

Tens of millions of workers to join all-India general strike

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Tens of millions of workers across India will join a one-day general strike today to protest the “pro-investor” policies of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government—austerity, privatization, the promotion of fire-at-will contract-labour jobs and the gutting of health and safety and all other regulatory restraints on capitalist exploitation.

The strike is also being fueled by mass anger over the government’s ruinous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like governments around the world, Modi and his BJP have prioritized corporate profit and safeguarding the fortunes of India’s billionaires and multi-millionaires over protecting workers’ lives and livelihoods.

This has produced a health and socio-economic catastrophe.

Official figures show India with more than 9.2 million COVID-19 infections, the world’s second highest tally, and almost 135,000 deaths. These figures are undoubtedly a gross underestimate. India has one of the lowest per capita testing rates among countries hit hard by the coronavirus. COVID-19 has taken root in the slums of Delhi, Mumbai and other urban centers, and in rural areas where public health care is scant to non-existent. Even in normal times, only 86 percent of all deaths are recorded by state authorities, and of the deaths that are registered, just 22 percent receive a doctor-certified cause of death.

Hundreds of millions have lost income, and this in a country where prior to the pandemic 50 percent of all children were undernourished. With India’s economy contracting by 23.9 percent in the April-June quarter and expected to shrink by around 10 percent during the 2020-2021 fiscal year, tens of millions have permanently lost their jobs or had their hours cut. The pandemic, an IMF report concluded last month, will push 40 million more Indians into “extreme poverty,” defined as surviving on US \$1.90 or less per day, by the end of 2020.

All of the country’s major trade union federations, with the exception of the BJP-aligned Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, have endorsed today’s national protest strike, as have many unaffiliated unions. They are calling on the far-right, Hindu supremacist BJP government to halt its privatization program; repeal the regressive labour and farm “reforms” it recently pushed through parliament; and to provide emergency assistance to the most impoverished sections of the population, by making a one-time 7,500 rupee (approximately \$100) payment to every non-tax-paying family and by providing 10 kilograms (22 pounds) in food grains per month to the neediest families.

Those walking off the job today will include central and state government employees, state transport workers, coal miners, power workers, bank workers and workers at numerous state-owned enterprises threatened with privatization, such as the airplane manufacturer Hindustan Aeronautics and the state-owned telecommunication company BSNL. Many workers employed in the “informal sector,” where workers have virtually no rights, including construction workers and auto-rickshaw drivers, are also expected to join the protest.

Small farmers, who have been agitating for weeks against a BJP agricultural “reform” meant to boost agri-business at their expense, have called a protest in the national capital Delhi today, timed to coincide with the nationwide protest strike. Yesterday, police in the neighbouring state of Haryana used water-cannon to block farmers making their way to Delhi, where authorities have invoked the threat of COVID-19 to declare the protest illegal.

Eight months after the pandemic exploded around the globe—as a direct consequence of the inaction of ruling elites focused on profits and share prices—social opposition, above all from the working class, is erupting.

In Greece, a public sector general strike is taking place today. The ADEDY trade union called the job action due to outrage among workers over a lack of protection from COVID-19. Public transit workers in the capital, Athens, are also striking against the plans of the country’s right-wing government to abolish the eight-hour day and place new restrictions on the right to strike.

In South Korea, up to 200,000 workers struck yesterday against anti-worker legislation that would ban strikers from occupying certain facilities and worksites, while 30,000 workers at Kia Motors mounted a partial strike to press for higher wages and oppose job cuts.

Many of the labour federations that have called today’s protest strike are directly affiliated with opposition parties that have themselves played a crucial role in the imposition of pro-market policies and capitalist restructuring. This is true of the Congress Party-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC); the Labour Progressive Federation (LPF), which is the union front of the Tamil Nadu-regionalist DMK; and of the Centre of the Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the union wings of the Stalinist parliamentary parties—respectively, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and the Community Party of India (CPI).

As for the labor federations and unions that are purportedly

politically “independent,” their role has been no different. They have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

For the unions, today’s protest strike is a maneuver aimed at channeling the mounting anger within the working class behind the opposition parties, beginning within the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government, in futile appeals to the BJP to abandon its “anti-people, anti-worker anti-national” policies.

For years, the Western press has been full of reports celebrating a rising India. Such reports gloss over the basic truth that India’s capitalist expansion over the past three decades has been fueled by the super-exploitation of the working class. Indian big business and global capital have appropriated the lion’s share of the wealth, making India one of the world’s most unequal societies. India’s richest 1 percent have four times more wealth than the poorest 70 percent, more than 950 million people.

The brutality of Indian capitalism has been laid bare by the pandemic.

For the first three-and-a-half months of 2020, the BJP government ignored the threat from the COVID-19 pandemic. Then on March 24, with less than four hours’ notice, it imposed an ill-prepared and ill-conceived lockdown that failed to stop the virus, because it was not accompanied by the necessary health measures such as mass testing and contact tracing. Moreover, it exacted a horrific social cost—as exemplified by the plight of the migrant workers—because the authorities left the hundreds of millions of people who lost their jobs and income overnight essentially to fend for themselves.

Starting at the end of April, the BJP government, with the support of the state governments, including those led by the opposition, began pushing for a return to work, exploiting the social misery created by its own actions. The result was that the pandemic, especially once virtually all lockdown measures were lifted at the end of May, spread like wildfire.

This “herd immunity” policy has been the cutting edge of an intensified assault on the working class. In mid-May, Modi promised a “quantum leap” in pro-investor reforms, and in the months since the BJP government has dramatically accelerated its privatization drive and pushed through its labour law and agriculture “reforms,” measures long-demanded by Indian and international capital.

At the same time, the Modi government has doubled down on the other key policy that every Indian government has pursued since 1991 and that has gone hand-in-hand with drive to make India a haven for global capital—expanding India’s ties with US imperialism.

With the strong backing of the Indian ruling elite, it has exploited the six month-long border dispute with Beijing to integrate India still more fully into Washington’s reckless military-strategic offensive against China. This has included a raft of new initiatives and agreements with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, and important steps toward transforming the US-led Quad strategic dialogue into a military alliance.

Meanwhile, Modi and his BJP have stepped up their promotion of anti-Muslim communalism, with the aim of promoting reaction

and splitting the working class.

The Stalinists, as a result of their support for a succession of Congress Party governments that championed neo-liberal reforms, and their own implementation of “pro-investor policies” in the states, such as West Bengal, where they have formed the government, have seen their working class support hemorrhage. Nevertheless, they are providing the political leadership for today’s general strike and are valued by the Congress and other opposition parties because they endow them with phony “progressive” credentials.

Integrated into establishment politics for decades, the CPM and CPI have responded to the Indian bourgeoisie’s intensification of its class war assault by shifting still further right. They have redoubled their efforts to tie the working class to the right-wing opposition and the institutions of the Indian state. In the name of defeating the Hindu supremacist BJP, they contested the recent Bihar state elections in an alliance with the Congress Party, and intend to do the same in coming months in West Bengal and in Tamil Nadu, where the Congress is the number-two in a DMK-led bloc.

This is a continuation, but under far more explosive and dangerous conditions, of the same reactionary course they have pursued for the past three decades. Their guiding principle, justified in the name of fighting the Hindu right, has been to tie the working class to the opposition parties as they implement the socially incendiary pro-investor agenda of Indian big business. By politically suppressing the working class and preventing it from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis, the Stalinists have enabled the BJP to exploit mass anger and frustration over endemic poverty, mass unemployment and rampant social inequality and emerge as India’s principal party of government.

During the same three decades, there has been a vast increase in the size and social power of the working class. But for that power to be mobilized, the working class must forge its class independence, unite its disparate struggles, orient to the growing global working class counter-offensive and rally the oppressed toilers behind it in a struggle against Indian and world capitalism. To do so Indian workers must repudiate all the parties of the bourgeoisie, their Stalinist accomplices, and their communalist, caste-ist, regionalist and nationalist politics, and base their struggles on the program of socialist internationalism.



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