

Telangana Road Transport workers face harassment, contract-rollbacks after union surrender

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The Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers—who returned to work on November 29 after a bitter 52-day long strike against the privatization of the state-owned TSRTC and onerous working conditions—now face management harassment and regressive changes to their terms of employment. This includes a campaign to force the almost 50,000 workers to renounce participation in any independent workers’ organization, and to instead “partner” with management through bogus, state-sanctioned “Workers’ Welfare Committees.”

In this, TSRTC management is acting, as it has throughout the bitter conflict, at the behest of Telangana Chief Minister, K. Chandrashekar Rao (commonly referred to as KCR), and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) state government. KCR has vowed to privatize the bus company, which is an essential means of transport, above all for the working class and the rural poor.

Management is pressuring the TSRTC workers to sign a petition it drafted, but that is made to appear as if it is an initiative launched by ordinary workers. Addressed to the various unions that represent the TSRTC workers, it states:

“We serve in various positions of the depot and this is to inform that we are setting up a Workers’ Welfare Council for fast-track resolution of our problems. We are confident that this will work for us, so kindly do not hold trade union elections for at least two years.”

This development follows on the heels of the Joint Action Committee (JAC) of TSRTC unions’ abject betrayal of the militant anti-privatization strike. Although none of the workers’ grievances had been met, on Nov. 25 the JAC leaders ordered them to return

to work the next day.

However, when the TSRTC bus drivers, conductors, mechanics and office workers attempted to return to their workplaces on Nov. 26, they were met by battalions of police expressly deployed by the KCR-led state government to block their return to work. Hundreds of workers were arrested for nothing else than trying to return to their jobs.

This move was calculated to keep the workers in fear for their jobs and to demonstrate the TRS government’s power over their lives.

The Telangana chief minister had repeatedly declared the TSRTC workers had “self-dismissed” themselves for defying his autocratic edicts. First, because they defied his order they return to work within hours of the strike’s launch on October 5, and then because they ignored a second ultimatum that they report for work on November 5.

Two days after barring the workers’ return, the Telangana chief minister posed as their magnanimous benefactor. He announced that all of the workers could “resume duties happily tomorrow,” November 29, and that he would meet with a delegation of five workers at his residence on Sunday, December 1.

Accusing the union leaders of “misleading” the workers in striking TSRTC, he said “We care for the employees, but not for the union leaders.” In actuality, it was the immense anger of the TSRTC workers that compelled the unions, which had had close relations with KCR and his TRS, to call the strike.

KCR then called on the workers to renounce their participation in the unions and instead join state-sponsored “worker councils.” “We will set up a ‘Workers Welfare Council’ with a senior minister in

charge,” declared Telangana’s autocratic chief minister. “We will fix a date and call for a meeting once a month.”

During the December 1 meeting at his palatial, government-granted residence, KCR tried to beguile the workers with various “concessions.” He released their September pay cheques, which he had ordered withheld, said they would be paid for the time they were on strike (a common practice in India), and promised jobs to one family member of each of the 30 strikers who either committed suicide or died from heart attacks induced by stress and fear over their jobs and future.

In return for this “generosity,” KCR, adopting the airs of a patronizing despot, told the workers: “What I want from you is hard work. Leave your needs to me. Do your job sincerely and get the TSRTC back into making profits,”

He also declared, without consulting the workers whom he claims to “care for,” that the retirement age would hitherto be increased from 58 to 60.

Seventy percent of the workers have reportedly balked at signing management’s “Workers’ Welfare Council” petition. The TSRTC, however, is continuing to pressure them to renounce membership in any organization independent of management and the state.

KCR also announced that TSRTC’s losses, which are attributable to the state government slashing the company’s funding, will need to be clawed back though steep fare increases. These were not long in coming. The minimum fare for a short ride is to double from Rs. 5 (7 US cents) to Rs. 10. All categories of fares are to be significantly hiked, putting a severe burden on an already impoverished population.

A one-time Congress and Telugu Desam Party politician, KCR catapulted to political prominence in the first decade of the current century by spearheading a movement for a separate Telangana state. With the backing of India’s then Congress Party-led government, which thought it would bring electoral gains, Telangana was carved out of Andhra Pradesh and made a separate state in 2014.

During the years-long agitation for Telangana statehood, KCR claimed that the widespread economic backwardness and deprivation in Telangana would be overcome if the region became a separate state. Using demagoguery, and boosted by support from the Stalinist

Communist Party of India (CPI), many local unions, and other “left” forces, KCR was able to tap into widespread socioeconomic grievances, and gain support from broad sections of workers and toilers.

Voicing the bitter anger and sense of betrayal many workers who backed KCR now feel, a TSRTC striker released a scathing letter he had sent to the Chief Minister that denounced him as a dictator. His letter noted:

“When 1,200 people died [during the agitation for a separate state], I thought that KCR was a saviour and it was the leaders from Andhra Pradesh who deceived us. But, when you failed to respond to the suicide of 30 of our workers, that’s when I realized that **Telangana was not achieved for us, but for leaders like you.** I never imagined that my sisters would be brutally beaten with lathis (police batons), but in your Golden Telangana that became a reality.” [emphasis added]

There was widespread sympathy and support for the TSRTC workers’ struggle in Telangana and wherever in India workers were apprised of it. If the strike ended in a crushing defeat, it was because the JAC, the CPI and its sister Stalinist party—the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—and their respective union affiliates, the AITUC and CITU, systematically isolated the TSRTC workers’ struggle. Rather than make the strike the spearhead of a broader struggle to mobilize the working class in Telangana and across India against the ruling elite’s drive to dismantle public services, privatize state-owned enterprises, and further expand contract labour, the unions and the Stalinists urged the workers to turn to the Telangana High Courts and even India’s ultra-right-wing, BJP government for support.

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