

Capitulating to Modi's war-mongering, India's unions cancel May 20 general strike

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Capitulating to the anti-Pakistan war frenzy whipped up by the Hindu-supremacist BJP-led government and the entire Indian ruling class, the Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions and Independent Sectoral Federations/Associations (JPCTUF) has cancelled a one-day general strike planned for next Tuesday.

The May 20 nationwide strike would have brought tens of millions of workers across India onto the streets in opposition to the class war assault that the government of the would-be Hindu strongman Narendra Modi is mounting on behalf of the Indian bourgeoisie and foreign capital.

Although by no means the intention of the JPCTUF leadership—which is comprised of Stalinists, supporters of the big-business Congress Party, and other right-wing bureaucrats—the strike would have punctured the bellicose, communally-charged political atmosphere that the government, with the aid of the opposition parties and media, has whipped up.

This is precisely why the JPCTUF leaders called it off at a meeting Thursday.

The leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the Congress Party-affiliated Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC), and the other eight national labour bodies that comprise the JPCTUF are now saying that the one day walkout will be held on July 9, almost two months hence.

The JPCTUF has justified this decision with a frank declaration of its submission to and support for the Indian bourgeoisie in its reactionary strategic conflict with Pakistan, proclaiming itself to be “an integral part of the responsible patriotic citizenry of the country.”

The JPCTUF statement adds that Thursday's meeting gave “due consideration of the prevailing situation throughout the country,” and references the denunciation that the JPCTUF made at its meeting six days earlier, on May 8, of the “heinous terrorist attack in Pahalgam,” in Indian-held Kashmir.

Without providing a shred of evidence, the Modi government immediately blamed Pakistan for the April 22 Pahalgam attack.

By the time the JPCTUF leaders met on May 8, India had, in the name of avenging that attack, launched the largest military strike on Pakistan in decades, and the subcontinent's two

nuclear-armed states were rapidly cascading toward all-out war.

But neither in the statement issued from its May 8 or May 15 meeting did JPCTUF leaders make any word of criticism of India's reckless and patently illegal attack on Pakistan, let alone call on workers in India to join with their class brothers and sisters in Pakistan in opposing aggression, war, and the rival right-wing communalist governments and capitalist elites.

By scuttling the general strike and proclaiming itself “an integral part of the responsible patriotic citizenry”—that is the “left” flank of the BJP-led “national” crusade against “terrorism” and its supposed “masterminds” in Pakistan—the unions have materially strengthened the Modi government and Indian ruling class in the pursuit of both their predatory foreign policy interests and their war on the working class.

And this under conditions where Modi and the BJP government, to fervent applause from the corporate media, are imperiling the shaky ceasefire reached May 10, on the fourth day of major India-Pakistan clashes, with provocative avowals and actions. These include proclaiming that India's military assault on Pakistan, Operation Sindoor, is not over, only “paused”; declaring that any talks with Pakistan will be restricted to discussing New Delhi's demands relating to Islamabad's support for terrorism and the ceding of Pakistan-held Kashmir to India; and continuing India's refusal to abide by the Indus Waters Treaty.

The JPCTUF announced at a national convention held March 18 that it would call a general strike for May 20 to oppose the BJP government's moves to enforce new, anti-worker Labour Codes across the country, its privatization and austerity drive, and other pressing issues affecting workers and farmers. The convention specifically warned of an “alarming situation” confronting workers and the broader population due to the BJP government's “anti-worker, anti-people” policies.

In keeping with its promotion of “national unity,” the JPCTUF statement announcing the scuttling of the May 20 strike criticizes the government and employers for not working more closely with the union bureaucracy.

It expresses shock and indignation that at this “trying hour before the entire country,” the government and the employers are intensifying their attacks on working people. “Appallingly,” the Stalinist and other union bureaucrats declare, “even in the

midst of such a critical situation prevailing in the country owing to the terrorist massacre and consequent developments, the employers' class actively supported by the governments at the Centre and in many states is carrying on its onslaughts on the workers and employees across the establishments."

