

Tens of millions of Indian workers join general strike against Modi's class-war assault

Our reporters
29 March 2022

Tens of millions of workers across India participated in a two-day general strike Monday and Tuesday against the class-war, “pro-investor” policies of the far-right, Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Many workers did so in the face of government and management threats of disciplinary action, even firing.

The strike impacted all parts of India, from Assam in the northeast and Punjab in the northwest, to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in the south, as millions of workers in road transport, steel, oil, coal, power generation, postal and telecom services and public health walked off the job.

In all or parts of several opposition-led states and territories, including Kerala and Pondicherry, the strike resulted in a bandh, a general shutdown of all stores, business and schools. In West Bengal and Tamil Nadu general strike supporters blocked rail lines, disrupting passenger service.

The strike was called by ten central trade union bodies, including the Stalinist-led CITU and AITUC and the Congress Party-affiliated INTUC. The unions are calling on the Modi government to abandon its “anti-people, anti-worker and anti-national” policies and implement their 12-point charter of demands. These include: repeal of the government’s anti-worker labour law “reform” and a law banning strikes in defence industries; a halt to all privatizations; the scrapping of the National Monetisation Pipeline (a BJP-government scheme to turn over management of much of the country’s rail and highway network and other infrastructure to big business); regularisation of contract workers; and higher wages for the tens of millions of unemployed given menial work under the government’s “rural employment guarantee” (MNREGA).

Support for the strike was especially strong among workers at the many government-owned corporations now targeted for privatization. A key plank of the BJP government’s COVID-19 pandemic “economic recovery program” is a fire sale of public assets to domestic and international capital. Under the government’s new privatization policy all but a handful of public sector enterprises in “strategic sectors” are to be sold off.

The strike crippled the operations of state-owned Coal India. According to union officials, miners and ancillary workers joined the strike en masse across the coal belt that traverses Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

Workers in the petroleum refining and power sectors and at numerous ports also walked off the job. The port in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, for example, was paralyzed for the two days, as all 500

permanent and 750 contract workers directly employed by the port and 1,000 workers at various private shipping companies walked out.

Some 15,000 Steel Authority of India (SAIL) workers struck mills in Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal. At another government-owned steel mill in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, that has been the site of a longstanding anti-privatization agitation, 8,000 of the 11,000-strong workforce downed tools for both days.

Service at state-owned banks across the country was badly disrupted on both Monday and Tuesday. Many workers employed by state-owned insurance companies also walked off the job. The BJP government is planning to privatize two banks this year and is hoping to raise 800 crore rupees (US \$8 billion)—in the country’s biggest ever privatization to date—through the partial sell-off of the Life Insurance Corp. of India.

Millions of ASHA (rural community health service), Anganwadi (rural child care) and mid-day school meal workers joined the strike. These mainly women workers are not even paid the minimum wage, although many have been in the frontlines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Private sector workers also joined the strike. In Tamil Nadu, workers at Ashok Leyland, Hinduja Foundries, Madras Rubber Factory Tyres, Balmer Lawrie and Tablets India Ltd went on total strike. In Assam and West Bengal, production at tea plantations was crippled.

However, in many major industrial belts, like the vast agglomeration of factories in Gurgaon-Manesar on the outskirts of Delhi, the unions bowed to employer threats and in the name of “industrial peace” instructed workers to report to work both Monday and Tuesday.

At many plants in the Oragadam-Sriperumbudur industrial belt near Chennai, many workers employed at auto plants, including Hyundai, K Tyres, Apollo Tyres, Yamaha and Cosmos, nonetheless took leave and participated in demonstrations and road blockades. There was also reportedly large participation by workers employed at auto and other globally-connected industrial firms in the lunch-time and after-work protests that the unions did sanction.

A Hyundai worker who took part in a protest rally in Sriperumbudur told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Nowadays the corporations are becoming more and more hardened against the workers. We have to fight,” he continued, “for every right. The situation faced by workers is extremely appalling, especially in the informal sector” (i.e., for day labourers and other “casually-employed” workers).

Farmer organizations joined worker protest demonstrations in many parts of the country. After a massive year-long farmer’s agitation,

which saw tens and at times hundreds of thousands of farmers encamped on the outskirts of India's national capital, the Modi government beat a tactical retreat last December and repealed three pro-agribusiness laws.

The labour "reform" laws it rushed through parliament in the same session in September 2020 remain, however. They give employers still greater leeway to use contract workers and to terminate them at will, eliminate constraints on large companies quickly implementing mass layoffs and shutting down plants, and legalize most worker job action.

