Over 5,000 arrests, police violence against transport strikers in India's Telangana state

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Over 5,000 people, including leaders of the Joint Action Committee (JAC) of trade unions leading the five-week strike by 48,000 Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers, were taken into "preventive custody" on Friday by the pro-business Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) state government. The right-wing government is led by the autocratic chief minister, K. Chandrasekar Rao, commonly referred to as KCR.

The police raids and mass round-up throughout the state of Telangana were ordered by the KCR government to prevent workers from taking part in a mass rally the JAC had previously announced for Saturday at "Tank Bund," the location of a famous 16th century artificial lake in the city of Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana.

The chief minister, who is leading the assault on the workers, directed his police to deny permission for the rally, a blatant attack on the workers' democratic right to free speech and assembly. The police claimed that the rally would cause "public inconvenience" and "law and order issues."

When outraged workers in their hundreds decided to defy the ban and proceed to the site of the rally, squads of police set upon and severely beat them with batons. They also lobbed tear gas against the workers. Many workers were seriously injured and some collapsed under the blows from the police.

Others were taken into custody, including leaders of opposition parties such as the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress Party. These leaders were cynically posturing as supporters of the workers in order to make political gains against the TRS government.

The TSRTC drivers, bus conductors, mechanics and other workers have been on strike since October 5 in a fight for job security and a substantial improvement in their miserable wages and working conditions. They have remained on strike in defiance of KCR's second ultimatum to return to work, the latest with a return date of November 5, or be summarily fired.

The chief minister had decreed on the day the strike commenced that unless the workers were back at their posts by 6 p.m. that evening they "would not be taken into service under any circumstances."

The fact that the workers have thus far defied KCR's threats, in spite of immense hardship for themselves and their families resulting from lost pay, has only further enraged Chief Minister KCR and the corporate interests for which he speaks.

The workers have advanced 26 demands to improve their pay and working conditions, but the central issue is opposition to the state government's efforts to privatize the TSRTC. The workers are demanding instead that the road transport company, upon which the vast majority of the population depends, be merged directly into the state government. In recent years, the TSRTC has been starved of state funds for maintenance and modernization and driven into a vicious cycle of losses and increased debt.

On November 2, after a special cabinet meeting, KCR announced that he would privatize 5,100 of the 10,400 TSRTC routes.

The fate of the TSRTC is shared by state-owned road transport corporations all across India. In the state of Kerala, ruled by the Stalinist Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), the road transport workers went on a 24-hour strike on November 4, demanding that their wages be paid on time. The response of the Stalinist chief minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, a CPM politburo member, was to

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attack the workers. He permitted the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) to invoke “dies non” (no-work, no-pay) because the workers are demanding timely payment of their paychecks and other allowances.

KCR’s autocratic methods and his drive to privatize the TSRTC at the state level parallel the autocratic rule of Hindu supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP at the national level. In August, the BJP government under Modi unilaterally and illegally abrogated the special status the Indian Constitution had long granted to Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority Indian state.

Modi and his right-wing cabinet have been single-mindedly pushing for the privatization of giant state-owned enterprises, so as to squeeze even more profits from the workers and further enrich the Indian elite.

Last January, Nitin Gadkari, the minister of road transport and highways, publicly exhorted all of the state governments to privatize all public transport. He claimed that the state could not “afford” to fund these essential services. The Indian masses are completely dependent on existing relatively inexpensive road transport for their daily commutes as well as long-distance travel.

Despite the tremendous courage and resiliency of the TSRTC workers, the strike is in great danger because of the rotten trade union leadership of the JAC. These officials have appealed to the most determined enemy of the Indian working class, the Modi-led BJP national government, to intervene.

The JAC tellingly called Saturday’s protest a “million man march,” patterned after the march organized in 2011 by a Joint Action Committee led by KCR himself, which agitated for a separate state of Telangana. Telangana became a separate state in 2014 after the region was carved out from the state of Andhra Pradesh.

The current TSRTC trade union leaders, in cooperation with the Stalinist CPI and CPM as well as the Congress Party, exhorted the workers of Telangana to support KCR’s TRS party, promising them their lives would improve if Telangana became a separate state.

The Telangana High Court, concerned that KCR’s hard line against the TSRTC workers could backfire and set off a wider social conflagration, blocked KCR’s move to privatize the 5,100 routes he announced on November 2. The court also directed him to hold talks with the trade unions before its next hearing on November 11.

The JAC is sowing illusions that the High Court is on their side. Indian courts have always been particularly brutal toward the working class. This was underscored when the High Court in the northern state of Haryana sentenced 13 innocent Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in March 2017 to life imprisonment on concocted murder charges.

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