

India: Chennai sanitation workers forced to end strike for job permanency

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About 1,800 sanitation workers attached to the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB), a public service and state government agency, were forced to abruptly end their strike on May 25 due to bullying tactics employed by senior CMWSSB officials and a large contingent of police officers. The workers began an indefinite strike May 15 to demand permanent employment.

During a sit-in strike at the Metro water depot in MRC Nagar on May 25, top Board officials barged in and threatened the contract workers with termination if they did not immediately return to their posts. Threats of force from the accompanying police officers were also made. Sensing rising anger among the workers, the senior Board officials told them that they would raise their demand for permanent jobs with the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, of which Chennai is the state capital, and that a favourable solution would be found for them within three months. These promises were nothing but a fraud meant to supplement their efforts to force the strikers back on the job with bullying and intimidation.

Workers say that the Board decided to end the direct employment of 1,800 temporary workers February 21, reducing them to the status of contract workers. However, management kept quiet about this change. The workers only came to know about it when their salary for April was not paid on time.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-linked Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is active in the CMWSSB and some of whose members were threatened with termination and arrest by the police, played the principal role in bringing the sanitation workers' militant strike to an end. Rather than responding to the CMWSSB managers' threats and the police intimidation tactics by broadening the strike and rallying support from other sections of the working class, the CITU isolated and abandoned the sanitation workers.

According to media reports, workers "alleged that officials forcefully retrieved the keys of jet rodding vehicles and desilting vehicles from the protesting drivers saying that they have been terminated from service."

A worker at the May 25 sit-in described to the media the background of the workers' decision to end the strike: "The CMWSSB management has been continuously threatening the protest workers to call off their strike. Now, they are calling up

individual workers asking them to return to work immediately and get the wages for the protesting period or they will appoint a new person in his place. Police also threatened to arrest the workers citing the Prime Minister's visit to the city."

The sanitation workers' strike against the contract labour system erupted spontaneously without any trade union assistance.

The CMWSSB sanitation workers are not alone in fighting for permanent jobs and against cheap-labour and precarious-contract jobs. The vast majority of the sanitation workers across India are contract workers. Government authorities are keeping these highly oppressed workers employed on a contractual basis for indefinite periods in order to impose poverty wages and deny them even the most minimal rights and benefits. Contract workers suffer unrestrained exploitation because violations of worker rights by contract agents are hardly ever monitored and restrained.

Contract labour is prevalent in both the private and public sectors across India, and its spread has been a key mechanism by which the ruling-class has intensified worker-exploitation, while dividing workers.

The unions, including the CITU, declaim against contract labour, but have mounted no serious struggle against it. They have confined worker opposition to isolated and sporadic struggles and have accepted the splitting of the workforce at numerous companies into two or more tiers, often consisting of permanent, contract, trainees and temporary workers.

The unions have isolated the contract workers' struggles from the broader upsurge of working-class strikes and protests directed against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's austerity measures and pro-investor "reforms." Major strikes by autoworkers, one- and two-day general strikes involving tens of millions of workers across the country, and the year-long agitation by farmers against the government's pro-agribusiness farm laws demonstrate that the potential exists for a unified struggle by working people for improved conditions and workplace benefits.

More than 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) workers struck for five months, from early November though the end of April, to secure the status of state government employees so as to block the corporation and

state government's plans to privatise bus routes and depots. Despite the determination and militancy of the strikers, their strike was isolated and betrayed by the trade unions, above all the Stalinist CITU. The courts stepped in to illegalise the strike, and workers were ultimately forced to return to work as the financial strain of the struggle became too much to bear.

The striking sanitation workers in a May 16 open letter to the residents of Chennai, asking for support for their strike, declared: "We have been working for about 20–30 years as Field Workers, Silt Vehicle Drivers, Jet Rodding and Super-Sucker Vehicle Drivers and Operators. Before the law prohibiting manual scavenging was enacted, we were regularly risking our lives inside septic tanks and in underground sewer wells. ... There is not a day that goes by without us facing accidents or humiliations. ... The toxic gasses and fecal contaminants have been occupationally affecting our bodies in many worksites. ..."

WSWS reporters visited striking Chennai sanitation workers while the strike was going on and discussed with them the need to build an action committee that is independent of and in opposition to the treacherous pro-capitalist trade unions, like the Stalinist CITU. They explained that workers can no longer rely on the trade unions and the political parties tied to them to defend their class interests. The contract labour system is a state-supported policy to increase worker exploitation and the profits of big companies and investors. They must therefore wage a struggle against the capitalist state and national governments and fight for socialist policies.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) forms alliances with big business parties including the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which currently forms Tamil Nadu's government, promoting them as a "secular and democratic" alternative to the communal and authoritarian BJP. In this way the Stalinist parties tie the working class to the capitalist parties and state.

Striking sanitation workers spoke out against the appalling conditions they must endure.

Kamalakannan, 40, told the WSWS: "Previously we were direct employees of the Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board. Now we came under different contract agents who supply contract workers to the board." He complained that sanitation workers were not provided with safety kits like gloves, helmets, shoes, and uniforms by the authorities.

"Deprived of safety kits, a 42-year-old worker, Janakiraman, was seriously injured when the jet rodding system busted and extremely high-speed water splashed out and his head was severely damaged. The administration took him to a public hospital. After treatment, he is now staying in his home. The board has not provided him any compensation. He is paid only a nominal wage monthly," the worker explained.

Chandrasekar, 32, a sewerage cleaning worker, said: "We are not paid for Sunday, as they follow a no-work no-pay policy. I

have been working for 11 years. My monthly salary is 15,000 rupees [US\$193]. They deduct 850 rupees from my monthly salary for PF [Provident Fund] and ESI [Employees' State Insurance Scheme, a social security scheme for workers]."

On using modern equipment at work, he said: "Though new modern types of equipment are available now for cleaning sewers, in some places working men have to go down sewerage wells to remove any blockage. This type of work causes various health problems for workers. We do this cleaning job virtually in all the government sector premises as well as in housing boards schemes.

"Though they use jet rodding and sewage suction trucks in some places at work, the state government uses men in most of the places. We work on High Court and General Hospital [GH] premises as well as in the houses of state ministers."

Sridar, 45, said: "I used to get a monthly salary of 25,000 rupees when I was working for the board. But after they made me a contract worker, my salary is reduced to 20,000 rupees. We demand permanent jobs so our jobs will be secured permanently and we will become entitled to the other benefits enjoyed by permanent workers."

Speaking on the treacherous role played by the CITU, he said: "Five years ago, we joined the CITU, on their promise that they would make all of us permanent within three months. But to our disappointment, they didn't make us permanent even after five years. The CITU didn't even come to our protection whenever we were harassed by higher officials. Therefore we left the CITU union. We lost confidence in the union. We don't need a union. We are now in a direct struggle against the state government."

Nirmal, 38, said: "I have been working for eight years. My monthly salary is 12,000 rupees. However, out of this, I have to spend 5,000 on my house rent. Most of the contract workers are living in rented houses."

According to Gopal, who joined the board in 1992, three workers have died due to COVID-19 in the last two years.

He said the union had filed a case in the courts in 2019 under pressure from contract workers. "But we have not been informed with any updates regarding the case. When asked, the union officials would say not to ask that question because they themselves didn't know anything about it."



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