An appeal from Pani Wijesiriwardena, SEP (Sri Lanka) presidential candidate

Defend the striking transport workers in Telengana, India

8 November 2019

The following statement in defence of striking transport workers in Telengana, India, was issued by Pani Wijesiriwardena, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the Sri Lankan presidential election on November 16.

I urge workers in India, Sri Lanka and throughout South Asia to defend the struggle of your fellow workers at the Telengana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) in India against the reactionary attack of the state government, backed by the Narenda Modi-led central Indian government.

Telengana Chief Minister Chandrasekhar Rao arbitrarily fired 48,000 TSRTC transport workers just hours after they launched a strike on October 5 to call for the merger of the TSRTC, an autonomous state-owned company, with the state government. They also demanded an end to horrendous working conditions, overwork and low pay.

Rao has not only arrogantly refused to talk to the TSRTC unions' Joint Action Committee and illegally withheld the workers' September pay. He also threateningly declared that the sacked workers would not be considered for "re-employment" until they gave an undertaking to "not join any employees' union."

I vehemently condemn this outrageous attack on workers' hard-won right to strike, their legally-recognised right to organise and have union representation, and to be paid for their work.

This attack has already taken the lives of eleven workers. Four workers committed suicide and seven others have died from heart attacks induced by anxiety over their jobs and the livelihoods of their families.

It is clear that this is a planned attack by the state government which, on the directives of the Modi government, intends to privatise the state-owned bus service. Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party government, which confronts a major economic crisis, has launched a massive disinvestment or privatisation campaign of Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) under the guise of "economic reform."

The Telengana state government has starved the TSRTC of funds, pushing it into the red, in order to create a pretext for the public transport company's outright privatisation. This would drastically intensify the exploitation of transport workers and have a serious impact on commuters, the overwhelming majority of whom are poverty-stricken people.

I would like to highlight the fact that the struggle of the TSRTC workers is part of a wave of mass strikes and protests by workers in country after country. This eruption is rooted in the historic and systemic crisis of global capitalism (see: "From Chile to Lebanon: Working class offensive sweeps the globe").

Recent strikes in Sri Lanka by university workers, school teachers and railway workers are part of the initial stage of a growing revolutionary movement of the international working class.

Workers in India, Sri Lanka, throughout South Asia and internationally must not allow capitalist governments to unleash these reactionary social attacks on any section of the working class. The historic and objective unity of the working class must be consciously built and established across workplaces and national borders to fight the escalating government and corporate assault. The necessary unified struggle of the international working class must be based upon the

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program and perspective of international socialism.

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