

India: 48,000 striking Telangana transport workers defy back to work order

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Over 48,000 drivers, mechanics, conductors and other workers at the state-owned Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC), who have been on indefinite strike for over a month, have refused to return to work in defiance of a November 5 back-to-work order.

The order was issued by Telangana State's right-wing chief minister and leader of the Rashtra Samithi party K. Chandrasekhar Rao, commonly known as KCR.

The chief minister announced his ultimatum and threatened to fire the striking workers last Saturday following a two-hour emergency meeting with his cabinet. KCR also threatened to fully privatize the whole of the TSRTC. This was in direct opposition to the workers' main demand, which is for the merger of the quasi-independent state corporation with the state government, which would transform the workers into full-fledged state employees.

Only a tiny fraction of the workers, 11 according to the union and at most a couple of hundred according to other reports, have reported back to work. In several instances, workers reported to work only to turn around and rejoin their striking colleagues.

The workers' defiance is all the more striking and revealing of their great tenacity in light of the severe hardship they and their families are facing, having not received a paycheck for two months. Even their September paycheck, which should have been paid since it came due prior to the commencement of the strike, is being vindictively withheld by the chief minister to punish the workers.

KCR had previously said the workers had "self-dismissed" themselves when they disobeyed his back-to-work ultimatum issued on the first day of the strike.

Despite the workers' courage and militancy, their

strike is in great danger because the trade union leadership is pinning its hopes on the intervention of the biggest enemy of the Indian working class, the pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by the autocratic prime minister, Narendra Modi.

On Wednesday, the leader of the umbrella Joint Action Committee (JAC) of the TSRTC trade unions, Ashwathama Reddy, announced at a press conference in the capital Hyderabad that the JAC had "appraised" the Modi-led BJP government and the national working president of the BJP, J.P. Nadda, and was seeking their intervention to end the "impasse" with Chief Minister KCR.

Thus, the leadership, instead of mobilizing the broad support the TSRTC workers have garnered from other sections of the working class and from students, is urging the workers to put their faith in the Modi government. There is no doubt that a call by the JAC for other workers, such as teachers, coal miners and workers in private industries, to come out in defense of the TSRTC workers would get an enthusiastic response across the country.

The Modi government, which is a cauldron of Hindu-communal reaction and a ruthless agency of big businesses, has been spearheading a drive to privatize giant state-owned industries and amend labour laws to allow corporations to hire workers on a temporary basis, pay them meager wages and fire them at will without any compensation or serving notice.

The JAC is also collaborating with the opposition parties in Telangana, including the Congress Party, which took the lead in transforming India into a cheap-labour haven for transnational corporations, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), both of which have long subordinated the Indian

working class to the Congress Party, which they have promoted as a secular and progressive bulwark of Indian democracy and the only alternative to the ultra-reactionary BJP.

The union leadership has already announced that it may overlook several of the 26 demands the JAC has made for improved working conditions, pay and benefits. It has literally begged the chief minister to open talks, which KCR has thus far refused to do, despite a directive from the Telangana High Court.

“We are ready to overlook a few demands for the time being,” said union leader Ashwathama Reddy. He continued, “Our humble request to Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao is to invite us for the talks and resolve the issue.”

Reddy announced several days ago that he had requested a meeting with the BJP home minister and Modi’s chief political henchman, Amit Shah, a determined enemy of Indian workers who partnered with Modi in overseeing the anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Shah has repeatedly described poverty-stricken migrants from Bangladesh as “termites” who should be picked up and thrown into the ocean.

The treachery of the turn to the Modi government is underscored by the fact that KCR’s moves to privatize the TSRTC are entirely in keeping with the policies advocated by Modi himself.

The JAC is also pinning its hopes on legal maneuvers to hinder KCR’s privatization drive and thus postpone it to the future. Reddy said at a press conference: “The RTC came into existence through the Road Transport Corporations Act, 1950, and the state government has no authority to privatise it. The permission of central government is a must. As per section 39, the government cannot close down the corporation without the centre’s permission.”



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