

130,000 public transport workers strike in Indian state of Karnataka in defiance of draconian government threats

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The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government in the southern Indian state of Karnataka is mounting an all-out offensive to suppress a major strike by some 130,000 public road transport workers. The government has so far arrested over 130 workers, fired hundreds and suspended thousands more.

Led by Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, the government is also cynically using the ongoing COVID-19 crisis to pressure the employees to return to work, citing the “inconvenience” the strike is causing to the local population, which depends upon public transport for daily travel.

The strike began on April 7 and is now entering its third week. It has paralyzed public bus transportation throughout the state. The entire fleet of 26,000 buses has ground to a halt, although the BJP government claims that they have been able to operate a few thousand buses using threats of dismissal and other forms of blackmail to cajole some workers to return to their jobs.

The BJP government took a hardline stance from the outset of the strike. “The government will not negotiate any more. Employees should return to work,” declared the Chief Secretary P. Ravi Kumar, Yediyurappa’s top bureaucrat, following a meeting he had with the chief minister (CM) a day prior to the commencement of the strike.

The workers belong to four separately organized state-owned bus transport corporations, abbreviated as KSRTC (Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation), BMTC (Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation), NWKRTC (North Western Karnataka Road Transport Corporation) and NEKRTC (North Eastern Karnataka Road Transport Corporation).

These brutally exploited workers, whose regular salaries are frequently not paid on time, are demanding that their pay be brought in line with the recommendations of the government-appointed 6th pay commission. In 2018, the commission recommended a 30 percent hike in the pay scales of all government employees.

Even a 30 percent hike for these workers would result in an additional expenditure of little more than 8 billion rupees (Rs.) (\$107 million), a mere drop in the bucket compared to the government’s total budget expenditure of Rs. 2.4 trillion (\$31 billion) in 2020–21.

The repeated delays in salary payments have imposed an intolerable burden on the workers and their families. This was acknowledged by one of the managers in an anonymous comment to the press. “There was a mistake on our part,” he said. “Salaries of employees were delayed and were paid in installments last year. In fact, they couldn’t celebrate last year’s Deepavali [a major festival] due to the delay.”

The workers are demanding that they be formally classified as government employees with a state-mandated pay scale, instead of workers whose pay and working conditions are determined by the vagaries of the “autonomous” transport corporations’ financial results. The strikers are also demanding a halt to overwork through the hiring of more workers, solutions to various workplace grievances and government investments to improve the condition of the dilapidated bus fleet.

In addition, the workers are demanding that the government pay the promised compensation of Rs. 3 million (\$40,000) to the families of at least 112 workers who have succumbed to COVID-19. So far, according to the union leading the strike, the dependent families of only seven workers have received such payments.

This is the second time workers have resorted to strike action since mid-December. At that time they returned to work after four days when their de facto union leader, Kodahalli Chandrashekar, urged the workers to trust the BJP government’s word that it would “sincerely” consider their demands. True to its character, the government subsequently ignored the workers’ longstanding demands.

The eruption of this strike comes on the heels of a bitter three-month long struggle by over 3,000 Toyota Kirloskar Motors workers in Karnataka that was systematically

isolated and, in March, outright betrayed by the local union leadership and the Stalinist-led labour federations.

The strike also takes place in the context of a five-month long agitation by hundreds of thousands of overwhelmingly small and marginal Indian farmers, many of whom have been camping on the outskirts of India's capital, Delhi, since late November. They are demanding the repeal of the pro-business farm laws adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP government, which is seeking to consolidate the control of giant global and domestic agribusinesses over the agricultural sector.

The BJP state government is particularly concerned by the unity being displayed by permanent workers, trainees and those on probation. As one official commented to the press, "It is surprising that this time, trainees and probationers too have joined the strike. Since youngsters are involved, calming them down and making them understand is a challenge for the government. It is only the experienced employees who can make them see the harsh reality and end the strike."

The wives and children of workers have participated in protest marches throughout the state. This in spite of the government cynically threatening them, citing COVID-19 restrictions. In fact, it is transport workers who have lost their lives due to the authorities' ruinous mishandling of the pandemic.

The government is employing two tactics to intimidate the workers. One is to unleash ferocious police repression, dismiss, blackmail and suspend workers. The second is to grant private bus and van companies, who are gouging the riders, special permission to ply the routes normally reserved for public transport corporations.

Last Friday, the government seized on the tragic death of a 59-year-old bus driver, Nabid Rasool Awati, to witch-hunt the strikers. Awati was one of the workers who had returned to work after managers visited his home to "convince" him to "return to duty." He was fatally wounded when stones thrown by unknown persons, described in the press as "miscreants," pierced the windshield of his bus.

Immediately following the incident, BJP Deputy Chief Minister Laxman Savadi, who is also the transport minister, sought to blame the workers. Without a shred of evidence, he said, "It is condemnable that the driver's own colleagues caused his death. Some transport employees are neither joining duty, nor allowing their colleagues to join. We will not spare those who have done it."

The following day, the BMTC management suspended close to 2,500 workers, including around 2,000 permanent staff. Other road transport companies such as KSRTC have followed suit, imposing similar repressive measures.

In the first nine days of the strike, 52 KSRTC workers

were arrested, including 47 under the provisions of the draconian Karnataka Essential Services Management Act (ESMA). Twenty workers of NEKRTC, six from BMTC and four from NWKRTC were also arrested. The police filed over 130 FIRs (First Information Reports) within these nine days.

In response to a slew of Public Interest Litigations (PILs) instigated by government supporters and other right-wing forces, the Karnataka High Court is also threatening the strikers. It issued a statement telling them to return to work immediately so as not to "inconvenience the common man."

The striking transport workers abandoned their previous rotten union, called the KSRTC Staff and Workers' Federation, and last year formed a new organization, the Karnataka State Road Transport Employees League. Their most visible spokesperson is Kodihalli Chandrashekar, the right-wing, politically well-connected head of a farmers' organization who has become the League's "honorary president."

What the strikers above all require to secure victory is a new political orientation. They must broaden their struggle to workers throughout Karnataka and working people across India to challenge the low wages and ruthless exploitation enforced by the state and central governments together with big business. The conditions for such a struggle are extremely favourable, as shown by a series of militant strikes and protests over recent months, including the November 26 nationwide general strike against the Modi government's austerity policies.

But as the three-month-long struggle by Toyota Kirloskar Motors workers in Karnataka underscored, workers' struggles cannot succeed if they remain under the control of the pro-capitalist trade unions, including the Stalinist-led CITU and AITUC, which isolate them and seek to tie to them to the Congress Party and other right-wing opposition parties.

To prevent this, striking transport workers must establish an independent strike committee to take control of the job action out of the hands of the unions and appeal for a unified struggle by the broadest sections of working people and the impoverished masses for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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