

Tens of thousands of transport workers enter fourth week of indefinite strike in India

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Over 90,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers are now in their fourth week of strike action in defiance of vicious management reprisals, including the suspension and firing of thousands of workers, and a Bombay High Court ruling banning their job action.

The strike is a grass-roots initiative. It erupted in opposition to the express wishes of virtually all of the more than two dozen unions at the Maharashtra government-owned MSRTC. In late October, the unions called off a nascent strike after concluding a rotten deal with the state government that pledged timely payment of the workers' wages and provided for modest pay and allowance (benefit) increases.

On Wednesday, the state government warned that "strict action" would be taken against the strikers if they failed to return to work on Friday, November 26. The threat was combined with a minimal pay increase for some employees.

The workers' central demand is that the MRSTC be fully merged into the state government. Were this to be done, the MRSTC workers would be entitled to the same pay scale, benefits and job security as other government workers. At present, the workers are ineligible for government pay scales since the MSRTC is managed as an autonomous corporate entity that has to financially fend for itself. Moreover, the workers calculate ending MRSTC's autonomous status would impede the government's and MRSTC management's plans to privatize much or all of its operations, which provide a public service vital to the lives of working people in India's second most populous state.

The state government—a three-party coalition led by the fascistic Shiv Sena and including the Congress Party, which came to power in late 2019 with the support of the Stalinist parliamentary parties—insists that the merger demand cannot be fulfilled. This elicited one of the striking workers to make the following observation to the daily *Indian Express*: "The government is saying in the media that the merger (of MSRTC with the state government) is not possible. Then why did they promise it in the election manifesto?"

The united demand of rank-and-file workers for MSRTC's

merger was not even raised by the leaders of most of the 27 unions who held negotiations with the Maharashtra state government Transport Minister in late October. In opposition to the union leadership, ordinary workers at the MSRTC progressively increased their agitation after the unions announced that they had reached a deal with the government to put an end to worker grievances on October 27.

Taking the union leadership by surprise, rank-and-file workers, who had started sporadic job actions in mid to late October, commenced an indefinite strike starting at midnight on November 3 in defiance of the explicit instructions of the unions. Fully 26 of the 27 unions that purport to represent the MSRTC workers had ordered them to abide by a Bombay High Court ruling declaring any job action illegal.

Subsequently, the unions declared their "support" for the strike, but this was merely a transparent effort to gain control over it. To the consternation of the MSRTC management and government, the strike has continued largely outside the traditional union structures.

During a recent hearing on a contempt petition filed by MSRTC management against the workers for having defied an earlier industrial court order banning the strike, the Bombay High Court directed the state government to file criminal contempt of court charges against the strikers if they seek to prevent scabs from resuming work.

MSRTC management is also mounting a merciless offensive against the striking workers. It has terminated at least 2,000 striking contract workers for defying its "back-to-work order," suspended close to 3,000 regular employees and issued disciplinary "notices" to a further 2,627 striking workers. This open hostility of the management towards the workers made several striking workers comment to the press, "Do they want to just break our unity and strike using the divide-and-rule formula? They have suspended thousands of employees instead of solving our problems and understanding how we are suffering due to our miserable pay."

The workers have also exposed other nefarious tactics that

the government is using to try break the strike. They have alleged that the government is blackmailing private bus companies, which have shown some reluctance to ply some of the routes previously served by the MSRTC, by threatening to withhold outstanding contract payments.

Management has deliberately withheld workers' wages for months, citing a lack of revenue. This has compelled workers to incur huge debts, including to finance health care for family members who have contracted COVID-19 and required hospitalization.

The workers are continuing to withstand extraordinary hardship since the strike commenced. They are not receiving even their measly monthly wages, which range from Rs. 12,080 to Rs. 26,673 (\$163 to \$360), plus meagre allowances. Due to repeated delays in salary payments stretching over several months, at least 38 workers have committed suicide since March 2020.

Last year the *Wire* published a heart-wrenching article on the desperate conditions facing these impoverished workers due to management's failure to pay them, often for months at a time. It reports on the November 9, 2020 suicide of 30-year-old MSRTC worker Manoj Choudhary, who was the sole bread winner for his young wife, parents and grandparents. Choudhary took his own life because he was utterly despondent about not being able to provide for them.

His wife Aishwarya described the harrowing months they faced prior to her husband's suicide. "My husband tried everything he could to stay afloat. But with his meagre Rs 14,000 (\$189) salary per month, which was also paid after a delay of three to four months, it became impossible for him to take care of the family," she said.

These brutally exploited workers are being made to bear the full health and financial burden of the ruinous decisions made by the state and union governments to prioritize protecting corporate profits and investor wealth over saving lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in the deaths of at least 304 MSRTC workers and more than 4 million deaths nationwide, as well as massive income and job losses. A steep fall in ridership during the pandemic has created a dire financial situation for the MSRTC.

The workers have shut down all 250 depots and grounded almost all of MSRTC's fleet of 18,500 buses, essentially paralyzing public transport, since the strike commenced in full earnest from midnight on November 3.

Tens and perhaps even hundreds of striking workers have camped out at the Azad Maidan (Liberty sports ground) in Mumbai to bring their agitation and plight to the public's attention. Protesters are pooling their resources to pay for food and even water. Many other supporters, including civic organizations, are showing their sympathy for the strike by distributing lunches, dinners, biscuits and tea.

While the courts and the state government have berated the striking workers for disrupting the education of students who use MSRTC to travel to school, a group of at least 50 students, subject to the exorbitant fares that private bus companies charge, traveled to the town of Kolhapur to show their solidarity with the strikers.

The grassroots workers' struggle has bewildered both MSRTC management and the state government. They have both long relied upon the pro-capitalist union apparatuses to keep workers under their control.

This was noted in an *Indian Express* interview with MSRTC Managing Director Shekhar Channe. "It looks like the major and the oldest unions, which were in the committee initially, are not part of this strike," said Channe. "So, as everyone is claiming, it is a spontaneous and a voluntary strike by the workers. There seems to be no leadership here. And a responsible leader is required to solve the issues. Due to a lack of leadership, it's becoming difficult to find a way out of the strike."

For MSRTC management, a "responsible leader" is one who can sabotage the workers' determined struggle and force them back on the job with a deal that does nothing to address their just demands for greatly improved wages and working conditions.

Management is also pushing ahead with the financial "turn around" of the currently loss-making corporation by enlisting the European-based management consulting company KPMG to "advise" them on how to restructure the MSRTC. The goal of such a restructuring will be to increase the profits extracted from the workforce and from the workers, students and poor farmers who use its buses for their daily transport. The kinds of solutions management is looking into, in the words of the MSRTC Managing Director Channe, include: "[reducing] the bus-staff ratio," contracting out more routes to private operators and "developing MSRTC depots and lands on a Public Private Partnership (PPP)" basis.



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