Tens of thousands of Maharashtra state transport workers continue strike in defiance of court orders

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Over 95,000 bus drivers, conductors and mechanics at the state-owned Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) have been on indefinite strike since midnight Nov. 3.

The strike was only launched after workers rebelled against an agreement that the Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana and other unions had reached with the Shiv Sena-led state government.

Negotiated at the end of October, amid a job action limited to only a section of the MSRTC workforce, the agreement abandoned the workers' principal demand—that they be made direct employees of the state government, thereby making it more difficult for their jobs to be cut, contracted out or privatized.

Angered by this betrayal, workers at several bus depots walked off the job or refused to end the partial strike they had launched Oct. 27. This rank-and-file strike movement quickly snowballed to involve thousands, if not tens of thousands. In an attempt to regain control over the rank-and-file, the unions then called an indefinite strike of the entire workforce for midnight Nov. 3.

The low-paid, brutally exploited MSRTC workers have suffered great hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed millions in India and plunged hundreds of millions into still deeper poverty. According to the unions, at least 37 workers have committed suicide over the past year-and-a-half because of MSRTC's repeated weeks-long and even months-long delays in paying their wages. As of last August, COVID-19 had killed at least 304 MSRTC workers, but the state refused to declare the MSRTC staff "frontline workers" and prioritize their vaccination.

The strike has completely paralyzed public bus transport in Maharashtra, which, with a population of almost 125 million, is India's second most populous state and home to its financial capital, Mumbai. Despite rulings by a state industrial court and the Bombay High Court declaring the job action illegal, the strike appears to have gained strength in recent days. Currently, MSRTC's entire fleet of around 18,500 buses is grounded and its 250 depots shut down.

Management, with the full support of the Shiv Sena-led state government, is intent on making the workforce and MSRTC customers—overwhelmingly comprised of workers and the urban and rural poor—pay for the massive losses resulting from years of underinvestment and the economic disaster produced by the pandemic.

In addition to on-time payment of their wages, the workers' main demand is for MSRTC to be fully merged into the state government so that workers are treated as state government employees, with the same benefits and enhanced job security. Currently, the MSRTC, just like other state transport services in India, is being run as an "autonomous" capitalist enterprise and starved of state investment. As a result, the MSRTC has had to go into debt to the tune of Rs. 95 billion ($1.3 billion) to pay for fuel, salaries and other daily expenses.

The MSRTC strike coincides with a growing agitation among workers at the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) in the southern state of Kerala. The KSRTC workers mounted a 48-hour strike on November 5 and 6 to demand a pay hike and, most importantly, regular payment of their wages. Kerala is ruled by a Left Democratic Front coalition that is led and dominated by the Stalinist Communist

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Party of India (Marxist), or CPM. But its attitude to the KRSTC workers is no less hostile than the Maharashtra's Vikas Aghadi (Development Front) state government—a three-party coalition, including the Congress Party, till recently the Indian ruling class' preferred party of national government, and led by the Shiv Sena (literally Shiva's Army), a fascist party and erstwhile close ally of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. The Kerala state Transport Minister has reportedly vowed "stern action" against the KSRTC workers if they again resort to job action.

Citing an Oct. 29 industrial court ruling, the Bombay High Court issued an order Nov. 3 outlawing the all-out strike the unions had called for midnight that evening. It also instructed the state government to immediately constitute a panel to examine the workers' demand for the MSRTC to be fully merged into the state government, in the hopes this could be used to mollify the workers and suppress the strike movement.

In response to the High Court order, virtually all of the more than two dozen unions active among the MSRTC workers announced they were withdrawing their support for the pending job action. Nevertheless, to the dismay of both the government and union leaders, the all-out strike went ahead.

Subsequently many of the unions again shifted their stance and professed to be leading the strike. "For five years, our demands are the same," declared one union leader, "but the government is not willing to listen. We will not call off the agitation till our demands are met."

MSRTC management has responded by suspending many of the most militant workers for engaging in what it calls an "illegal strike." Yesterday, it suspended a further 1,135 workers, bringing the total number suspended to 2,053. On Wednesday, MSRTC filed a contempt of court case against the unions and workers for mounting an "illegal strike" in defiance of the Nov. 3 Bombay High Court. For its part, the High Court has signalled it is planning to intervene aggressively in favour of management, saying it fails to "understand how employees gain" by repeatedly "breaching" its order not to strike. Adding insult to injury, it callously asked how the workers' defiance will prevent future suicides in their ranks.

The state government, meanwhile, has given permission to price-gouging private bus companies to ply MSRTC's routes during the strike, purportedly to "relieve the hardship" faced by the over 6.5 million passengers that ride the state-owned company's buses every day. In fact, with the government's blessing, MSRTC has for years been increasing the "hardship" of its impoverished riders by bilking them with fare hikes.

Workers' anger at their mistreatment has been building throughout the pandemic. A bus driver told the *Hindustan Times*: "We do not get salaries on time. There have been times that our family members go to bed without eating anything. We are just asking for our rights and want the state government to just listen to us."

According to a recent MSRTC job advertisement, the basic monthly pay for drivers and conductors ranges from an atrocious Rs. 12,080 ($163) to Rs. 26,673 ($360), plus unstated "extra" allowances.

The explosive MSRTC strike is part of mounting wave of worker struggles across India. Among others, auto workers, bank employees and rural health workers have mounted strikes to protest low wages, speed-up, the Modi government's sweeping privatisation drive, and the lack of workplace protections from COVID-19. Meanwhile, farmers are continuing their agitation, now in its 12th month, against Modi's pro-agribusiness farm laws.

In November of 2019, 48,000 Telangana state road transport (TSRTC) workers mounted a month-long strike against privatization, and in April of this year around 150,000 workers at KSRTC, MSRTC's sister company in Karnataka, which borders Maharashtra to the south, also staged a weeks-long strike. Both strikes were ultimately suppressed as a result of government reprisals and threats and the complicity of the trade unions, which systematically isolated them, without any of the workers' major grievances addressed.

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