

# Millions of Indian workers strike to protest attacks by Modi government amid COVID-19 pandemic

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Expressing the growth of popular anger towards the anti-worker policies of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its ruinous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of workers have joined strikes and protests in recent weeks to oppose the government's attacks on their wages and working conditions.

Millions of scheme workers, mainly Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and those attached to the Anganwadi network (rural child care centres that are part of the Indian public health care system), took part in a three-day strike from August 7 to 9. Workers were opposing draconian changes to labour laws and disinvestment in and privatization of PSUs (Public Sector Units). They also demanded the transfer of 7,500 rupees to the bank accounts of all non-income tax paying families for six months, financial aid for farmers, a halt to retrenchments and closures, the payment of lockdown wages and the reinstatement of workers thrown out of work during the lockdown, and the provision of all families with subsidized grain and other foodstuffs.

The action, called by 10 Central Trade Union federations (CTUs), was the third nationwide strike or protest within three months. There was a nationwide strike on May 22 against major attacks on labour rights by different state governments. A nationwide protest on July 3 opposed the Modi government's pro-investor reforms, which the prime minister has vowed to dramatically intensify.

Showing the ruling elite's fear of the protest movement, police arrested and detained participants in many states, according officials of the CTUs.

A joint statement issued prior to the August 7-9 protests by the 10 CTUs noted the conditions faced by the scheme workers, many of whom are frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19: It complained that "none" of the "minimum requirements" for their safety and security, including personal protective equipment (PPE), insurance and risk allowance, are being provided by the government." As a result "many of the workers have died" due to COVID-19.

The strike was joined by close to 90,000 ASHA workers in Bihar, who had been on strike since August 6 demanding PPE

and the payment of delayed wages. One ASHA worker, Sarita Roy, told the *Hindustan Times* on August 8 that the workers are "not provided with the (protective) equipment even as we carry out all immunization tasks and even document maternity rates." They are paid just 5,000 rupees (\$US67) a month. However, even this paltry sum has not been paid for the last four months.

According to figures from the CTUs, nearly 10 million workers participated in the latest nationwide three-day action, which underscores the mounting popular anger towards Modi and his right-wing BJP. The growth of working-class struggles is not just an Indian phenomenon, but rather part of a worldwide upsurge of class struggle as workers express their opposition to social inequality and the ruling elite's homicidal drive to reopen the economy as the pandemic continues to rage.

The strike took place as the spread of the virus across India continued to accelerate. Over the last two weeks, India has reported the highest number of daily cases in the world, surpassing the US and Brazil, according to the World Health Organisation.

India's total reported COVID-19 cases has now surpassed 2.7 million. On August 17, the death toll surpassed the grim milestone of 50,000. Roughly 900 deaths are being reported on a daily basis.

The week of August 10-16 was the deadliest week of the pandemic in India thus far, with 434,003 new infections (an increase of 5.9 percent from the week before) and 6,555 deaths (an increase of 4.4 percent from the previous week). From August 1 to August 17, 1 million new COVID-19 cases were recorded.

The rapid spread of the disease is the direct product of the Indian ruling elite's adoption of a murderous policy of "herd immunity." During Modi's two-month-long, ill-prepared lockdown, the ruling elite failed to use the time to do anything to strengthen the country's chronically under-resourced public health care system. The government also refused to provide financial assistance to tens of millions of impoverished workers in the informal sector who lost their jobs, plunging them into destitution. Having created conditions of unbearable social misery for tens of millions of workers, the government began a

premature and reckless reopening of the economy so as to allow big business to begin extracting profits from the super-exploited working class.

Following in the footsteps of capitalist governments around the world, the Modi government has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to carry out long-planned “economic reforms” aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the working class, attracting international investment, and boosting the wealth of India’s super-rich. Measures being implemented include the privatization of public services, further cuts to social spending, and changes to labour laws, including attempts to lengthen the workday from 8 to 12 hours.

By forcing workers back into factories and other crowded workplaces with virtually no safety protection, Modi and the state governments, many of them opposition-led, bear responsibility for mass workplace infections and deaths. Reuters reported in July that workers at Bajaj Auto, India’s biggest exporter of motorbikes, were demanding the temporary closure of one of its plants after 250 employees tested positive for the coronavirus.

This is merely one example of the mounting opposition among various sections of the working class to the criminal indifference of the entire ruling elite towards their lives. The NewsClick website listed on August 6 at least 17 major workers’ protests over the preceding four months. They include:

- On June 1, over 50,000 women protested across the country demanding income support for needy families and grain.
- On June 25, nearly 100,000 ASHA workers held protest demonstrations across various states demanding better protective gear, better salaries and service conditions.
- On July 2-4, over half a million coal workers participated in a three-day strike against the government’s opening up of coal mining to private investors.
- On July 13, over 200,000 construction workers protested against the merging of a law and fund specifically meant for their protection on the job with the general Labour Code and the fund’s diversion to other purposes.
- On July 23, a workers-peasants’ joint demands day was observed with over 200,000 people participating. They were protesting against proposals to privatize agricultural trade, scrap labour laws, and for basic needs.

- On August 4, over 80,000 defence production employees

held demonstrations at the gates of their production units protesting against the impending privatization ordered by the Modi government.

- On August 5, thousands of road transport workers held protests across India demanding the revocation of a new law that favours big transport companies over small providers.

Each week brings new protests. On August 10, about 700,000 truck and small commercial vehicle operators in Madhya Pradesh went on a three-day strike against a tax hike on diesel. They also demanded insurance coverage for truck drivers, as they are exposing themselves to health risks while operating during the pandemic.

Under such explosive conditions, the 10 CTUs which called the three-day strike of scheme workers earlier this month did so with the aim of maintaining control over the mounting social opposition and directing it behind their own reactionary political agenda. The CTUs involved in calling the strike were the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which is affiliated to the opposition Congress Party, the Stalinist Communist Party (Marxist) or CPM-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the Stalinist Communist Party of India or CPI-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), and the right-wing Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or DMK-led Labour Progressive Federation (LPF).

In a display of their right-wing orientation, which includes demands for a dialogue with the BJP government, they invited the Bharatiya Mazdur Sangh (BMS), which is affiliated to the Hindu supremacist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological mentor of Modi’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to participate in the joint union action, but it declined.

A joint statement issued by the CTUs on July 18 noted that COVID-19 has resulted in 140 million workers losing their jobs within three months. This figure increases to 240 million if casual employees and contract workers are included. The statement pointed to the catastrophic outcome of these job losses, including an increase in malnutrition and hunger related deaths. It also warned of depression and suicides among desperate jobless workers.

In spite of these horrific conditions, all the CTUs could muster was a pledge to submit a petition to the Modi government calling for improvements. Needless to say, such appeals will fall on deaf ears.



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