

# India: Striking Tamil Nadu teachers and government employees defy state repression

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Tens of thousands of teachers and other state public sector employees in Tamil Nadu remain on strike after walking out on January 22. An estimated 70 percent of primary and high schools have been impacted across the south Indian state. The long-running conflict with the state government is over a nine-point charter of demands, including decent pensions, wages and working conditions.

The right-wing communalist All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government has responded by arresting hundreds of strikers, including senior union officials, and threatened to dismiss or forcibly transfer anyone who does not return to work today. In 2003, the state government dismissed almost 200,000 teachers who walked out over pension cuts and attacks on other benefits and conditions.

According to press reports, over 450 teachers have been suspended and face charges of unlawful assembly, public nuisance and other bogus allegations. Fourteen senior officials of the Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers' Organisations and Government Employees' Organisations (JACTTO-GEO), which controls the industrial action, have also been suspended.

The JACTTO-GEO called the strike in response to growing opposition by teachers and other state government employees to the regressive 2014 contributory pension scheme (CPS), which is listed on the stock market and taken from employees' wages.

Strikers want the previous government-funded pension system restored and are demanding payment of a 21-month-old wage rise recommended by the pay commission. They are also calling for equal pay for secondary school teachers in state government schools in line with their central government counterparts, and permanency for school teachers and anganwadi (day

care centres) employees.

The Tamil Nadu government has sent almost 1,000 teachers warning notices, citing a Madras High Court directive that they immediately end the strike. Any teacher that returns to work today will be told that if they sign an agreement not to participate in any future strike action they will not be subjected to any disciplinary action.

The state government has also begun recruiting temporary teachers as strike breakers. The education department initially offered strike breakers 7,500 rupees (\$US105) per month but increased this to 10,000 rupees on Friday because there was little response.

In an 11-page media statement on Saturday, Minister for Fisheries and Personnel and Administrative Reforms D. Jayakumar, flatly rejected the strikers' main demand. "Tamil Nadu has done away with the old pension scheme due to an acute lack of funds... the state has concluded that it would be impossible to repeal the new scheme," he declared.

In a cynical attempt to pit the poor and other welfare recipients against the strikers, he claimed that the state government spends over 70 percent of all funds on salaries, pensions, administration and interest and only 29 percent on welfare. Jayakumar said the state government would have to borrow more money if it acceded to strikers' "unreasonable" demands and that this would lead to increased taxes.

Contrary to these claims, the AIADMK government, like its state counterparts and India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government, provides multi-million dollar tax concessions and other benefits to foreign and local big business investors. The cost of these "incentives" is imposed on the working class and rural toilers through austerity measures and the destruction of government-

funded pensions and other hard won social gains.

Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers, who are part of a growing upsurge of the international working class, are determined to roll back the escalating government attacks on wages, conditions and rights. Their strike, however, remains in the hands of the union, which has isolated the industrial action and will shut it down and negotiate a sell-out deal at the first opportunity.

The JACTTO-GEO leadership oppose the mobilisation of other sections of the Indian working class and are desperately appealing for talks. Together with the opposition Congress—the traditional party of Indian ruling elite—the Stalinist Communist Party (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, and the regional capitalist parties, such as the DMK, they all defend Indian capitalism and its profit-driven requirements.

Tamil Nadu teachers and state government workers must follow the example of 70,000 striking Matamoros “maquiladora” auto workers on the Mexico-US border, who established independent action committees and organised strike action for better wages and conditions in direct opposition to the existing unions.

In order to take forward their struggle, Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers must make a political and organisational break from the unions, establish independent rank-and-file action committees and fight for the broadest mobilisation of workers on a socialist and internationalist program.

Last year’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, and the general strike by another 150 million Indian workers demonstrates the determination of South Asia workers to fight. The betrayal of all these struggles by the unions makes clear the necessity for workers to break from these pro-capitalist organisations.



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