

“We are striking for our very existence”—Maharashtra state transit worker tells WSWS in 12th week of militant job action

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26 January 2022

Seventy-seven thousand Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers, or about 80 percent of the state government-owned inter-city bus service’s workforce, are continuing their militant strike in defiance of a labour court ruling declaring their job action “illegal.”

The strikers are defying, in addition to the courts, government threats, savage management reprisals and the open opposition of their ostensible union representatives. Now off work for close to 90 days, the MSRTC workers are vowing to persevere with the strike until their demands are met.

Apart from timely payments of their wages, the workers’ principal demand is for MSRTC to be fully merged into the Maharashtra state government so that the workers are bona fide government employees, entitled to the same job security, pay grades and employee benefits as state government workers.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rajiv (a pseudonym), a young MSRTC bus mechanic in Pune, Maharashtra’s second largest city, insisted that the workers are determined to carry on their job action. “This strike is against the government,” said Rajiv. “It is for our own existence we have struck work.”

MSRTC management, working in close conjunction with Maharashtra’s fascistic Shiv Sena-led coalition government, has dismissed close to 3,000 strikers, suspended 11,000 and transferred many others to locations far away from their families. In addition, the Maharashtra Transport Minister has repeatedly threatened to invoke the Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA). This would legalize the strike and grant police unhindered powers to summarily arrest and detain

striking workers en masse.

Rajiv, who spoke to the WSWS in Hindi, was enthusiastic about the articles the WSWS has published on the MSRTC strike. He sent the WSWS several photographs of striking workers in Pune and also of his striking colleagues in Mumbai, Maharashtra’s metropolis and capital, who have established a camp in the famous *Azad Maidan* sports ground to promote their struggle.

The large trade union federations have completely isolated the MSRTC workers’ struggle. They have refused to mobilize their sizable memberships in Maharashtra, let alone India as a whole, in support of the strike and to make it a spearhead of the swelling working class opposition to the Indian ruling elite’s privatization drive and promotion of precarious contract-labour employment. This is especially true of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), respectively the union affiliates of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

“We are striking without any unions,” Rajiv explained. “Our unions are not with us, they have already betrayed the strike by reaching an agreement with the management.”

After several days of partial strike, the full MSTRC workforce walked off the job at midnight November 3, bringing the state-owned transport company’s entire fleet of over 18,000 buses grinding to a halt. This all-out strike was launched in direct opposition to some two dozen trade unions, who had refused to champion the workers’ demand for MSRTC’s merger into the state government in talks with government officials, and immediately

bowed to a labour court ruling in early November declaring the impending job action illegal.

“Despite provocations,” continued Rajiv, “this is a completely peaceful strike; we are not involved in any kind of violence.”

The strike erupted after more than a year and a half of pandemic, during which the workers were forced to work without proper protections from COVID-19 and frequently went weeks and even months without pay. As of last August, COVID-19 had killed more than 300 MSRTC workers, but the state refused to declare the MSRTC staff “frontline workers” and prioritize their vaccination.

Many of the strikers are their family’s principal or even sole source of income. The stress of not being able to properly provide for their families is causing great emotional stress. According to Rajiv, 40 to 45 workers have died from heart attack over the past three months and several others have been driven to suicide.

Rajiv who is the sole breadwinner for his family, described the impoverished financial conditions his large household endures: “Our household comprises of my father, who is 75 years old, mother, who is 58, and wife and a young 3-year-old son. When I joined MSRTC in 2009, my initial pay was Rs. (Rupees) 3000 (\$63). In 2010, the MSRTC was compelled to increase our pay to comply with the minimum wage law the Maharashtra state passed. Our pay increased to Rs. 6,600 rupees (\$143).

“Now my gross pay per month is Rs. 29,000 (\$387) but after all the deductions, I receive only Rs. 7,500 (\$100) in hand every month. The deductions include Rs. 4,000 for housing in the MSRTC quarters and the rest of the deductions are for provident fund (retirement account) and loans I have had to take to live from the State Transport Cooperative Bank at 13 percent interest rate.”

When informed of the victimization of United Kingdom bus driver David O’Sullivan, who was fired from his job for defending workers’ safety and health during the pandemic, Rajiv said “Such gross injustice is indeed happening everywhere.”

On hearing for the first-time of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s call for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to wage class struggle in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions, this young worker said, “First and foremost, every worker must receive a minimum living wage all over the country and internationally linked to the cost of living. For example,

US workers have different cost of living and that should determine the minimum wage.”

The workers are well aware that if the Maharashtra state government is so determined to keep MSRTC as an autonomous corporate entity it is because it is actively working to privatize the bus service. Recently management revealed that it has hired the consultancy firm KMPG to consider various ways to do this, including through the contracting out or outright sale of bus routes and depots.

In pushing to privatize public services and infrastructure, the Congress Party-supported, Shiv Sena-led state government is completely aligned with India’s Narendra Modi-led far-right central government. The Modi government has made a massively expanded and accelerated privatization drive a centrepiece of its so-called pandemic economic recovery program. Currently in the works are the privatization of much of the coal industry, several banks, Air India, and—as part of a four-year, Rs. 6 trillion (\$80 billion) National Monetisation Pipeline scheme—the de facto privatization of much of public infrastructure, including ports, rail lines, highways, and power generating stations and transmission grids.

Like their union affiliates, the two major Stalinist parties, the CPM and CPI, are shunning the MSRTC workers, refusing to even publicize their valiant three-month struggle. The Stalinists fear their militant example, are determined to uphold the pro-capitalist union apparatuses, and want to politically protect the Maharashtra state government, which they tout—notwithstanding it being led by the fascist, Mahrattachauvinist Shiv Sena—as an ally in the fight against Modi and his BJP. A further factor is that the CPM-CPI-led Left Democratic Front government in Kerala is involved in its own battle with workers at the MSRTC’s sister corporation in Kerala, the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC). The KSRTC workers have grievances over poverty wages, poor working conditions and the need for job security guarantees similar to those of the MSRTC workers.



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