

1.7 million Maharashtra state government employees on indefinite strike in defence of pension rights

Arun Kumar
16 March 2023

Nearly 1.8 million state government employees in the western Indian state of Maharashtra began an indefinite strike from March 14 to protest an attack on their pension rights. The strikers' main demand is the restoration of the government-funded Old Pension Scheme (OPS). They are opposing the contribution-based New Pension Scheme (NPS), which imposes on workers themselves the financial burden of maintaining their pensions.

Striking workers have also raised several other demands, including the regularisation of contract employees, the filling of vacant posts and an extension of the benefits of the in-service advancement scheme to teaching and non-teaching staff. The authorities in India's second-most populous state have responded aggressively to the strike, including by employing contract workers as strikebreakers and making threats to criminalize the job action by reactivating essential services legislation.

Striking workers joined protests in districts throughout the state, including about 68,000 in Pune, 80,000 in Kolhapur and 17,000 in Chhatrapati Sambhaji. Their main slogan was, "Only one mission, restore old pension." The strike has affected several state government services, including in state-run hospitals, offices and schools.

According to Vishwas Katkar, the convenor of a committee of nearly 35 unions functioning among state government employees, semi-government staffers and teachers, their members in all 36 districts of Maharashtra are participating in the strike. He said: "Services in hospitals, educational institutes, government establishments, tax offices and even the district collector offices were completely shut."

The indefinite strike against the NPS is a powerful indication of the readiness of Indian workers to fight governments' pro-investor economic reforms, including harsh austerity measures. At the centre, the Modi government is spending huge amounts to modernise India's military so it can act as a junior partner of US imperialism in

its reckless preparations for war with China. The provision of billions for new weaponry and incentives for foreign investors necessitates a massive onslaught on public services and workers' rights by all levels of government.

The trade unions were reluctantly forced to call the strike due to the growth of opposition among the workers. They continued discussions with the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-Shiv Sena state government in a desperate attempt to achieve a face-saving "solution" to avert a strike, but failed.

The NPS was first introduced in 2003 for central government employees by the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as part of its pro-investor economic reforms. Under the new system, all central government employees who joined the service on or after January 1, 2004, lost benefits under the OPS and had to join the NPS. Ten percent of their salary was deducted for the pension fund, while the government contributed 14 percent. The pension fund is governed by a central government body called the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA). Each employee can choose how their share is invested by the PFRDA. Retirement benefits depend on returns from the investment, rather than being guaranteed by the government as under the old scheme.

The demand for restoration of non-contributory OPS has gained momentum as worker opposition mounts to the current BJP-led central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and state governments, which are intensifying their offensive against the working class in favour of big business.

While the NPS was first introduced by the BJP, it has been supported by all parties of the political establishment. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government continued with the NPS for central government employees. At the state level, it was introduced by various state governments throughout India, whether they were led by the BJP, Congress or regional bourgeois parties. As for

the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, it has failed to consistently oppose the NPS. When the CPM-led Left Democratic Front was returned to power in Kerala, it refused to revoke the previous government's decision to introduce the NPS. Only under enormous opposition from the workers did five state governments—Punjab, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh—feel compelled to restore OPS recently.

To gain popular support ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections early next year, the opposition Congress party and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have claimed that they support the restoration of OPS. However, this is nothing but fraudulent posturing, as can be seen by the records of central and state governments led by or including these parties in implementing the NPS.

Expressing the opposition of big business to any reversal of the NPS amid growing worker opposition, former Reserve Bank of India Governor D Subbarao told the media: “That [restoration of OPS] will be a decidedly regressive move both for our commitment to fiscal responsibility and more broadly for the credibility of our reforms.”

The BJP-Shiv Sena government is counting on the ability of the trade unions to betray the movement. But it is also holding repressive state powers in reserve to ruthlessly suppress the strike in order to send a message to the entire working class. Last Tuesday, the Maharashtra state legislative Assembly passed the draconian Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act, 2023 (MESMA). The act revived essential services legislation that was previously allowed to lapse. Should the government decide to do so, it is now in a position to invoke the new law to ban the strike.

The strike by well over a million Indian government workers is part of a growing wave of class struggles in India and around the world. These struggles are developing internationally against the intensified assault by governments and bosses on workers' basic social and democratic rights. The ruling elites in every country aim to unload the full burden of the economic crisis, which has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of the US-NATO war against Russia, onto the working class.

Hundreds of thousands of public and private sector workers across Sri Lanka defied government essential service orders and walked out in a one-day strike on March 15 against the Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

A huge militant strike movement is developing across Europe. In the UK, 400,000 workers took strike action this week. In France, millions of workers have protested President Macron's draconian gutting of the pension system to pay for French military rearmament and the further enrichment of the wealthy. In Germany, public sector

workers have waged a series of militant warning strikes in opposition to miserable working conditions and low wages.

Like their class brothers and sisters throughout the world, the main obstacle facing striking Maharashtra workers is the treachery of the trade unions. Having only called the strike under immense pressure from the workers, the unions are keen to send them back to work at the first opportunity. On the evening of March 14, two unions representing primary teachers and health workers decided to withdraw from the job action as of Wednesday. Sambhaji Thorat, president of Prathamik Shikshak Sangh which has 350,000 members, said the central union of the state employees that called the strike should abandon its adamant attitude, discuss the issue with the government and end its protest.

On this basis, Thorat and his union were “willing to give the government more time to find a solution...” Seeking to placate public anger, senior Minister Chandrakant Patil told the state assembly that his government had not rejected the unions' demand, but was seeking to form a committee of retired officers to find a suitable solution to the problem.

Striking workers should have no illusions in the ability of the unions to conduct a genuine struggle for their pension rights. As already indicated by the withdrawal of two unions, the Maharashtra workers' struggle is in immense danger if it remains under the control of the unions. The strikers face the same threat as the 70,000 Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation workers, whose courageous five-month strike in early 2022 was deliberately isolated by the unions and broken by a draconian Bombay High Court ruling ordering an end to the job action without any of the workers' demands being met.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees independent of the unions. Such committees will enable the strikers to unify their struggle with those of workers throughout India and internationally who are fighting similar attacks by governments and corporations alike. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) provides the organisational framework and political leadership to establish unity among workers internationally in opposition to capitalist austerity and imperialist war.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact