

India: Striking Maharashtra transport workers defy state government's latest back-to-work ultimatum

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More than 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers have again defied a government back-to-work order and are now in their 20th week of strike action.

At the very outset of the strike, the workers, who include drivers, conductors, technicians, and workshop engineers, were abandoned by the more than two dozen unions that purport to represent them. Nevertheless, the workers have persisted in the face of savage management reprisals, court orders declaring the strike illegal, and mounting threats from the government of Maharashtra, India's second most populous state.

The latest back-to-work ultimatum from the government, a coalition of the fascistic Shiv Sena, the Congress Party and Nationalist Congress Party, included a threat of mass firings. State Transport Minister Anil Parab said that in the event a worker "doesn't resume work by March 10, then we will assume that he/she is not in need of a job and then strict action will be taken against them." Justifying the ultimatum he added, "The transport body is facing huge financial losses due to the strike." On March 8 he told the state legislature that the strike has cost MSRTC 1.74 billion rupees (US \$22.9 million).

Reflecting the workers' determination to fight, Shashikant Jadhav, a strike leader from the Pune region, told the *Hindustan Times*: "They are free to take any strict action on us, but we will not stop until (our) merger demand is fulfilled." This was a reference to the workers' demand the MSRTC, a government-owned agency run as a capitalist for-profit corporation, be merged into the state government. "We are," continued Jadhav, "also suffering a lot from the last four months. Many workers have committed suicide

and there is no food to eat in most homes. But still, we are continuing the strike for our future."

During the more than two-year COVID-19 pandemic, the MSRTC workers have received their meagre salaries only irregularly, while being forced to work in unsafe conditions. Although hundreds had died from COVID by last summer, the government refused to prioritize them for vaccination.

The workers insist they deserve the same job security and benefits as other state government employees. They also believe that merging the MSRTC with the state government will make it more difficult for the government and management to implement their plans to privatize the inter-city bus agency, which is a vital service for millions throughout the state, especially the rural poor.

In negotiations with management and the government prior to the strike, the unions refused to raise the workers' merger demand. Then on the eve of the workers launching a company-wide unlimited strike, the unions bowed to a court order declaring the impending job action illegal and withdrew their support.

To the government's and unions' dismay, the strikers have repeatedly defied government back-to-work ultimatums and management reprisals. Transport Minister Parab reported to the state legislature last week that MSRTC has fired 2,216 strikers and suspended a further 12,207.

The government threats, management reprisals, and financial distress have resulted in some 20,000 of the 92,000 workers who walked off the job on November 3 returning to work. But that leaves more than 70,000 workers on strike and MSRTC's operations crippled.

The government has cavalierly rejected the workers' demand the MSRTC be merged into the state government, terming it "unaffordable." In a ploy to get the workers to end their militant strike, a court last November combined a call for an immediate return-to-work with an order for the state government to appoint a committee to study the merger issue.

Predictably, that committee has rejected the merger demand, although the court has not yet been formally apprised of this. Citing this fact, the Bombay High Court on March 8 instructed the government not to take further punitive measures against the strikers at this time.

The workers' determination and militancy has surprised and confounded the political and corporate establishment, and their union lackeys. The government has repeatedly threatened to invoke the draconian Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (MESMA), which would allow it to arrest "illegally" striking workers en masse. If it has not yet done so, it is because it fears that this could lead to a major clash that could draw in other workers, and under conditions where the unions are discredited among the MSRTC strikers and broad sections of other workers. Across India, as around the world, there is a groundswell of strikes and protests against the capitalist elite's criminal "profits before lives" pandemic policy, harsh austerity measures, and attacks on workers' social and democratic rights.

Nevertheless, the MSRTC strike is in grave danger, because it has been systematically isolated by the trade unions and ostensible left parties.

In the absence of a clear strategy to broaden the struggle based on the recognition that the problems the MSRTC workers confront are those facing the working class as a whole, MSRTC management and the government can continue to press forward with their plans to starve the strikers into submission.

And despairing of an alternative, the MSRTC workers can be induced into placing hopes the courts or a section of the right-wing political establishment will come to their aid. In fact, the capitalist elite, its state institutions and parties are all bitterly hostile to the strike, which constitutes a challenge to the privatization and austerity agendas being pursued by the entire ruling class.

Tragically, on March 12, one day after the Bombay

High Court was supposed to give a ruling based on the as of yet unsubmitted "experts report" on the merger demand, a 41-year-old bus driver named Muzzafar Khan committed suicide. Khan was reportedly depressed by the repeated delays in the court rendering a decision.

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 MSRTC workers are in fact fighting for the entire working class. To mobilize support for their struggle and make it the spearhead of a working class counter-offensive against privatization, precarious contract-labour jobs, austerity and the absence of COVID protections, the MSRTC workers need to form a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of all the treacherous pro-capitalist trade unions and political parties. MSRTC strikers can be assured the World Socialist Web Site and International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will provide them every assistance in taking this vital step.



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