Indian army deployed to break Jammu and Kashmir power workers' strike

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Workers across India and around the world must take serious warning from the Indian government's deployment of military and para-military forces to suppress the anti-privatization strike that 20,000 power workers in Jammu and Kashmir launched December 18.

The Narendra Modi-led government's quick action to break the power workers' strike arose from its fear that the strike could become a rallying point for broader sections of the working class. Recent months have seen numerous militant struggles against the sweeping attacks Indian big business and their political hirelings, beginning with Modi's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, are mounting on their social and democratic rights.

The military deployment to break the power workers' strike sets a dangerous precedent. It has already been followed by an order from the BJP government that rules Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state, banning all strikes by state government workers and employees of UP state-owned companies for the next six months. Under the draconian UP Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) police have the power to arrest striking workers at will, and strikers are subject to both fines and imprisonment.

None of the BJP's erstwhile opponents in the political establishment, including the Stalinist CPM and CPI, have condemned or even criticized the military intervention against the power workers' strike, thereby expressing their tacit support for it. The CPM-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) has likewise failed to even verbally protest the government's actions.

On December 18, some 20,000 employees of the Jammu and Kashmir Power Development Department (PDD), including everyone from linemen to senior engineers, launched an indefinite strike against the Modi government's plans to merge the PDD with the Power Grid Corporation of India (PGCI). Last year, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that all Union Territory power distribution companies would be privatized as part of the BJP government's "COVID relief package." The PDD workers, who are represented by the PDD Employee's Association (PDDEA), rightly fear that merger into the PGC is a key step toward accomplishing this. The striking workers also raised several other demands. These included "regularization" of all precariously employed daily-wage workers and power development department engineers, the delinking of their salaries from grant-in-aid and a regular budget for all PDD employees on deputation to different corporations.

The Jammu and Kashmir power workers' strike is part of a wave of struggles against privatization and contract-jobs. Defying state government threats, court orders and their "own" unions, 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers have been on strike since November 3, to press for the state-owned corporation's merger with the state government. Last week, nearly a million public sector bank workers across India walked off the job for two days to oppose the Modi government's plans to privatize most of the banking sector. Earlier this month, 68,000 coal miners in the southern state of Telangana waged a three-day strike against the Modi government's plans to sell off four coal blocks to private companies. In Punjab in northern India, tens of thousands of workers at Punjab state-owned enterprises have joined strikes and protests to demand the regularisation of contract workers and better wages and working conditions.

The Modi government has responded to the pandemic—which due to its ruinous profits-before-lives policy has led to millions of "excess deaths" and plunged hundreds of millions still deeper into poverty—by intensifying its attacks on the working class and rural toilers. A key element in this is its privatization program, under which all but a handful of "strategic companies"

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are to be sold off to Indian and global investors. Another is a labour law "reform" that will further facilitate big business' use of contract labour and illegalize most strikes.

Abandoned by the CITU, other unions and the "Left parties" and lacking any strategy to mobilize the working class against the Modi government and its class war agenda, the PDDEA quickly bowed to the government's military-enforced strikebreaking campaign. On Tuesday, three days after the military intervened, the PDDEA called off the strike. This followed talks Monday evening with Jammu Divisional Commissioner Ragav Langar and the Additional Director General of Police, Mukesh Singh. The union claimed to have obtained a "written assurance" that the government will put the proposed merger of the PDD with PGCI on hold pending further talks and pledges workers will henceforth be paid on time.

Such an "assurance" will in no way impede the Modi government's privatization drive.

The power workers' strike plunged large parts of Jammu and Kashmir into darkness Saturday evening, as Jammu was hit by sub-zero temperatures.

Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, who is the de facto ruler of the Union Territory since the Modi government suspended the elected government and legislature in June 2018, claimed the government's deployment of the army against the strike showed its "commitment" to the people of the disputed majority-Muslim region. He told the press: "I do not want to name them, but some people have criticized that the Army has been called to restore electricity. Personnel from REC (Rural Electrification Corporation), NHPC (National Hydroelectric Power Corporation) and NTPC (National Thermal Power Corporation) and officers from the army engineering corps have also come." "The army," added the former BJP government minister, "acted swiftly and deployed its troops at main critical electricity stations and water supply sources to restore supply."

The Modi government's prompt deployment of the army to break the Jammu and Kashmir power workers' strike demonstrates that its August 2019 constitutional coup—whereby Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, was stripped of its unique, semi-autonomous constitutional status, divided into two Union Territories, and effectively placed under permanent central government control—was directed not just against the Kashmiri people. It was directed against the Indian working class as a whole.

The Modi government has used its new powers of governance over Jammu and Kashmir to push through privatization of the power sector. No sooner had the bifurcation of the former state into two Union territories been completed in October 2019, than the administration of Jammu and Kashmir repealed the Jammu and Kashmir Electricity Act, 2010 and extended the Indian government's Electricity Act, 2003 to the former state. This laid the basis for the "unbundling" of power generation, transmission and distribution into three separate entities in order to prepare the way for their subsequent privatisation. In early December, the J&K administration declared merger of the territory's Power Transmission Corporation Limited (PTCL) and Power Distribution Corporation Limited (PTDL) with the PGCI.

Some two-and-a-half years after the events of August 2019, Jammu and Kashmir remains an armed camp with more than half-a-million Indian military and para-military troops deployed in a territory that is home to little more than 15 million people.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its immediate aftermath, "Modi's Kashmir coup is a provocative and reckless geostrategic power play. It is aimed at strengthening India's hand against Pakistan—its arch-rival since the two states were created through the 1947 communal partition of South Asia—and against China, with which the Indian elite is competing for markets, investment, resources, and global influence. …

"As critical and ominous as these developments are, the ramifications of Modi's Kashmir coup for the class struggle in India are no less significant.

"The BJP's Aug. 5 constitutional coup and state of siege … are aimed at strengthening the arbitrary power of the state, acclimatizing the population to the suspension of fundamental democratic rights, inciting the Hindu supremacist right and whipping up anti-Muslim communalism."

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