

Five-month Maharashtra bus workers' strike in grave danger after Bombay High Court issues menacing ruling

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8 April 2022

The militant strike that more than 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers have waged for the past five months is in grave danger of being broken without the workers realizing their core demands.

On Thursday, April 7, the Bombay High Court ordered the striking MSRTC bus drivers, ticket collectors, mechanics and other support staff to return to work by no later than Friday, April 22.

The court ruling effectively gives the Maharashtra state government-owned MSRTC legal sanction to dismiss any and all workers who continue the strike beyond April 21.

Responding to the High Court's latest anti-strike ruling, Maharashtra state Transport Minister Anil Parab minced no words. "It will be assumed," he arrogantly declared, that those "employees who still do not resume work" by April 22 "do not require the job."

In their oral observations, the High Court judges hectoring the workers. "Resume your duty," they demanded. "Don't lose your livelihood in this way."

Continuing in this vein, the judges ordered the workers to use "other remedies open" to them to counter the state government's rejection of their key demand that the MSRTC be fused with the state government. Presumably the judges meant that workers should expend their energies on futile efforts at lobbying the parties of the capitalist establishment—all of whom have demonstrated time and again their hostility to the MSRTC workers' struggle.

The workers want MSRTC, currently a state-owned enterprise run as a profit-making enterprise, merged into the state government, so that they can avail themselves of the same pay, benefits and job security protections accorded other government workers. They have taken up the merger demand as a means of resisting the plans of MSRTC management and the state government to privatize the inter-city bus service, which is an essential means of transport for tens of millions of working people, especially in rural areas.

The court set its April 22 deadline for the strike's end at

the conclusion of three days of hearings into the strike, which workers have mounted in defiance of savage management reprisals, government threats, and repeated rulings by the courts that the strike is illegal.

The hearing began with the court taking official cognizance of the government's rejection of the merger demand. In fact, this has never been in question. Throughout the conflict, the state government—a coalition led by fascistic Shiv Sena and including the Congress Party and Maharashtra-based National Congress Party—has been adamant that merger is non-negotiable and "unaffordable." But as part of its attempts to suppress the strike, the High Court set up a phony process to "study" the merger demand, when it first declared the strike illegal last November.

This week's High Court hearing was also meant to address an MSRTC-filed contempt of court motion against the workers for having commenced and continued the strike in defiance of various court rulings declaring it illegal.

The MSRTC workers have shown tremendous militancy and determination. Despite receiving no strike pay, the firing of over 2,200 workers, the suspensions of over 11,000 more, government threats of mass arrests, and the courts' anti-strike orders, the vast majority of the more than 90,000 workers who walked out last November 4 remain off the job.

If the strike is now in grave danger, it is above all due to the sabotage of the trade unions and Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI). From the outset, the more than two dozen unions that claim to represent the MSRTC workers have opposed the strike. The central trade union federations, including the CPM-affiliated CITU and CPI sponsored AITUC, have systematically isolated the MSRTC workers' militant struggle—abandoning them in the face of state repression and facilitating the company-government campaign to starve the strikers into submission.

During last week's two-day national general strike against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unrelenting drive to

privatize a massive number of public sector industries, no mention was made of the Maharashtra bus transport workers' courageous struggle against the threat of privatization, let alone anything done to mobilize the working class across India in their support.

Due to the treachery of the union and Stalinist parties, sections of MSRTC workers, seeing no way forward, misguidedly put stock in the High Court's phony professions of sympathy for the workers at various hearings held over the last five months. The court's order threatening them with dismissal if they do not return to work by April 22, together with its demand that they give up their struggle for the MSRTC's merger with the state government, has thus come as a bitter blow.

Throughout the dispute, the court has been acutely conscious of the danger the MSRTC workers' struggle could become the catalyst of a broader movement of the working class, under conditions where there is mass anger over the ruling class' ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying pandemic of mass joblessness and hunger.

Thus, even as they dramatically ratcheted up the pressure on the workers, threatening them with dismissal en masse, the High Court judges feigned concern with the workers' fate and made a show of extracting phoney promises from MSRTC management and the government.

On Wednesday, the court set Friday, April 15 as the return-to-work deadline. But at the hearing's conclusion, it extended this by a week.

Declaring that "when there is a fight between a lion and a lamb, the lamb has to be protected," the court directed MSRTC management to pledge that the fired and suspended workers will be allowed to return to work. The state government, meanwhile, has pledged that for the next four years it will provide state funding to MSRTC and ensure workers' wages are paid on time. Due to the pandemic and years of government neglect, MSRTC's finances are currently in a shambles.

None of the pledges and avowals from MSRTC management, the government or for that matter the High Court should be given any credence. The company has said it will drop disciplinary measures against the strikers. But it is also insisting that the many criminal court cases it has instigated against the most militant workers proceed, thereby providing itself with a mechanism to victimize and ultimately fire them.

Even less credible are the promises of government funding for the MSRTC. No figures have been provided as to the extent of this four-year support. Moreover, it in no way entails any commitment from either MSRTC management or the government to abandon their plans to privatize bus routes

and terminuses. Indeed, in the midst of the strike, MSRTC has been working with the giant transnational consulting firm KPMG on plans to contract out bus lines and otherwise monetize its assets.

Workers across India and internationally must come to the defence of the MSRTC workers. Toward this end, the WSWs is circulating the video statement of support issued by victimized UK bus workers David O'Sullivan on behalf of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

For their part, the MSRTC workers must draw the necessary conclusions from their clash with the pro-corporate union apparatuses. To coordinate and lead their fight, they need to build new organizations of struggle, entirely independent of and opposed to the unions and capitalist politicians, at every garage and terminus—an MSRTC workers rank-and-file committee. The first task of such a committee would be to break the union-imposed isolation of the strike, by issuing an urgent appeal to workers across India for a joint struggle against privatization and in defence of public services. There is no question such an appeal would win massive support from miners, bank, port and electricity workers and the millions of other workers targeted by the privatization agenda of the Modi government and the state governments, including those like Maharashtra's, led by the opposition parties.

MSRTC strikers seeking to build such 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 our wholehearted support and every assistance.



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