West Bengal's TMC, Tamil Nadu's DMK, and Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-Congress-Nationalist Congress Party coalition were among the opposition-led state governments that threatened state employees who participated in the job action with the loss of pay and other reprisals.

In the south Indian state of Kerala, where both the state government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the official opposition Congress Party backed the protest strike, the High Court ordered the state government to forbid state employees from joining the strike and discipline those who did. The court seized on a "public interest litigation" petition filed by a right-wing activist as the pretext for its attack on the strike.

The Stalinist CPM and its Left Democratic Front government quickly complied with the court, ordering state employees to report to work Tuesday, and vowing to impose sanctions on those who didn't. Newly hired "provisional employees" who stayed away from work would be dismissed, announced the government chief secretary.

However, most workers defied both the government and the court. Of the 4,824 employees at the state Secretariat just 176 reported for work Tuesday. Other government departments reported similar attendance figures.

In many parts of India, state bus transport workers were a key strike battalion. With the active encouragement of the BJP national government, state governments, including those led by opposition parties, are moving to privatize inter-city bus service, which is an essential means of transport, especially for the rural poor.

Officials with the Tamil Nadu State Road Transport Corporation (TNSRTC) said that only a third of the more than 15,000 buses it and its municipal subsidiaries deploy daily were on the road Monday. In Chennai, India's fourth largest metropolis, the figure was just 10 percent.

S. Vasan, a TNSRTC conductor, told the WWS that he was angered that the CITU called off the strike after one day. He explained workers had walked out in "great numbers" Monday because they recognize the state government is using financial losses caused by the pandemic and its refusal to invest in the service to prepare sweeping job cuts and privatization.

In Haryana, bus service was crippled across the state, as some 15,000 transit workers walked out. The BJP-led state government is reportedly planning to hand over 50 percent of inter-district bus routes and 20 percent of inter-state bus routes to private companies.

The unions that called this week's general strike claim to oppose the ruling class' privatization program, no matter that they are aligned with parties like the Congress, the DMK, and the CPM and Communist Party of India (CPI) that have supported a succession of Union and state governments that have implemented pro-investor policies, including privatization.

The unions' attitude toward a genuine struggle against privatization is exemplified by their isolation and abandonment of 75,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers

who for the past five months have been on strike against the plans of management and the state government to privatize bus lines and depots. The MSRTC workers have courageously defied savage management reprisals and government threats to have them arrested. They have also had to confront the direct sabotage of the more than two dozen unions that purport to represent them. From the strike's very beginning, the unions opposed it, ordering workers to obey a court order that declared the strike illegal.

In their appeals for the general strike and at the rallies held in its support on Monday and Tuesday, the leaders of the central unions and Stalinist parties made no mention of the MSRTC workers, let alone called on the working class to come to their defence.

All across India there is mass anger over the never-ending assault on workers' social and democratic rights and the ruling elite's ruinous "profits before lives" pandemic policy, which has led to mass death and a parallel pandemic of joblessness, hunger and deprivation. Moreover, this social crisis is now being exacerbated by the proxy war the imperialist powers, led by the US, are waging on Russia, having goaded it into launching a reactionary military assault on Ukraine.

However, this social anger and the accompanying surge in worker militancy has yet to find positive political expression in the development of a working class industrial and political counter-offensive.

The principal obstacles to this urgently needed development are the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Stalinist parties, which for decades have systematically suppressed the class struggle. For them, this week's protest strike, like those they have called virtually every year for the past decade, was a maneuver aimed at maintaining the working class under their political control so as to channel it into futile protests to the Indian establishment and parliamentary politics. Their stated aim is to bring to power an alternate right-wing capitalist government at the next national election in 2024, whether led by the Congress party, till recently the Indian ruling class' preferred party of national government, or a collection of regional-chauvinist and caste-ist pro-big business parties.

The Stalinists rail against the BJP as "Hindu fascist." But they do so not to summon the working class to struggle, but as part of their efforts to tie it to the Indian state and the right-wing "secular" big business parties. Indeed, the deeper the capitalist crisis becomes, the more the Stalinists turn to the right. Kerala's CPM-led state government has just unveiled a "New Kerala" development plan that calls for wooing foreign investment and opening up the health and university education sectors to private capital.

Conditions—as the powerful response to this week's national protest strike indicate—are ripe for unifying the myriad struggles of the working class and rallying the rural and urban poor behind it in the fight against the Modi government and Indian capitalism. This requires the building of new organizations of struggle through an organizational and political break with the corporatist trade unions and the Stalinist parties—workplace rank-and-file committees, and above all a mass revolutionary party based on the program of international socialism.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact