

Tamil Nadu state government rescinds its Factories Amendment Act—a political fraud

Arun Kumar
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On May 1, M.K. Stalin, the chief minister of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, announced the withdrawal of the Factories (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 2023—anti-worker legislation his own government had introduced and the state assembly passed just weeks earlier.

The Factories Amendment Act allowed, among other measures, an extension of daily work hours from eight to 12 and without overtime pay, a move that would throw the working class back a century. Given the pro-business, anti-working-class record of Tamil Nadu's DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) government, the withdrawal of the legislation is clearly a temporary manoeuvre and a fraud.

Announcing the legislation's withdrawal during his address to the party's May Day rally in Chennai, Chief Minister Stalin said: "I never ever consider accommodating interests of others as an insult." "If enacting legislation is a courageous move," he added, "withdrawing it immediately based on the views of others is also a courageous move..."

The DMK chief and state chief minister made no bones about his original "courageous" move to enact pro-investor legislation. Admitting that a longer workday would appeal to investors anxious to maximize their profits, Stalin said: "The bill was adopted with a view to attract huge investments to Tamil Nadu and create employment opportunities for thousands of youths."

The bill was introduced in the state legislature on April 12 and passed on April 21, just nine days later. Following enormous popular opposition, which forced some of the DMK's allies to make certain criticisms of the legislation, its implementation was put on hold on April 24.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—which has played a pivotal role in providing the right-wing, ethno-nationalist DMK with "left" political cover in recent elections—was compelled to attack the pro-business bill in an attempt to maintain its already eroded support within the working class. Stating that it "paves the way for treating workers like slaves," the CPM warned that if the new law were to come into effect, workers would be forced to work any number of hours without any limit, no overtime

pay, and no breaks. Whatever their criticisms, the Stalinists never threatened to leave the DMK-led electoral alliance over the anti-worker law.

Soon after the state legislature passed the bill, state Labour Minister Thangam Thennarasu claimed that more and more global investors are coming to invest in Tamil Nadu and they want "labour flexibility." By that he means unrestrained exploitation of the working class by global capital, including transnationals like Foxconn and Renault-Nissan. State Industry Minister Ganesan employed deceptive language to patronise the workers, saying the legislation would be implemented "only with (their) consent."

There were two main reasons why the DMK government ultimately decided to withdraw its Factories Amendment Act, 2023.

First, it encountered massive resistance among industrial workers employed in more than 40,000 factories across the state. Under this pressure, the unions affiliated to the Stalinist parties and other allies in the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) felt compelled to call state-wide protests and announce a state-wide general strike for May 12. Their aim in calling these protests was to contain the growing worker opposition—not mobilize workers to defeat the state government's anti-working class legislation and make the protests the launching pad of an all-India working class counter-offensive against the far-right, Narendra Modi-led central government and the ruling class' agenda of austerity, privatization and the casualization of work. Protest actions were called in a sporadic way on different days in different cities. As soon as the DMK said the legislation was to be withdrawn, the unions called off the protests and the proposed May 12 general strike.

The second reason the DMK reversed course was that it became apprehensive the popular opposition to the Factories Act would result in a serious electoral debacle for the DMK-led SPA in the national parliamentary elections to be held early next year, while causing undue friction with its allies.

The DMK-led SPA consists of the CPM; its smaller Stalinist ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI); the

Congress Party, till recently the Indian ruling class' preferred party of national government; the caste-ist VCK; the regional chauvinist MDMK and several other smaller "Dravidian" parties.

The DMK government's withdrawal of its Factory Act is a manoeuvre, meant to pull the wool over workers' eyes. It will revive it at the first available opportunity, most probably following next year's general election.

The DMK demonstratively "opposed" the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government's enacting of four new labour codes three years ago. These draconian laws allow state governments to extend daily work hours from eight to 12 in industrial sectors. Stalin and his DMK also denounced the BJP state governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat when they introduced bills lengthening the workday.

But once returned to power in Tamil Nadu, and following in the footsteps of the BJP government in neighbouring Karnataka, which passed legislation lengthening the workday earlier this year, the DMK decided to enact its Factories Amendment Act as part of a push to woo global investors.

Currently, Tamil Nadu, India's seventh most populous state, ranks fifth in attracting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), with Maharashtra first, followed by Gujarat, Karnataka and Delhi.

Seeking to bolster illusions in the DMK government and more generally the attempt to stitch together a right-wing alternative government-in-waiting to Modi and his BJP, the Stalinist CPM's Tamil Nadu state secretary, K. Bala Krishnan, expressed gratitude for the government's rescinding of the Factories Amendment Act and congratulated the DMK Chief Minister.

The Stalinists are working vigorously to develop their reactionary alliance with the Congress and various regional bourgeois parties like the DMK. They justify this policy with reference to next year's general elections, where they will campaign under the banner of "defeating" the Hindu supremacist BJP. On May 16, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury held talks with DMK chief Stalin in Chennai. Following the meeting, Yechury told the media, "Talks are going on between various parties who are willing to cooperate with each other to defeat the BJP and to create a better India. Communal fascist forces must be defeated."

While transforming India into a frontline state in the US imperialist war drive against China, the Modi government has launched a brutal onslaught on workers' rights at home. With its 2020 labour law "reform," it eliminated with one stroke 15 out of 44 national labour laws. The remaining 29 were fused into just four labour codes. These revised labour laws constitute an unprecedented attack on the working

class, opening the door for rapacious global and domestic investors to intensify worker exploitation. Besides allowing the workday to be permanently lengthened, and with no overtime pay, the BJP "reform" bans strike in most instances, eviscerates workers' right to form unions and empowers employers to compel female workers to do night work.

This draconian "labour reform" was enacted to attract global investors leaving China under enormous pressure from their home countries, primarily the US and Europe, as the imperialist powers prepare to wage a catastrophic war against China.

According to the *Hindustan Times*, the central government's labour "reform" "signalled the start of an experiment to remove rigidities in the country's labour markets and stringent rules for hiring and firing, as global companies start shifting their supply chains away from China and reduce their dependencies on factories there."

The Indian elite as a whole, including the Modi-led central government and all the state governments, regardless of party affiliation, are determined to turn Indian workers into a vast pool of cheap labour for global capital.

The defence of the past gains of the working class, including the eight-hour day and job protections, as well as democratic rights, can only be taken forward as an international struggle, mobilizing Indian workers in solidarity and joint action with their class brothers and sisters in Europe, North America and around the world against the common enemy, the profit-driven capitalist system. This fight must be linked to the fight against imperialist war and for world socialism.



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