

India: The indefinite strike by 48,000 Telangana transport workers at crossroads

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The ongoing strike by 48,000 Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers against privatisation and for improvement in their brutal working conditions and miserable pay has now reached a crossroads. The umbrella Joint Action Committee (JAC) of trade unions that is leading the agitation has now explicitly abandoned the key demand of the strike: the merging of the semi-independent but government-overseen company with the Telangana state government.

This step starkly reveals the bankrupt policy adopted by the JAC throughout the six-week-long struggle. From the beginning, its goal has been to pressure the extreme right-wing, stridently pro-business state Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao, commonly known as KCR, to make some concessions while relying upon other organs of the state apparatus, such as courts.

There is enormous sympathy and respect for the TSRTC workers for their defiance of the chief minister's threat of mass dismissals and for pushing forward, despite the immense hardship they and their families are enduring from going without a paycheck.

The strike could be a focal point to mobilise other workers in the state and nationally for a general strike against privatisation, the assault on wages, horrid working conditions and job insecurity. However, the union apparatus, with advice and support of opposition parties in the state—including the rotten Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM)—has appealed to the very forces arrayed against the workers—the courts, KCR and the government of Narendra Modi.

Several weeks ago, the JAC 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 one of the worst anti-Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Shah has snubbed this request since KCR's move to privatise TSRTC is entirely in keeping with the policies of the Modi government.

In January this year, the Modi government's Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari called upon state governments to get out of the "business" of providing inexpensive bus transport to India's impoverished hundreds of millions. Gadkari advocated instead a so-called public-private partnership where the state would subordinate the whole of public transport to the profit interests of private corporations.

KCR's offensive against the TSRTC workers mirrors the uncompromising assault the Modi government is waging against the working class nationally. The pro-big-business Modi government has amended the country's labour laws so as to permit domestic and foreign corporations to hire and fire workers at will. It is also in the midst of a massive privatisation drive by selling off giant historically built state-owned enterprises including Air India, the national air carrier.

The Modi government's illegal abrogation of article 370 in August and the subsequent dismemberment of Kashmir into two union territories has laid the groundwork for intensifying anti-Muslim attacks and bigotry—the hallmark of the BJP government's rule since it first came to power in 2014.

The strategy employed by the JAC throughout the TSRTC struggle has caused such deep disillusionment among the striking workers that 23 workers, fearing for their future, have either committed suicide or died from stress-induced heart attacks over the course of the strike.

Out of the 26 demands, merger demand was the most central to the TSRTC wage workers as they seek to

gain a modicum of job security and other government benefits that they lack at present.

Thousands of workers have been arrested during the course of the strike. So vindictive is the state government led by KCR that it has deliberately withheld the workers' pay cheque owed for the month of September.

The abandonment of the main demand by the JAC will vastly embolden KCR, who was somewhat thrown on the backfoot after the workers refused to capitulate to his November 5 back-to-work ultimatum.

KCR, a ruthless pro-business politician and a would-be autocrat, will now sense the JAC's weakness and use it to try to choke the weeks-long agitation altogether. He will most likely demand that the workers first return to work before he agrees to opening any talks with them.

The dropping of the merger demand was announced last Thursday by Ashwathama Reddy, the convenor of the JAC, who stated that the union was "temporarily" dropping this to clear this supposed "obstacle" to talks with KCR.

Reddy's capitulatory announcement did not elicit any response from the chief minister, who also leads the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) political party. Reddy then announced that he would commence a hunger strike on Saturday at his residence until the Telangana government agrees to open up talks with the JAC.

KCR's immediate response was to mete out more repression. He sent the state police to arrest Reddy at his residence on the outskirts of Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana. They barged into his house, manhandled his family and supporters and hauled him away to the Osmania University hospital on Sunday. There is a danger that the authorities will force-feed Reddy at the hospital.

Similar treatment was meted out to another JAC leader, Raji Reddy, who also had begun a hunger strike at his own residence. The police violently broke down his door on Sunday to haul him away to the same hospital.

From the beginning, the chief minister has adamantly refused to back down from his goal of privatising TSRTC. He has also stubbornly refused to open negotiations, despite non-binding directives from the Telangana High Court. He announced on November 2

that he is privatising about half the routes the TSRTC operates by contracting with private bus companies.

He has also shown callous disregard for the 23 workers who have lost their lives and has not expressed any sympathy to the deceased workers' families and fellow workers. KCR has demanded that workers completely capitulate to his autocratic diktat, return to work unconditionally and agree that they will not join any trade union.

The chief minister has twice announced that all of the striking workers have been summarily dismissed from their jobs—the first time on October 5, the day the workers commenced their strike, and then again on November 2 when he gave a new November 5 back-to-work order that workers defied.

There is widespread public support and sympathy for the workers because the TSRTC buses are an essential mode of daily transportation for the overwhelming majority and because every section of the working class across India is experiencing the same daily misery. The workers have also received powerful support from a section of students at the famous Osmania University, who denounced the massive youth unemployment and demanded jobs.

The only way forward for the striking workers is to widen their struggle by mobilising a political and industrial counteroffensive against KCR, the Modi government and the ruling class as a whole. TSRTC workers should solicit support from their fellow workers in the government and industry, both in Telangana and nationally, rather than continue with the rotten JAC strategy of appealing to the good graces of KCR, the Modi government and the courts.



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