

Millions of Indian workers join national general strike against Modi government's social attacks

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Tens of millions of workers throughout India joined a one-day general strike yesterday in opposition to the pro-investor economic reforms and associated austerity measures of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government.

The huge mobilisation, which organisers said involved 250 million people, is a powerful expression of growing mass anger, not just against the Modi administration but Indian bourgeois rule as a whole. It demonstrates the readiness of workers to fight the ruling elite's onslaught on jobs and wages, along with working and living conditions.

Strikers' demands included a cash transfer of 7,500 rupees (about \$US100) per month to all non-income tax-paying families; the withdrawal of anti-farmer laws and anti-worker labour codes; universal social security; a minimum monthly wage of 21,000 rupees with indexation to all employees including scheme workers; compulsory registration of trade unions within a period of 45 days from the date of application submissions; an end to forced premature retirements for government and public sector employees; public health care for all; and the allocation of 6 percent of GDP for public health and 5 percent for public education.

The strike was called by 10 central trade unions, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). They are the union federations of the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties: the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Other federations included the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which is the union wing of the opposition Congress Party, and the Labour Progressive Front, affiliated to the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The ruling BJP-led Baharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) did not participate.

While involvement varied according to industry, occupation and region, the national walkout involved workers from public sector units, including the banks, oil

refineries, steel mills, power plants, coal mines and defence production facilities, all demanding withdrawal of the Modi government's privatisation measures, its promotion of contract labour and its reactionary new "labour reform" restricting workers' right to strike.

Millions walked out in the southern states of Kerala, Telangana and Puducherry, Odisha in the east and Assam in the northeast, producing "complete shutdowns" partially impacting many other states. Protest rallies were held in major cities and towns across the country, including in Delhi.

Kerala ground to a halt with the Stalinist CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) state government supporting the strike. State-owned KSRTC buses did not operate, private buses, auto-rickshaws and taxis were not running, and government offices and major businesses were closed.

Strike action also stopped train services and saw large falls in road vehicle movements in various cities in the eastern state of West Bengal, including Jadavpur, Garia and Dakshin Barasat. While the anti-communist Trinamool Congress (TMC) state government, led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, has previously taken harsh legal action and used police and goon violence against strikers, it did not attempt to block the walkout. The right-wing TMC faces a state election next year with the BJP as its principal opponent.

In Odisha, state workers joined the strike, defying the Biju Janatha Dal (BJD)-led state government's attempt to ban the stoppage through the Essential Services Maintenance Act.

Workers from various sectors in the southern state of Tamil Nadu walked out, including from Salem Steel and other major companies, such as MRF and Ashok Leyland on the outskirts of Chennai, textile plants in Tirupur, the fireworks industry in Sivakasi as well as IT sector employees.

Media coverage of yesterday's strike has been scant, indicating the corporate elite's fear of any mass action by the working class amid rising popular anger over the

disastrous conditions created by the coronavirus pandemic.

Leaders of the Provisional Committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) held a protest in Gurgaon yesterday. They told the WWS that the main unions in the massive Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, which is on the outskirts of Delhi and has been a centre of working class militancy, had not called their members out on strike. The MSWU was formed by Maruti Suzuki car assembly workers in Manesar in opposition to a company stooge union.

MSWU members organised a series of militant struggles against slave-labour conditions maintained by the company in 2011-12. In a joint company-government vendetta against these militant workers, 13 employees, including all 12 MSWU executive committee members, were framed up on bogus murder charges and in March 2017 sentenced to life imprisonment.

Yesterday's strike, which cut across all language, religion and caste divisions, was a powerful demonstration of the objective unity of the Indian working class. This is a powerful blow against the Modi government's relentless barrage of Hindu chauvinism targeting Muslims and other religious minorities, and the ruling elite's constant incitement of ethnic-regional, caste and communal divisions.

Coinciding with yesterday's general strike was a two-day national farmers' protest and a "Delhi Chalo" march called by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), an umbrella platform of over 300 farmers' organisations. Its main demand is for the scrapping of three agriculture-related laws recently passed by the Modi government. These measures put farmers at the mercy of giant agribusinesses which would dominate cultivation, trade, storage and the pricing of agricultural commodities, including essential food grains.

Determined to block the "Delhi Chalo" march and other coordinated protest actions by farmers, BJP-ruled state governments in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh deployed paramilitary forces and the police.

Authorities in Haryana mobilised police to block its borders with the National Capital Territory (NCT), Delhi, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Roadblocks were erected to prevent farmers marching to the NCT. The Haryana BJP government also directed police to raid farmers' houses at midnight and arrest hundreds. Modi's national government similarly deployed police and paramilitary forces at the Delhi-Haryana border.

While 10 central union federations and several other union formations were involved in calling yesterday's strike, the main political role was played by the Stalinist CITU and AITUC.

Contrary to workers' determination to fight the Modi government's attacks, the Stalinist unions called the action

to let off steam and channel the growing opposition of the working class and the rural toilers behind opportunist alliances with Congress and various capitalist regional parties. In line with this agenda, the CITU and AITUC collaborated with the INTUC and LPF, the union federations of the Congress and DMK, and promoted those bourgeois parties as "the friends of workers."

The Stalinists, who have a long and sordid history of collaborating with Congress and the DMK, allied themselves with these parties in the May 2019 general elections. They also contested the Bihar state elections early this month in an alliance with Congress and Rastriya Janatha Dal, a corrupt caste-based regional bourgeois party. They plan to contest next year's state elections in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam in alliance with Congress.

The mass working class opposition to Modi's BJP-led government had already been rising in the months prior to its ill-prepared coronavirus lockdown last March.

A similar multimillion-strong national general strike against the government's economic reform measures was held on January 8, along with multi-ethnic demonstrations and protests against the reactionary anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These actions had been preceded by a wave of strikes in the auto industry.

Faced with the explosion of anger over the CAA, the Modi government was, for a period, forced onto the back foot. Modi, however, was able to use the dangerous conditions created by the pandemic to suppress those protests.

Eight months on, amid a health disaster and social catastrophe produced by the government's ruinous handling of the pandemic, an even more powerful movement of the working class and oppressed toilers has emerged.

In order to go forward, the Indian working class must politically and organisationally break from the stranglehold of the Stalinists and their Maoist variants, which all defend the profit system, and rally the peasantry and other oppressed masses in the fight against capitalism and for a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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