The statement continues: "Working hours are being unilaterally increased; statutory minimum wages and social security benefits are being flouted. Workers, particularly contract workers, are being retrenched with impunity. These are nothing but heinous attempts to implement notorious Labour Codes through the back door."

Similarly, in its May 8 statement, the JPCTUF criticized "communal outfits" who are inciting hatred against India's Muslim minority—a muted reference to the BJP, the RSS, and the network of Hindu supremacists organization they lead—from the standpoint that they are weakening the Indian "nation," not splitting the working class within India and across South Asia.

Having surrendered to the government and ruling class's reactionary "national unity" campaign and even as they are forced to admit they are waging class war, the JPCTUF leaders are pathetically urging that they "reciprocate the positive approach of the trade union movement and desist from any unilateral precipitative move in the matter of Labour Codes and other legitimate demands relating to working conditions and workers' rights."

This is coupled with an appeal for the government and employers to make more systematic use of their services in suppressing the class struggle, including by reviving the Indian Labour Conference, a corporatist body that the Modi government has refused to convene for many years. The statement declared, "[D]espite repeated persuasion by trade unions, the Government did not bother to meet and consult the Central Trade Unions or to hold (the) Indian Labour Conference, despite receiving notices for strike from all corners of the country across the sectors."

The union leaders are well aware that there is mass anger among workers and the rural poor over the BJP's pro-investor policies and the drive of Indian big business to increase worker exploitation. In recent years, numerous explosive strike struggles have erupted, especially in India's globally connected manufacturing industries, against poverty wages and the ever more prevalent use of precarious contract-labour employment. There is also mounting opposition to the government's plans to privatize all but a handful of companies in "strategic" economic sectors.

The BJP's labour law "reform" is a key element in the assault on the working class. It will permit contract labour in virtually all industries and erect huge new legal barriers to workers organising themselves into unions or waging strikes, effectively creating a legal regime where strikes are impossible. Workplace safety changes are limited, applying only to enterprises employing at least 250 workers, thus excluding 90 percent of India's workers. Companies employing fewer than

300 workers can now hire and fire workers at will or even shut down altogether, eliminating previous requirements for government permission for layoffs.

With the aim of containing mass worker opposition, the unions have periodically called one-day national protest strikes. They have done so while striving might and main to keep the working class politically tied to the Congress Party-led opposition, which seeks to replace Modi and his BJP with an alternative right-wing government, no less committed to pro-investor "reform" and the reactionary anti-China war alliance between New Delhi and Washington.

Pivotal in all this is the role of the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), and their respective trade union federations, the CITU and the All India Trades Union Congress or AITUC.

The CPM and CPI, like their union affiliates, have joined their allies in the Congress Party-led opposition bloc, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), in rallying behind the government in labelling Pakistan the "aggressor" and lauding the four-day military assault on Pakistan.

The JPCTUF's leaders' decision to scrap the May 20 strike underscores the role of the unions and the Stalinist parties as agents of big business and vital props of capitalist rule. They fear that under the current conditions even a limited one-day protest strike—by giving workers a means of voicing their demands and demonstrating the objective unity of workers across all the communal and caste lines promoted by the ruling class—could seriously undermine the ruling class's pretense of "national unity" against Pakistan.

Workers in India, as around the world, cannot assert their class interests in opposition to the capitalist ruling elite unless they oppose all its reactionary great-power interests and predatory actions on the world stage, and seek to unite their struggles with workers internationally.

Workers in India must fuse the struggle to secure their social and democratic rights with the fight against the ruling class's military actions, intrigues, communal incitement and war mongering. They must establish their class unity with the workers and toilers of Pakistan in the common fight against imperialism, the venal rule of the rival national bourgeoisies and their communal state-system and for the United Socialist States of South Asia.



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