

After union surrenders, Telangana mobilizes police to bar “fired” TSRTC workers’ return

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The Telangana state government has intensified its assault on the state’s road transport workers and its push to privatize the state-owned Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC), after the joint trade union action committee or JAC surrendered.

On Monday, the JAC instructed the 48,000 TSRTC workers to end their courageous anti-privatization strike and report for work Tuesday morning.

For 52 days, the TSRTC workers had stood firm in the face of state violence and repeated announcements by Telangana’s chief minister that they had all been fired for striking “illegally.” Yet the JAC shut down the strike without consulting them, cynically declaring that returning to work was the best means to fight the government’s privatization scheme.

Acting on the orders of Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, TSRTC management responded to the JAC’s unilateral surrender by announcing that the workers would be barred from resuming their duties.

TSRTC Managing Director Sunil Sharma described the JAC back-to-work order as “ridiculous,” then arrogantly declared, “The employees are presently on an illegal strike. According to rules it is impossible to take them back.” He went on to threaten the workers, telling them “Don’t go to the (bus) depots tomorrow, and disturb ongoing operations ... Stern action under the law will be initiated against those violating the rules.”

When the TSRTC bus drivers, mechanics, and ticket collectors reported for work Tuesday, they were greeted by phalanxes of police. State authorities empowered the police to arrest workers at will, by placing TSRTC depots across Telangana and their immediate environs under a colonial-era provision that prohibits gatherings of more than four people—Section of 144 of the Criminal Code.

More than eight hundred workers were arrested in

Hyderabad, the state capital, Tuesday morning, and at least 2,000 across the state.

One outraged worker, Govind Rao, told Indian media, “We are being treated as Maoists and terrorists in the state. We have served in TSRTC for so many years. This is not correct.”

Emboldened by the union’s surrender, Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao (commonly called KCR) has vowed to implement his government’s plan to privatize 5,100 of the TSRTC’s 10,400 routes. On Tuesday, KCR met with the state’s governor reportedly so as to press her to quickly approve an ordinance enacting the privatization plan once it is approved at a cabinet meeting scheduled for the end of this week.

KCR and his Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government have yet to spell out what they have in store for the 48,000 workers, whom they claim “self-dismissed” themselves when they defied KCR’s authoritarian diktat that they end their strike just hours after it began on October 5.

At the very least, the government intends to eliminate a large percentage of the workforce, beginning with the most militant workers.

It is the JAC and their advisers from the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and their affiliated union federations, respectively the AITUC and CITU, who have led the Telangana road transport workers’ struggle into the ground.

The TSRTC workers’ valiant stand has evoked widespread support in Telangana and, whenever workers are apprised of it, across India. Yet the JAC has done nothing to make the TSRTC strike the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against

the Indian ruling elite's privatization drive and its push for an ever more "flexible" cheap-labour workforce through the promotion of contract-labour.

Instead, it has sought to pressure the rightwing TRS government by aligning with the state's opposition parties, including the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's principal party of government, and the Hindu supremacist BJP.

As the conflict intensified, the JAC, following a meeting at the CPI headquarters in Hyderabad, appealed for none other than Amit Shah, the chief henchman of BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India's Home Minister to intervene!

Not only is the BJP government the most implacable enemy of the working class. In selling off much of the TSRTC, KCR is acting on the orders of the Modi government. Last January, Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari exhorted state governments to privatize all public transport, on the grounds they cannot "afford" to fund such essential services.

Since winning re-election last May, the BJP government has dramatically accelerated its privatization drive, announcing India's biggest ever sell-off of PSUs (public sector units).

The JAC has also relentlessly promoted illusions in the Telangana High Court, claiming that it will come to the workers' defence. In fact, the High Court has functioned throughout as a highly-conscious arm of the capitalist establishment. Its repeated calls for KCR to negotiate with the unions have been based on the calculation that the government's class-war assault could provoke mass working class opposition, and the ruling elite needs, therefore, a clear line of retreat.

In response to the JAC's ever more evident efforts to sabotage a genuine struggle, based on the mobilization of the working class, the High Court has adopted a more overtly hostile attitude toward the workers.

Last Friday, the High Court greenlighted KCR's privatization plan, when it ruled that the decision whether to privatize the TSRTC in whole or in part rests with the Telangana state government.

And this week, it rejected a petition for action to be taken to alleviate the suffering of the workers, whom the government has vindictively refused to pay for the work they performed in the month before the strike.

Professor PL Visweswara Rao told the court that

more than two dozen workers have died since the strike began from suicide or stress-related heart attacks. "The attitude of the state is inhuman," said Rao. "The children of TSRTC staff are being sent out of their schools because their parents are not able to pay school fees. Their homes have run out of ration and gas."

The High Court responded by saying not all the deaths could necessarily be attributed to the strike; then added, "Even if that were to be the case ... the blame squarely lies on the union leaders. Because it was they who started the strike and definitely not the state."

The JAC unions have utterly failed the TSRTC workers. This week's surrender was preceded by their mid-November announcement that they were shelving the workers' principal demand—that the TSRTC be fused with the state government to impede privatization and provide the workers, who work long hours for little pay, with improved benefits.

The Stalinist CPI and CPM have done nothing to rally the working class in the TSRTC workers' defence. Even now, under conditions where 48,000 workers are threatened with the loss of their jobs, the website of the CPM-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions makes no mention of the TSRTC workers' struggle, let alone calls for workers across India to take action in their defence.

This treachery is in keeping with the role the Stalinists have played for decades. In the name of fighting the Hindu right, they have propped up a succession of rightwing governments committed to neo-liberal policies and close ties with Washington and otherwise suppressed the class struggle.

With the bourgeoisie intensifying its offensive against the working class under the political leadership of the Hindu supremacist Modi, the Stalinists are moving still further right, forging closer ties with the Congress Party, even as it enters into a governmental alliance with the fascistic Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, India's second most populous state.



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