are equally committed to same pro-big business measures.

The only viable strategy to defeat these attacks, as in Mexico, the US, France and around the world, is one based on the international class struggle and the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the reactionary capitalist order.

India's main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—are trying to channel the rising movement of workers behind the return of yet another capitalist government, whether led by the Congress Party or a series of smaller, right-wing regional

parties—after the April-May general election, on the pretext of defeating the Hindu communalist BJP.

The same Stalinist parties made an electoral alliance with the AIADMK in the 2011 Tamil Nadu state elections, even after its mass sackings of striking government employees in 2003.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its January 12 Perspective on the political significance of the two-day national general strike: "All these parties have played a pivotal role in implementing the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital. Between 1991 and 2008, the CPM and CPI sustained in power a succession of governments, most of them Congress Party-led, which spearheaded the neo-liberal agenda and pursued closer ties with Washington."

Indian workers should follow the example of the Abbotsleigh tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, who, under the guidance of the Socialist Equality Party, have established a rank-and-file action committee completely independent of the trade union apparatuses that have enforced their brutal exploitation for decades. Auto workers in the US, confronted by plant closures and thousands more job losses, have taken a similar course.

Such rank-and-file workplace committees must develop a working class counteroffensive by unifying the struggles of workers across India and by reaching out to workers around the world, with whom they are closely interlinked by global capitalist production.

Above all, Indian workers need a revolutionary party, based on an internationalist socialist program and strategy, embodying all the strategic lessons of the struggles of the world working class, to prosecute the struggle for workers' power. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact