

India: Telangana Chief Minister fires 48,000 striking transport workers

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Some 48,000 workers attached to the state government-owned Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) are courageously continuing to defy the Telangana state government, whose autocratic Chief Minister, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, ordered them terminated when they refused to submit to his order that they return to work by 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 5.

Rao, the leader and founder of the regionalist Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), has vowed to permanently replace the fired bus drivers, mechanics, conductors and clerical staff. He has ordered state officials to hire 2,500 private buses, and immediately begin hiring replacement workers. According to a report in *News 18.Com*, the new hires will be compelled to give an undertaking that they will not join any trade union action or worker agitation.

Despite the termination threat, just one thousand of the 49,000 TSRTC workers who walked off the job at midnight Oct. 5 submitted to Rao's back-to-work order.

Last Sunday, Rao declared, "The union leaders behaved irresponsibly and were responsible for the termination of 48,000 employees. There is no scope of re-hiring the employees who abstained from duties, and no question of having any talks with them. The question of talks doesn't arise at all."

The union coalition that launched the strike against TSRTC has made no call for other workers, above all other Telangana state employees, to come to the fired workers' defence by mounting sympathy strikes. But there is no doubt that there is widespread public sympathy for the TSRTC strikers, and mounting fears within the state's ruling elite that the government's dictatorial actions could spark mass opposition.

Looking for a way to defuse the situation, some prominent TRS leaders have suggested that union

representatives be invited for talks. However, this has been coupled with avowals that the government is not prepared to discuss the workers' main demand, that the TSRTC be made a part of the state government.

The inter-union TSRTC Joint Action Committee (JAC) has welcomed an offer of "mediation" by Keshav Rao, the TRS general secretary and, according to press reports, a "close aide" of the Chief Minister. JAC Convenor Ashwathama Reddy said the unions would participate if invited for talks.

Press reports have noted that as of yet the workers have not been officially served with their termination papers.

The government's vicious action against the TSRTC workers has already had tragic consequences. Two strikers, Surender Goud, a conductor, and Srinivas Reddy, a driver, depressed about the loss of their jobs and the government's refusal to pay them their wages for September, have taken their own lives. In an act of despair, Reddy self-immolated. Goud hanged himself.

While India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has said nothing publicly about the clash in the southern Indian state of Telangana, there is no question that K. Chandrasekhar Rao and his TRS government have been encouraged in their draconian action against the striking state transport workers by the central government's August 5 constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir and the ongoing security lockdown there. As around the world, the Indian elite is increasingly turning to authoritarian methods of rule.

On Tuesday, the Telangana High Court admonished both the government and the TSRTC unions, with the evident aim of promoting negotiations and ensuring that the strike doesn't ignite a broader social movement.

The court held in abeyance ruling whether the strike was illegal, while criticizing the government for refusing talks during the strike. It also chastised the government for failing to appoint senior management personnel, as part of what the workers' contend is a deliberate attempt to run the loss-making company into the ground, so as to justify its privatization.

The court rejected the government's contention that the dispute could be adjudicated through months' long litigation before the Labour Court, under the terms of the Industrial Disputes Act.

"Does the government want people to suffer for three months due to lack of transportation?" asked the two-member High Court bench. "Why," it continued, "is the government so harsh towards the employees? These employees ... brought your government to power for the second time."

The court urged the JAC to end the strike, and instructed the government to inform it by Friday of the steps it had taken to end the strike.

A coalition of up to ten unions, the JAC is demanding that the TSRTC be merged with the state government, which would entitle the workers to greater benefits and protections. Above all, the unions are promoting the merger demand as a viable answer to the government's drive to let the company go to rot as a pretext for its privatization.

In Andhra Pradesh from which the Telangana region was hived off as a separate state in 2014, the state government recently agreed to transform the employees of the state-owned bus service into government workers.

The JAC is also raising a series of other demands, many of which it says are outstanding since 2015. These include pay hikes, exemption of the corporation from Motor Vehicle Taxes, post-retirement general health insurance coverage, maternity leave on a par with government employees, and replacement of old buses.

The strike has had a major impact on Hyderabad, Telangana's state capital and India's sixth biggest metropolitan region. It has also affected transport to and from the Bathukamma and Dasara festivals in Telangana and neighboring Andhra Pradesh.

Telangana became a separate state after a years-long agitation led by K. Chandrasekhar Rao and his TRS. But the Telangana movement, which exploited popular

anger over unemployment and other social issues to advance the reactionary and divisive demand of the Telangana elite for its own regional state apparatus, was backed by the Stalinists, especially the Communist Party of India (CPI), and many unions, including those at TSRTC.

Many strikers are now expressing outrage at having been drawn into giving their support to the TRS and its regionalist agitation. As a result, the union officials have had to adapt their rhetoric. "We fought for Telangana and are not afraid of ESMA [Essential Service Maintenance Act]." Raji Reddy, a JAC leader told the media. "This is not the Telangana we had thought of."

The eruption of class struggle in Telangana attests to the validity of the prognosis made by *World Socialist Web Site* when it was formed as a separate state by India's then Congress Party-led government: "The Congress is portraying the creation of Telangana as a triumph for democracy and a blow to social inequality. These are cynical lies from a government that has pursued 'free market' policies that have brought untold wealth to a tiny layer of capitalists, while condemning India's workers and toilers to grinding poverty and economic insecurity."



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