

Tamil Nadu government bans strikes in auto component industries

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The pro-business government in the southern state of Tamil Nadu issued an order June 25 that essentially bans strikes by workers in the auto component manufacturing industry.

The ruling AIADMK party imposed this measure by classifying the entire gamut of privately owned auto-component manufacturing industries in the state as “public utility services.”

The declaration received the approval of the state governor, who stated that it was in the “public interest” as required by national labour legislation, Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 (IDA).

The AIADMK government, a bribed and willing agent of giant transnational corporations, made this iron-fisted move in the backdrop of explosive and widespread struggles mounted by highly exploited auto and auto component workers that have taken place particularly in the last year.

A whole series of militant strikes erupted last year in Tamil Nadu, especially in the auto and auto component industries. Major strikes occurred in motorcycle manufacturers Yamaha Motors and Royal Enfield and auto parts manufacturer Myoung Shin India Automotive (MSI), all of which lasted for over two months. The trade union affiliate CITU of the Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) led these strikes into a dead end by keeping them isolated. Ultimately they urged workers to return to work and put their faith in the anti-working class AIADMK government and the courts.

The actions were provoked by management abuses such as confiscating workers’ cell phones prior to work, refusal to allow the workers to meet with human resources representatives to lodge complaints, and the use of faulty time recording machines that do not register overtime work.

Prominent strike leaders were fired for initiating agitations to form their own, independent, union in Yamaha Motors. The job actions at times paralyzed automobile production in the state, leading to complaints from the manufacturers.

These draconian moves on the part of the Tamil Nadu elite take place under conditions where the region has emerged as

a major world center of automobile manufacturing, with exports of automobiles comprising of 13 percent (\$6 billion) of the total state exports of \$47 billion.

Under provisions of the decree, workers in auto-component sector are now to be governed under the relevant section dealing with Public Utility Service in the IDA. This blatant misuse of the government power by the AIADMK is formally permitted by the 1947 act, despite the fact the legislation defines “public utility service” as railways, posts and telegraph, docks and other such public enterprises.

The 1947 act bans any strike in public utility service unless the workers provide a six-week notice. During this period the government has the power to intervene and impose compulsory arbitration that can get tied up in labour courts for years.

The role of Tamil Nadu state authorities as direct servants of corporate interests was demonstrated by the comments of a senior government official who told the press that the strike ban was made to “boost investor confidence” in the manufacturing sector in Tamil Nadu.

Another well-known senior advocate who represents factory management in labour disputes in courts was even more explicit. In comments to the Indian daily the *Hindu*, he declared:

“In the recent past, there has been a tendency of trade unions to indulge in sudden strikes. The notification of the State government would prevent strike in the Sriperumbudur automobile hub. **It will ensure industrial peace in the automobile belt and make trade unions understand the responsibility and ensure that they mediate and settle the issue amicably.**” [Emphasis added]

Although the government declared that the decree would last for six months, the corporate media has acknowledged that this time period can be extended indefinitely.

Over the past two decades under successive rule of the AIADMK and its political rival DMK, Tamil Nadu has been transformed into a cheap labour haven for Japanese, US and Korean corporations. The AIADMK under its late autocratic leader Jayalalitha spearheaded policies starting from the

mid-1990s on aimed at attracting giant transnational corporations by offering them a cheap and reliable electricity supply, capital subsidies and an ultra-cheap labour force.

Consequently, the state has become a choice destination for international manufacturers including Ford, Hyundai, Nissan, Yamaha and various other fortune 500 companies.

Chennai (formerly Madras) the state capital and its outskirts Chengalpattu-Oragadam industrial belt are now known as the Detroit of India. According to the government, the state accounted for about one third of auto and auto component exports from India in 2017-18. The state also boasts of an installed manufacturing capacity of 1.71 million cars and produces three cars a minute and one truck every two minutes.

Tamil Nadu, with 38 Special Economic Zones, has the highest number such SEZs of any state in India. SEZs grant transnationals special permission to ride roughshod over working conditions and poison the environment while enjoying special grants, subsidies and tax breaks.

Thus, AIADMK considers its main political duty to cater to the profit interests of the multinationals, claiming these policies are needed for employment and economic growth.

This is the same orientation as that of the BJP national government led by the Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a ferocious advocate of big businesses and a deadly enemy of the working class.

The Indian ruling elite's goal is to transform India into a premier center of world's auto manufacturing and exports. In 2018, over 4 million automobiles were exported from the country with the automobile and auto-component manufacturing contributing close to 10 percent to the nation's GDP.

In order to maintain India as an attractive destination for global manufacturers, all sections of the Indian ruling elite, including the big-business BJP, AIADMK and the Congress Party, agree that Indian workers must be made to submit to brutal working conditions. That is why Maruti Suzuki automobile workers in the northern state of Haryana were singled out for exemplary punishment by sentencing 13 of the workers, including the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, to life imprisonment on shamelessly concocted murder charges.

It is now anticipated by both domestic and foreign businesses that Modi, after having won an unchallengeable majority in the parliament, will impose a slew of pro-business measures.

Soon after taking power, Modi's Labour Minister Santosh Kumar Gangwar commented to the press:

"We will try to complete the labour reform agenda. They [Overseas Investors] will have reasons to be happy. You will see a slew of reforms, I can assure you of that. We are going

to pretty much hit the ground running."

In ordinary language, labour "reforms" refers to the total dismantlement of any statutory protection of working conditions and pay so as to allow big businesses to exploit Indian workers unhindered.

S. Kannan, president leader of CITU (Center of Indian Trade Unions), the trade union arm of the Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), promised to oppose the move in his comments to the *Hindu*. He observed that the automobile industry was already declared a public utility service. Now, it has been extended to auto components industry. "We will consult with the leaders and oppose the move. This means delayed justice for labour grievances," he said.

However, both the CPM and its sister Stalinist party CPI (Communist Party of India) have long allied themselves with either the DMK or AIADMK. In 2001, both of them paved the way for the fiercely anti-working class Jayalalitha government to come to power.

Both parties and their respective trade union arms, the CITU and the AITUC (All India Trades Union Congress) of the CPI, do not have any program to oppose and defeat this act. They have proved unable and unwilling to mobilize Indian workers in defense of the imprisoned Maruti Suzuki workers.

The Stalinists' opposition to the neo-liberal agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie—austerity, increasing use of contract labour, privatization and deregulation—is entirely bogus, for in practice they always ally themselves with this or that right wing bourgeois party, promoting them as being progressive. In addition, when in power both parties promoted "pro-investor" policies in their old bastion of West Bengal for 33 years and now in the southern state of Kerala where they hold power.



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