

Defying management reprisals and state repression, Maharashtra public transport workers' strike surpasses 100th day

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More than 75,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) bus drivers, ticket collectors, mechanics and other ancillary workers have now been on strike for more than one hundred days. The strikers are defying harsh management reprisals, draconian threats by the government of India's second most populous state, repeated court orders banning their strike, and the complete abandonment of their struggle by the trade unions.

The striking workers have raised several demands. These including that the state government-owned MSRTC abide by its contractual obligation to pay them on time, and that proper financial compensation be paid the families of as many as 700 workers who, having been forced to work during the pandemic, died of COVID-19. But the strikers' central demand is that the intercity bus service be fully merged into the state government, so they can benefit from the better pay, benefits and above all job security provided state government workers.

MSRTC, working in close concert with Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-led state government, has attempted to break the strike through mass terminations, suspensions and transfers to faraway MSRTC depots. The state labour court declared any job action by the MSRTC workers illegal on the eve of their launching an all-out strike starting Nov. 5.

More than two dozen unions claim to represent the MSRTC workers. But all but one bowed to the labour court, ordered workers not to walk out at midnight Nov. 4, and they have sabotaged and opposed the strike ever since.

A particular foul role is being played by the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and their respective labour affiliates, the

Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The Stalinists claim to oppose the privatization drive of India's Narendra Modi-led far-right central government and the Indian bourgeoisie as a whole. Yet they have systematically blacked out information about the MSRTC workers' struggle, let alone taken any action to rally workers in Maharashtra and across India in their defence.

The strikers' demand for MSRTC merger with the state government is based on their awareness that Maharashtra's government and MSRTC management are plotting to privatize the bus service, which provides an essential service for working people, especially in rural areas. For years, successive governments have starved the MSRTC of proper funding.

On January 17, a labour court in Bandra, a Mumbai suburb, reaffirmed the pre-Nov. 5 ruling that the strike is illegal. At MSRTC management's request, the unions were made a party to the case, although the lawyer acting on their behalf insisted that they have not and do not sanction the strike.

As would be expected, management and the Maharashtra government seized on the latest court ruling against the workers to intensify their efforts to break the strike.

An MSRTC official declared that the court's ruling the strike illegal constitutes ipso facto legal sanction for all the reprisals it has taken against the striking workers. "Due to this order," asserted the official, "the action taken by the corporation against workers like suspension and termination will be deemed legal and the corporation can even take the action of deducting salaries of the staffers on strike and penalise them."

In the days immediately following the court order, management officials visited workers at their homes in an

attempt to intimidate them and browbeat them back to work. These efforts were largely unsuccessful. Despite the reprisals and threats and the absence of any union financial support, some 75,000 of the 98,000 workers who walked off the job last November remain on strike.

To date, MSRTC management has terminated at least 8,067 workers and suspended 11,000 others. Hinting that even more savage reprisals are being prepared, a senior MSRTC official said, "The strike cannot go on like this. Despite offering all solutions, employees are not yielding."

The state government has repeatedly threatened to invoke the draconian Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act, which would empower police to arrest striking workers en masse. If it has not done so to date, it is because it fears such action would impel other sections of the working class to come to their defence.

What the government and ruling class are counting is that the unions and Stalinist parties will continue to systematically isolate the MSRTC workers' struggle, thus enabling them to ultimately starve the strikers into submission.

Arrogantly rejecting the workers' demands, Sharad Pawar, president of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), recently told the Maharashtra state legislature, "No matter who is in power, this (merger) demand is not acceptable." The NCP and the Congress Party, until recently the Indian ruling class' preferred party of national government, are the junior partners of the fascistic Shiv Sena in a coalition government.

In an attempt to intimidate the MSRTC strikers, Pawar went on threaten them with a fate akin to that of the Mumbai textile workers. Their 18-month long 1982-83 strike was smashed as a result of a joint conspiracy between the then-Congress-led national and state governments and the textile bosses, resulting in the loss of 150,000 millworker jobs. "The MSRTC employees," declared Pawar, "shouldn't take any extreme step like the mill workers strike which destroyed textile mills in Mumbai."

For his part, Pawar's nephew, Ajit Pawar, Maharashtra's deputy chief minister and finance minister, let slip the ruling elite's real concern in relation to the merger issue. "If one corporation is merged today, such a demand will come from many corporations tomorrow," he said. In other words, the government and big business fear that any accommodation to the MSRTC workers' merger demand will encourage workers at other arms-length state-owned corporations to raise the same

demand, as a means of opposing privatization.

The MSRTC workers have shown great courage and determination in sustaining their strike for more than 100 days in the face of management reprisals, state attacks and the treachery and sabotage of the pro-capitalist unions. However, insofar as the strike remains isolated and is not animated by a socialist political strategy, the MSRTC workers' struggle is in great danger.

The MSRTC workers must make their strike the spearhead of a counter-offensive of workers in Maharashtra and throughout India against privatization, precarious contract-labour employment, and the capitalist ruling elite's criminal prioritizing of investor profit over safeguarding lives throughout the pandemic.

There is no question that an appeal from the MSRTC strikers for a joint struggle against privatization and in defence of public services would win massive support from coal miners, bank, port and electricity workers and millions of other workers targeted by the privatization agenda of the Modi government and the state governments, including those like Maharashtra, led by the opposition parties.

The MSRTC workers have spurned the demands of the management and the government that they allow the corrupt, discredited unions to negotiate on their behalf. This correct decision poses point-blank the need for workers to create genuine organizations of working class struggle. That is, a network of rank-and-file committees tasked with formulating and leading the fight for their just demands, above all by seeking to mobilize support from, and developing a united struggle with, workers across India and internationally.

MSRTC strikers seeking to build rank-and-file committees can depend on the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to provide them with tactical advice, political guidance and our whole-hearted support.



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