

Millions of Indian workers to join two-day general strike against Modi's ruinous pro-investor policies

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Millions of workers across India are mounting a two-day general strike this Monday and Tuesday to oppose the ever-escalating assault of the Narendra Modi-led, far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government on their social and democratic rights.

The strike will be joined by government workers, coal and copper miners, steel, oil, telecom, postal and rural health (ASHA) workers. Particularly strong participation is anticipated from workers at public sector enterprises targeted for privatization like Coal India, the Life Insurance Corporation of India and the state-owned banks.

The strike will cut across the caste and communal divisions that are systematically promoted by India's ruling elite and its political representatives, providing a powerful demonstration of the objective unity of the working class.

Across India there is immense social anger over mass joblessness, sharply rising food and fuel prices, endemic poverty, and the lack of basic public services, including health care and education. All of these social ills have been enormously exacerbated by the ruinous response of the ruling class, led by Modi and implemented by all the opposition-led state governments, to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past year, workers have sought to assert their class interests through a mounting wave of strikes and protests. Last May, autoworkers forced the temporary closure of Ford, Hyundai and Renault-Nissan plants on the outskirts of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, over the lack of COVID-19 protections. Particularly important is the strike that 75,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation workers (MSRTC) have been waging since last November to thwart plans to privatize the intercity bus service and secure regular payment of their wages. The workers have persisted in the face of savage management reprisals and government threats, and the sabotage of the more than two dozen unions that claim to represent them. Even before the strike began, the latter ordered the MSRTC workers to obey a court injunction declaring it illegal.

Conditions are more than ripe for unifying the disparate struggles of workers against precarious contract-labour jobs, privatization and poverty wages and for social and health protections against the pandemic and joblessness into a working class counteroffensive, and for rallying the rural toilers and urban poor behind such an offensive.

However, for the 10 trade union federations that have called the two-day all-India strike, it is not a stepping stone toward the mass industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the Modi government and Indian capitalism. Rather they have called the strike, as they have similar protest strikes more or less every year for the past decade, with the aim of suppressing, not developing, the class

struggle. They seek to channel workers into futile attempts to pressure the Modi government to adopt "pro-people" policies and behind their own efforts to bring to power an alternate right-wing capitalist government at the next general election in 2024.

This is true of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the trade union arm of the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, and the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), which is aligned with the right-wing, regional-chauvinist DMK, the governing party in Tamil Nadu. It is especially true of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) the trade union affiliates of the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, respectively, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Profits before lives

Like the imperialist rulers of North America and Europe, India's governments have at every point during the pandemic prioritized protecting big business profits and investor fortunes over saving human lives. A brief, ill-prepared national lockdown in the spring of 2020—during which the mass of the population, stripped of all income overnight, were effectively left to fend for themselves—has been followed by a homicidal drive to keep the "economy open" at all costs. Last spring, as India was being ravaged by its catastrophic Delta-driven second wave of mass infections and death, Modi publicly avowed that he would "save" India from lockdown, not the deadly virus.

Officially, India has reported 521,000 COVID-19 deaths. But everyone apart from the Modi government and their shells in the corporate media acknowledge this to be a gross undercount. Numerous studies of excess mortality have placed the true number of India's COVID deaths at four million or more.

The pandemic has been accompanied by a pandemic of joblessness and hunger.

Many of the tens of millions of jobs that were eliminated in the worst phases of the pandemic have not been restored. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, 8 percent of Indian households have no member that is "economically active" (whether as a worker, farmer, hawker or business person) and 68 percent just one

person. This in a country where most people live in extended, multigenerational households and there is no state aid for the jobless.

During the first year of the pandemic, 230 million more Indians had to live on 375 rupees (US\$5) or less per day, found an Azim Premji University study. Those hardest hit have been the poorest sections of the working class. A People's Research on Indian's Economy survey found that between 2015–16 and 2020–21, the poorest 20 percent of Indian households suffered a more than 50 percent decline in their income, on average.

The wealth of India's rich and super-rich on the other hand has swelled, and never more so than during the pandemic. In 2021, the number of Indian billionaires increased from 102 to 142 (Forbes) or by 51 to more than 250 (Harun Global Rich List). The 98 richest of these billionaires, observed the recent Oxfam report "Inequality Kills," have wealth equivalent to that of the poorest 40 percent of all Indians, 555 million people.

