Massive all-India general strike protests Modi's pro-investor, communalist policies

Deepal Jayasekera and Keith Jones
9 January 2020

Tens of millions of Indian workers, youth and rural toilers joined a one-day nationwide general strike yesterday to protest the Bharatiya Jananta Party (BJP) government's pro-investor and communalist policies.

Since winning re-election last May, with massive big business and corporate media support, the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has dramatically escalated its assault on the working class. Through changes to the country's labour laws, it is promoting the proliferation of precarious contract-labour jobs and further limiting workers' right to strike and organise. It has also dramatically accelerated the privatisation of public sector enterprises, moving forward with plans to sell off India's railways, open up the coal industry to private investors, and privatise Air India and Bharat Petroleum. It has also provided big business with another bonanza by slashing the corporate tax rate by 8 percentage points, or more than a quarter.

At the same time, with the aim of splitting the working class and mobilising its Hindu-supremacist base as a battering ram against mounting social opposition, the Modi government has taken a series of provocative steps targeting the country's Muslim minority. These include illegally abolishing the special, semi-autonomous constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, hitherto India's only Muslim-majority state, and, last month, rushing into law a discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Yesterday's strike was called by 10 central union federations, and had the explicit support of the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and the implicit support of the big business Congress Party, with whom the Stalinists are closely aligned.

Key union demands—formulated in a 12-point charter—include measures to provide jobs for the unemployed, now estimated to number 73 million or almost 8 percent of the workforce; basic social protections for all workers; and increases in pensions and the derisory minimum wage. The strike also demanded the repeal of the CAA and the scrapping of the government's plan to force all of the country's 1.3 billion residents to prove their entitlement to Indian citizenship, a scheme transparently aimed at intimidating and harassing the Muslim minority.

The corporate media, big business, and the Modi government are all trying to downplay the impact of yesterday's protest strike.

However, while the strike's size and scope did vary across states and sectors of the economy, there is no doubt that it had a massive impact overall, and that yesterday's action attested to both the growing militancy and the immense social power of the working class.

According to the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), 35 million bus, truck, and auto rickshaw drivers joined the strike. In many urban centres, including in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar, and in Kerala in the southwest, much or most of public transport was shut down.

Bank workers also joined the strike in huge numbers to protest the BJP government's plans to merge and privatise many state-owned banks, which, like India's financial system as a whole, are weighed down by massive corporate debts.

Many government workers joined the strike in defiance of threats of reprisals issued by the BJP-led central government and various state governments. A central government order stated that workers who joined the strike would face "consequences," including "deduction of wages" and "appropriate disciplinary actions."

News reports indicate that industrial workers, including in India's globally connected auto sector, came out in force. *Outlook India* reported that workers walked out at Honda Motorcycle and Scooter's Manesar, Haryana, plant and numerous auto parts plants in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt, which lies on the outskirts of India's capital, Delhi. The strike also crippled production at the Bajaj Auto plant in Chakan, Maharashtra, and at Volvo bus and truck, Toyota car, and Bosch auto parts, and Vikrant Tyres plants in neighbouring Karnataka. Hundreds of thousands of Coal India workers in Jharkand and across India, and jute plantation workers in West Bengal also joined the strike.

The power sector was heavily hit by the strike, with electricity production down by as much as 5 percent, as 1.5 million engineers and other power workers walked out.

There was also huge support for the strike from the extremely poorly paid, state-funded *Anganwadi* or rural child care workers, the vast majority of whom are women.

In some states, there were mass arrests of strikers and strike supporters. In Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK state government, an ally of the BJP, ordered police to arrest protesters in the state capital, Chennai, and in Coimbatore, a textile manufacturing centre, where more than a thousand people were detained.

In West Bengal, led by the Trinamool Congress (TMC), a right-wing regional rival of the BJP, there were clashes between security forces, TMC goons, and strike supporters. After strike supporters

© World Socialist Web Site

blocked trains, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee went on a tirade, accusing the CPM and its Left Front allies of seeking "cheap publicity by calling bandhs [strikes] and hurling bombs at buses."

According to the Newsclick website, farmers and agricultural workers joined rallies, road blockades and other protests in nearly 480 of India's 732 districts, and students at 60 universities boycotted classes.

Yesterday's strike took place amid the countrywide wave of mass protests that erupted in response to the passage of the discriminatory CAA. These protests, while spearheaded by Muslim youth, have cut across the communal, caste and ethnic divisions that the ruling elite has long cultivated so as to set working people against each other.

Roiled by the seemingly sudden, but in reality deeply-rooted, emergence of mass opposition, the BJP government has responded with massive state repression—including lethal police violence, blanket bans on protests, and Internet shutdowns—and by ratcheting up its promotion of Hindu communalism.

In late December, Indian Army Chief Bipin Rawat, flouting elementary democratic-constitutional principles, rallied to the government's support, labeling the anti-CAA agitation as "violent" and chastising students for "misleading" the nation. Modi has since promoted him to be India's first Chief of Defence Staff.

Last Sunday evening, in an outrage for which even the *Hindu* has held the BJP government responsible, members of the ABVP, the student group linked to the BJP and its fascistic ideological mentor, the RSS, savagely assaulted students at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). More than 40 students had to be hospitalised, many with serious injuries after being attacked with iron rods, field-hockey sticks and stones.

JNU has been an especial target of the BJP government and Hindu right since at least 2016, because of its long association with left-wing activism and socialist politics.

Meanwhile, global and domestic capital are demanding that the BJP government introduce a new wave of "big bang" neo-liberal reforms, so as to attract the investment needed to pull the Indian economy out of an accelerating slowdown.

In line with these demands, the BJP government has reportedly decided to slash its annual spending in the remaining three months of the 2019-2020 fiscal year by 2 trillion rupees (US$27.87 billion) or the annual equivalent of 7 percent. Even so, due to a massive revenue shortfall, the budget deficit is expected to swell from a planned 3.3 percent of GDP to 3.8 percent.

To gird itself to contend with mounting economic turbulence and working-class opposition, the Modi government is moving to further strengthen the Indian bourgeoisie's reckless and incendiary anti-China alliance with Washington. On Tuesday, as Trump was discussing the next steps in the US war drive against Iran following his criminal assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Suleimani, Modi telephoned the US president. According to a White House statement, Modi and Trump discussed "ways to further strengthen the United States-India strategic partnership in 2020."

The mounting working-class challenge to the Modi regime is part of a global upsurge in the class struggle. The past year that has seen major strikes and sustained, and in some cases insurrectionary, protest movements around the world, including in Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, the United States, France, Britain, Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka.

As everywhere, the pressing task in India is to politically arm the growing working-class counter-offensive with an international socialist programme and revolutionary leadership.

In diametrical opposition to the needs and aspirations of the tens of millions of workers and youth who joined yesterday's strike, the unions and Stalinist parties are seeking to channel the mass opposition to the BJP and the bitter fruits of three decades of India's capitalist "rise" behind the Congress Party and a parade of right-wing ethno-chauvinist and caste-ist parties. For them, yesterday's strike was a manoeuvre aimed at burnishing their "militant" credentials, the better to contain, defuse and suppress working-class opposition.

Their hostility to genuine class struggle is epitomised in their callous abandonment of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers jailed for life on frame-up murder charges for the "crime" of leading resistance to contract labour and a brutal work-regime, and their pleas for Modi to resume regular meetings of the tripartite Indian Labour Conference.

For decades, in the name of opposing the Hindu supremacist BJP, the CPM, CPI and their respective union affiliates, the CITU and All India Trades Union (AITUC), have supported right-wing governments, most of them Congress-led, that implemented pro-market policies and pursued ever-closer relations with Washington.

In a statement distributed to strikers yesterday, "Indian workers need a revolutionary socialist program me to fight Modi, capitalist austerity, and communal reaction," the *World Socialist Web Site* explained:

> "The only viable strategy to defend democratic rights and defeat communalist and fascist reaction in India, and around the world, is one based on the international class struggle and the independent political mobil is ation of the working class against the decrepit capitalist order."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site