Hundreds of thousands of power-loom operators in south India launch indefinite strike

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An indefinite strike by 200,000 power-loom operators in the Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has paralysed the transformation of yarn into cloth in one of the country's principal textile and cloth manufacturing centres.

The action, which began Sunday, is being led by power-loom owner-operators. But it is being supported by hundreds of thousands of other power-loom workers, whose own wages are directly dependent on the terms of work agreed to between the owner-operators and so-called master weavers. The latter are middlemen used by the large domestic and global garment companies to manage a brutal "putting-out" production system akin to that of early 19th century Britain.

The strike has resulted in more than half a million owner-operators and workers directly or indirectly employed in the power-loom sector in the two districts halting work. Indian media claims the strike is causing a loss of 600 million rupees worth of production per day and will, if it continues, cripple the textile export industry.

Neither the power-loom owner-operators nor the hired hands who work alongside them have received a pay increase since 2014. The final straw triggering the strike was reportedly the big mills' refusal to sanction a minuscule increase in piecework rates agreed with the operators last November.

The owner-operators are paid a pittance by the large mills to weave the yarn into cloth, and employ up to five or six workers on piecework to perform the job. A 2014 report noted that the workers labour on average between 10 and 12 hours per day, but must complete double shifts of 16 hours or more when demand is high.

Under conditions of the surging COVID-19 pandemic, the development of the power-loom strike involving hundreds of thousands is significant and shows that workers will not passively accept the capitalist class' offensive against them.

Almost a million people depend directly and indirectly for their livelihood on the power-loom industry in these two Tamil Nadu districts. Work in neighbouring districts tied in one way or another to textile manufacturing in Coimbatore and Tiruppur has also come to a halt as a result of the strike.

Wage agreements in the local power-loom industry are supposed to be renewed every three years. But no agreement has been reached since 2014. Indeed, reports suggest the owner-operators have had to endure payment cuts even as their operating costs have risen substantially.

The large mills, which use the cloth produced by the power-loom workers, export at least part of their production of finished garments to giant western retailers such as GAP and IZOD. They outsource a major portion of the weaving to small and medium power-loom owner-operators, since it is more profitable for them to pay a piece rate. The power-loom industry is itself based upon shuttle looms, an obsolete technology.

The agreement reached last November, during tripartite talks held between master weavers, power-loom owner-operators and representatives of the labour department, provided for a 20 to 25 percent hike in piece-wage rates. It was to supposed to come into force in December. But the master weavers reneged on it.

M. Manoharan, a power-loom worker in Tiruppur told IANS: "We are treated badly. We weave the cotton yarn into beautiful material, or rather convert the cotton yarn to the beautiful cloth materials, but we are never given any recognition and we don't want that.

"We need a hike in our wages that have been stagnant since 2014. Even after the tripartite talks decided that wages would be hiked by 20 to 25 percent, nothing happened and we had to resort to this strike. Hope the authorities will open their eyes at least now."

During talks on January 8, the cloth manufacturers from Avinashi in Tiruppur District told the power-loom unit owners that the 20 percent pay hike previously announced for the Palladam variety of fabric would be provided in stages, with 10 percent paid immediately and a second 10

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percent hike introduced at a later date. This offer, however, was rejected by the power-loom unit owners' associations. Whilst the owner-operators have themselves been squeezed by rising prices, they also fear the reaction of the power-loom workers who work alongside them. The latter desperately need pay hikes amid the immense economic hardships caused by the Indian authorities' ruinous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Joint Commissioner of Labour, Coimbatore, attempted to prevent a strike, which would cripple the whole industry. He appealed to the power-loom unit owners' associations to await the decision of talks involving cloth manufacturers from Tiruppur and Palladam and members of job working power loom unit owners' associations on Tuesday, January 11, and not to engage in direct action.

In a statement issued to the press, the power-loom owner-operators of Tiruppur and Coimbatore district said: "Wage increases for power-loom workers have not been fully available for 7 years since 2014. Many people have abandoned the industry due to the high prices and are looking for other ways (to live).

"Under these conditions, the textile manufacturers are delaying the implementation of the 20 percent increase in Palladam variety and the 23 percent increase in Somanur variety (of cloth) announced by the State Ministers, District Collectors and Labour Welfare Officers in the talks held at the Coimbatore District Collectorate on 24.11.2021 after several rounds of negotiations for a new wage increase from 2020 onwards.

"Condemning this lethargic trend, we have decided to engage in an indefinite strike from 9.01.2022 (Sunday) as per the decision taken by the federation of (power-loom) weavers associations in two districts."

The power-loom workers are paid on average a pittance of 300 rupees (US$4) per day. As they do piece-rate work, a worker has to work long hours to earn this wage. The workers are not entitled to any social security benefits including provident fund or medical insurance. They labour under "a No work No pay" policy, meaning they are not paid for holidays. Some workers who are provided with accommodation are compelled to work even longer hours since they are paid less because they are provided with lodging.

Many of the working power-loom owners are indebted to the banks and many have had to shut down due to bankruptcy.

The power-loom workers associations leading the strike have not made any effort to mobilize the support of other sections of the working class around the current job action. Instead, their orientation is towards appealing to the big business DMK-led state government, which has a notorious anti-working class record. The DMK-led government, which came to power last May with the support of the two main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—continued the drive of its predecessor to "open" up the economy amid India's devastating second wave of the pandemic. Predictably, it has spurned the owner-operators' appeals that it intervene on their behalf.

The union federations affiliated to the Stalinist CPM and CPI—the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) respectively—do everything in their power to suppress and isolate workers' struggles. They are doing nothing to mobilise support for the power-loom workers' struggle or mobilise the hired hands as an independent force.

The power-loom workers' struggle is part of a growing wave of social struggles, involving ever broader sections of the working class and urban and rural toilers across India and internationally.

There is mass anger over the failure of employers, including government-owned hospitals, to provide workers with proper PPE and safe working conditions, or to pay their regular wages, amid the two-year-long pandemic.

The privatisation drive of India's far-right, Narendra Modi-led BJP central government is encountering increasing resistance, including from coal miners, and steel, power and bank workers. Tens of thousands of Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers have now been on strike for more than 70 days, paralysing inter-city bus transport in India's second largest state. The workers are pressing for the state-owned MRSTC to be merged into the state government so as to derail government's plans to break up and privatise the bus service.

Last Thursday, thousands of Delhi University teachers joined a one-day strike to protest the Delhi Union Territory government's funding cuts, which have resulted in their wages and benefits not being paid for months. And on Friday, thousands of ambulance workers in Uttar Pradesh struck or joined protests to demand the reinstatement of 10,000 workers who were sacked last year, and better compensation for the families of co-workers who died from COVID-19. The workers were sacked in the midst of India's Delta variant-driven second wave of the pandemic, when the BJP state government awarded the ambulance contract to another company.

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