The Modi government's ruinous "profits before lives" pandemic policy has been the cutting edge of an intensified class war assault on the working class. In the name of promoting India's post-pandemic economic recovery, it has implemented a raft of "big bang" economic "reforms" aimed at dramatically increasing investor returns and worker exploitation. These include: further tax cuts and subsidies for big business; a labour law "reform" that promotes contract labour and "hire-and-fire" employment and makes most worker job action illegal; and a massive fire sale of government assets, which will see all but a handful of firms in a few "strategic sectors" privatized.

To implement these socially incendiary measures, Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP foment communalism to split the working class, and increasingly resort to authoritarian measures. This was exemplified in their August 2019 constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir. It stripped India's lone Muslim-majority state of its special constitutional status, and reduced Jammu and Kashmir to a Union Territory, thereby placing it under permanent central government rule. Last August, the Modi government rammed the Essential Defence Service Act through parliament without debate, so as to illegalize all strikes in the defence production sector.

The union federations that have called the March 28–29 general strike are raising various demands that speak to workers' grievances such as repeal of the new labour laws, the regularization of all contract workers, the provision of proper protective gear and health and life insurance to all frontline pandemic workers, and universal social security for the 90 percent of workers employed as day-labourers or by small businesses in the so-called informal sector.

But the unions and the Stalinist "left" parties raise these demands as part of their efforts to keep the working class trapped within the confines of protests to the establishment and parliamentary politics. The Stalinists, in particular, rail against the BJP, labeling it "Hindu fascist." But they do so not to summon the working class to struggle, but rather with the aim of tying it to the state and the corrupt and thoroughly right-wing "secular" big business parties, beginning with the dynastic Nehru-Gandhi family-led Congress.

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India and the US-NATO war on Russia

Tellingly, the unions, including the Stalinist aligned CITU and AITUC, are entirely silent on the war that the NATO powers, led by US imperialism, goaded Russia into launching in the Ukraine, and which they are now recklessly escalating with the aim of subjugating Russia and intensifying military-strategic pressure on China.

The NATO proxy war against Russia is a double threat to the Indian working class, and the people of South Asia and the world.

First, the all-out economic war that the imperialist powers are waging against Russia is having a devastating impact on the world economy, fueling sharp spikes in the price of energy, fertilizer and basic foodstuffs.

Second, the war, long planned by the US and its NATO allies, is being pursued by them as a global strategic conflict aimed at initiating a repartition of the world. US President Joe Biden openly admitted this last week when he compared the current crisis to the two world wars of the last century, adding, "There's going to be a new world order out there, and we've got to lead it."

Unless prevented through the revolutionary intervention of the world working class, the imperialist war drive will end in a catastrophic conflagration among the great powers, in which South Asia and the Indian Ocean will be key battlefields.

The Indian bourgeoisie has encouraged and emboldened American imperialism in its pursuit of global hegemony. Continuing on the path blazed by the Congress Party government that preceded it, the Modi government has transformed India into a US frontline state against China, forming an ever-expanding web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security ties with Washington and its chief Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Modi has thus far resisted pressure from the US and the other imperialist powers that New Delhi label Russia the "aggressor" and downgrade its longstanding military-security ties with Moscow. This is based, however, only on crude calculations as to how the Indian bourgeoisie can best pursue its own predatory interests. Moreover, Modi, with the support of the Indian bourgeoisie, is trying to offset the pressure from the US, Japan and the EU powers over Russia by proving even more supportive of Washington's belligerence against China.

The privileging of profits over saving lives during the pandemic—leading to successive waves of mass death and the ever-present threat the virus will take more virulent forms, like the rapidly spreading BA.2 Omicron sub-variant—and now the eruption of war in Europe demonstrate that capitalist rule is in incontrovertible conflict with the most basic needs of working people in India as around the world.

The growing struggles of the Indian working class must be infused with an international socialist program to oppose war, social inequality and communalist reaction, fight for a Zero-COVID elimination policy, and unite its struggle with workers around the world in a political offensive against the capitalist profit system.



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