

Six-week-long Maharashtra public transport workers strike endangered by unions' sabotage

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Almost 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers are steadfastly continuing their six-week-long strike, despite government threats and savage management reprisals. These include the suspension of over 10,000 workers, the transfer of 2,250 workers to faraway locations, the termination of at least 2,300 daily-wage workers, and repeated threats to invoke the draconian Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (MESMA).

The workers at the Maharashtra state-owned bus company launched their indefinite strike at midnight November 3, forcing the entire fleet of 18,500 buses off the road. In walking off the job, the bus drivers, ticket collectors, mechanics and support staff defied the Bombay High Court, which has declared any job action illegal, as well as the 28 unions that claim to represent them. The latter had refused to even raise the workers' central demand—that the MSRTC be fully merged into the state government—when they held talks with Maharashtra Transport Minister Anil Parab on October 27 and urged workers to submit to the court order banning their strike.

Through the MSRTC's merger with the state government, the strikers are seeking to counter the plans of management and the Maharashtra government to privatize its operations. State government workers have job security and better wage and benefits than those employed at public sector enterprises like MSRTC.

Discredited by their actions, the unions have largely fallen silent during the strike, displaying both their impotence and their role as would-be corporate shepherds of the workers.

The fact that the unions have lost control has been

bemoaned by MSRTC's managing director who told the *Indian Express*, "Everyone is claiming it is a spontaneous and 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."

In other words, management cannot rely on the bureaucratic union apparatuses to herd the workers back to work.

In an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, a bus driver gave voice to the militant mood among the strikers. "Our fight," he declared, "is for justice, and we will continue the strike until (our) demand of merger is fulfilled. We are suffering a lot due to this strike, but this needs to be understood by the state government: If they want us to die like this protesting, then we are ready for it, but [we] won't take the strike back."

While the workers have shown great courage and determination in sustaining the strike for the past 43 days, their struggle is in grave danger. This is because the organizations that claim to speak in the name of the working class, the trade unions and the ostensible "left" parties, are systematically isolating the MSRTC workers' struggle.

As a result, MSRTC management and the Maharashtra government—a three-party coalition led by the fascistic Shiv Sena and including the Congress Party, until recently the Indian ruling class's preferred party of national government—are free to wage a war of attrition. They are counting on threats, reprisals, and mounting economic hardship among the poorly paid workers to pressure an increasing number to return to

work and, ultimately, cause the strike to collapse.

Management has succeeded in putting more buses on the road in recent days. Whilst its claims are no doubt exaggerated, MSRTC announced earlier this week that 21,370 of the 93,000 workers who walked out on November 4 have now returned to work and that around half of its 250 bus depots are partially operational.

State Transport Minister Anil Parab has been issuing nonstop threats against the strikers. On December 10 he gave the workers an ultimatum to return to work by Monday, December 13. After accusing the workers of “preventing state transportation employees from returning to work,” he announced that the government “is seriously considering taking action” under MESMA.

With the invocation of MESMA, police would be granted unhindered powers to summarily arrest and detain striking workers en masse. Although the Shiv Sena-led government did not act on Parab’s threat, it is no doubt awaiting what it considers the choice time to pounce, arrest the most militant strikers and deliver a fatal blow to the strike.

If it has not done so to date, it is because it recognizes there is a great well of public sympathy for the strikers and, more generally, enormous social anger within the working class and among the rural toilers.

As a result of the Indian ruling class’s criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions have died and hundreds of millions more have been plunged deeper into poverty and hunger. Like many workers across India, the MSRTC workers have gone months at a time without being paid during the pandemic. Unable to bear not being able to feed their families or provide them with proper health care during the pandemic, at least 40 MSRTC workers have committed suicide.

If they are to prevail, the workers must expand their struggle, by making it the spearhead of a working-class industrial and political counter-offensive against the class war agenda being pursued by Indian big business and its political representatives.

Were the MSRTC strikers to appeal for a common struggle against privatization and the ever expanding use of precarious contract labour in both public sector enterprises and globally connected industrial firms, they would win mass support.

Over the past year millions of workers have joined

strikes and protests against the drive by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government to privatize most remaining public sector enterprises, place huge swaths of public sector infrastructure under the management of big business under its “National Monetization Pipeline” initiative and further promote contract labour under its labour law “reform.”

Yesterday, 900,000 bank workers, including 60,000 in Maharashtra, began a two-day strike against the BJP government’s plans to privatize two banks in the coming year. Last week, 68,000 coal miners, including 23,000 contract workers, staged a three-day strike in Telangana to oppose the state-owned Singareni Collieries Company’s selling off of four coal blocks at the behest of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government.

Meanwhile, in Punjab, where the Congress Party forms the state government, there has been a wave of strikes and protests by contract workers at Punjab state-owned companies, including Punjab Roadways, Punbus, and the PEPSU Road Transport Corporation. The contract workers are demanding wage hikes and the “regularization” of their employment, i.e., that they be made permanent workers.

The Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, and their affiliated union federations, respectively the Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU) and All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) are playing an especially foul role in the MSRTC strike. They have done nothing to publicize the strike, let alone sought to mobilize the working class to support the MSRTC workers’ struggle. *People’s Democracy*, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)’s English-language weekly, has yet to carry a single article about the strike, which has erupted against a Shiv Sena-led government that the Stalinists support as part of their efforts to bring to power an alternate right-wing government to India’s current far-right Bharatiya Janata Party regime.



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