

Striking Maharashtra bus workers and their lawyer charged with “rioting” and “conspiracy”

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One-hundred-and-eighteen striking Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) bus workers and their lawyer, Gunratan Sadavarte, were granted bail yesterday. But they still must face charges of “rioting” and “conspiracy” for mounting a protest at the Mumbai residence of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Sharad Pawar on April 8.

The authorities, who have denounced the April 8 protest in the strongest terms, claim that the workers threw slippers and rocks at police guarding Pawar’s home and tried to enter it.

The workers and their lawyer have spent the past two weeks in jail, with their previous attempts to secure bail either denied or postponed.

Yesterday, a Sessions Court said the workers could be released on bail on payment of a surety of 10,000 rupees (US \$130). For many of the workers and their families this will prove a great hardship. 10,000 rupees exceeds the monthly salary of many MSRTC workers. Moreover, they have received no income or strike benefits during the almost six-month-long strike against the government-owned inter-city bus service.

The court set bail for Sadavarte at 50,000 rupees.

Pawar’s official residence, Silver Oak, was the scene of an angry protest just one day after the Bombay High Court ruled the more than 70,000 MSRTC workers must end their strike and return to work by April 22, or their employment will be terminated.

The central demand of the striking workers—that the independently-operated MSRTC be merged with the state government to protect their wages, terms and conditions against looming privatisation—was rejected by the court.

The arrest and jailing of the strikers who protested at

Pawar’s residence and of Sadavarte, who faces manufactured “conspiracy” charges, is part of a campaign of state repression aimed at intimidating the MSRTC workers and breaking their strike.

The spontaneous protest outside Pawar’s residence in south Mumbai speaks to the depth of anger among India’s working class and urban and rural toilers, amid a pandemic that has claimed millions of lives and surging inflation that is placing huge burdens on working people.

MSRTC workers are fighting the same agenda of privatisation and austerity that is being enforced against the multi-million Indian working class by India’s far-right Narendra Modi-led government and all the state governments, including those like Maharashtra’s, which are led by opposition parties.

However, the trade unions and the “left” parties—above all the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their respective trade union federations, the CITU and AITUC—have done nothing to mobilize support for the MSRTC workers’ anti-privatisation struggle. Rather, they have done everything they can to isolate and sabotage it.

Protesting strikers angrily denounced the NCP leader for refusing to support their demands, flinging shoes and slippers in disgust. Pawar has been a fixture of the political establishment in Maharashtra for decades. He was targeted after feigning sympathy for the bus workers’ struggle, while colluding with the unions and courts to force a return to work.

The NCP rules Maharashtra as part of a coalition government that is led by the fascistic Shiv Sena and also includes the Congress Party, from which the NCP

split more than two decades ago.

India's ruling class was rattled by the April 8 protest. Sarad Pawar's nephew, Ajit Pawar, also a senior NCP politician and Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister, demanded to know why police had failed to provide advance warning. Home Minister and NCP politician Dilip Walse-Patil announced an investigation into "intelligence failures" and a hunt for "instigators." A local police chief was sacked amid bitter recriminations.

No small factor in the panicked response to the Silver Oak protest was events across the Palk Strait in Sri Lanka. Just one week earlier, a protest outside the home of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse helped spark the largest mass demonstrations on the island in nearly 70 years against an economic crisis that has ravaged millions.

State forces in Maharashtra moved quickly to suppress the April 8 protest and exact revenge. Police immediately arrested 104 strikers, including 29 women, on charges of rioting. Six more strikers were arrested later that night. They were placed in judicial custody and until yesterday denied bail.

Sadavarte, the lawyer who represented the striking workers before the Bombay High Court, was detained for questioning on April 8, although he was not even present at the protest outside Pawar's residence. He was sent to jail later that day. He now faces charges of rioting and conspiracy.

The trumped-up charges were quickly used to launch a wider crackdown on the strike. On April 9, police "evacuated" strikers from Mumbai's Azad Maidan sports ground where they had been encamped since last November. Cyber police are being used "to scrutinise call data records and social media chats of protesters to find out whether they were instigated by any political party or an organisation," reported India's *Free Press Journal* on April 11.

Sadavarte's arrest was discussed at the highest levels of the state. Minister of Transport Anil Parab, the Shiv Sena leader who has repeatedly threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) and have the strikers arrested en masse, denounced the lawyer as the protest's "mastermind."

State authorities opposed bail for Sadavarte, whose house was raided by police two days after the protest. Public Prosecutor Pradeep Ghara claimed the lawyer

must be detained to help authorities unearth a "larger conspiracy" allegedly targeting the homes of three more state government ministers.

Press reports indicate the jailed strikers were subjected to repeated police interrogations to extract false "confessions."

The repression meted out to the courageous Maharashtra strikers exposes the real purpose of the Bombay High Court ruling on April 7. Its much-lauded claims that no worker would be victimised for their participation in the strike, if they returned to work by April 22, lie in tatters.

"We will be taking strict action against the staffers who were part of the mob involved in the attack and have been arrested," declared MSRTC Managing Director Shekhar Channe on April 12. He continued, "Most of the striking MSRTC staffers who were arrested in the attack have already been suspended or termination notices served to them as a part of disciplinary action against participating in (the) strike."

Workers across India and internationally must demand the dropping of all charges against the Maharashtra strikers and their lawyer, and that they and the thousands of other MSRTC workers victimized during the strike be unconditionally reinstated to their jobs. The Indian state has a long record of violent reprisals against strike leaders. In 2017, India's courts vindictively sentenced 13 workers who had led militant struggles at Maruti-Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana, car assembly plant to life imprisonment on frame-up charges.



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