

Indian workers in general strike call for unity

Our correspondents
14 January 2020

Tens of millions of workers, students, agricultural workers and farmers joined a one-day general strike and protests throughout India last Wednesday, registering their opposition to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and its austerity measures and promotion of Hindu chauvinism.

Indian supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* campaigned among striking workers in Chennai, in the south, and Kolkata, in the east. They distributed copies of the WSWS perspective "The fight against communal reaction in India is the fight for socialism" and discussed with strikers the central political issues in the strike, above all the need for a revolutionary socialist program to fight the Modi government and the reactionary agenda of the entire Indian ruling class.

Under conditions where Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government and its allies are whipping up Hindu communalism, aiming to weaken and split growing working class opposition to its austerity measures, the workers who joined the strike and protests cut across all communal, caste and ethno-linguistic divides.

In a politically significant development, striking workers demanded the repeal of the BJP's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). This was in addition to economic demands, such as higher wages and permanent jobs, and opposition to the privatisation of public sector industries, a new contributory pension scheme and pro-investor amendments in labour laws. The CAA is aimed at intimidating India's many-millioned Muslim minority, while subjecting the entire population, especially the poor, to outrageous harassment to "prove" their citizenship via a National Register of Citizens (NRC).

In Chennai, strikers joined a protest in front of the Mount Road post office. Anganwadi (Child Care Centre) workers were prominent. When workers began

to march, however, the police blocked them and herded them onto buses. The protesters were driven to a detention zone and not released until the evening.

An Anganwadi female worker, who wished to remain anonymous due to fear of reprisals from the authorities, told the WSWS: "We are participating in this strike to demand that our jobs are made permanent. There are over 250,000 Anganwadi workers in Tamil Nadu state. Though our official working hours are 8am to 4pm, we have to stay longer. Our job is to look after the children in child care centres and feed them. Parents are supposed to come at 4pm to take their children back. If parents do not turn up to collect their children, we have to escort the kids to their homes. That means we stay at work without overtime pay for more than an hour."

She was critical of the role of the trade unions in curtailing this struggle. "I have been regularly participating in one-day general strikes every year with the hope of becoming a permanent employee," she explained. "The unions are not helpful in this regard."

A group of three-wheeler drivers spoke in favour of socialism and the establishment of a workers' government.

Murugan said: "I agree that workers need to fight for their own government. Only then will all their pressing demands be resolved. But no other party is talking about this idea of fighting for a workers' government to establish social equality."

Jegatheesh, a member of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), said: "The unions don't have a radical program to fight on. For them, the general strike is a way of making compromises. The unions organise their annual general strike to control the fuming workers. We [CPI] used to collect money from workers in the factories and other workplaces but now our party got 150 million rupees from the DMK [Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam, a Tamil bourgeois

party] for its election fund. We don't agree with this.”

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, held a protest rally at the bus terminal in Sriperumbudur, a major auto industry hub, 40 kilometres from Chennai. Less than 100 workers participated, however, in an area where hundreds of thousands of workers are employed in globally-connected auto and related industries. The police arrested the protesters when they moved just 100 metres from the bus stand. Those arrested included some Anganwadi workers, as well as CITU leaders at the Yamaha India, Royal Enfield and Hyundai auto plants.

Around 50 workers from Motherson and some other auto plants in the area held a rally in the same bus stand under the banner of the Left Trade Union Centre, a regionalist splinter faction from the Maoist All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU). Motherson workers have been on strike since August 26, demanding a wage rise and opposing harsh working conditions. The police arrested them also as they began to march from the bus terminal.

Ajit, an Axil worker, denounced the Modi government's CAA and NRC. He told the WSWS: “These measures are against the people and trying to divert them from the real issues. I am from Madurai [460 kilometres from Chennai] and have come to Sriperumbudur for work. Earlier, I thought, through the media campaign, that north Indians were ignorant and voted for the BJP. But now, through your explanations, I understand that the BJP's rise is due to the betrayal of the working class by parties like the CPM and CPI.

“Now students in north India are united in fighting against the CAA. I support them. I like your party's program. It is working to develop an international consciousness among workers and youth. Now I begin to understand that immigrants should not be called illegals. They are victims of imperialism and capitalism. I am inspired by your socialist and internationalist ideas.”

Thiyagarajan, a Motherson worker, said: “The Modi government has cut 30 billion rupees from education and is spending 39 billion rupees to build detention centres [for “illegal immigrants”]. Only your party has explained the need for a united fight on all the social problems. The unions have not expanded the general

strike and not called out workers from all companies.”

Thiyagarajan was critical of the unions' role in isolating the striking Motherson workers. “Failing to call out the contract workers is wrong and gives strength to management. The union has not even called out workers from other Motherson plants across India. I agree with you that the social crisis is a global crisis of capitalism. I will read the WSWS.”

Yogalakshmi, an Anganwadi worker, said: “All the Anganwadi workers are contract workers and their basic salary is 4,000 rupees [\$US56] a month. I have worked for 39 years, but get only 4,500 rupees. We are hired as part-time workers but the government burdens us with a lot of work, like pre-school maintenance, health checkups for pregnant mothers, etc. Yet our salary remains that of a part-timer. We are in the CITU union. We thought the union would solve our problems but nothing has changed for years.

“Teachers and students are united in this struggle. The police attacked the people fighting against CAA. I understand from what you say that the state is not for the poor and oppressed people, but for rich people. I am in favour of your idea of workers' power and international socialism.”

In Kolkata, Tapan Chatterjee, a bank employee, commented on the government's attacks on workers' social and democratic rights. “We never felt so insecure before. All the public sector workers are in fear. Nobody knows what will happen next. Workloads are increasing.

“When Modi came to power I supported him. But I never thought the situation would turn out like this. We all should fight against the privatisation of the public sector. I know this one strike will not change much. But we should fight.”

The authors also recommend:

The Indian general strike and the global fight against communalism and war

[11 January 2020]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact