

Tens of millions of Indian workers join 1-day general strike against Modi government's class war assault

Our reporters
9 July 2025

Tens of millions of workers across India joined a one-day general strike Wednesday, July 9, to protest the far-right Narendra Modi-led government's class war assault.

The strikers voiced their opposition to the lengthening of the work day, the spread of precarious contract-labour jobs, privatization, the evisceration of public services, and legislation that will illegalize most strikes and introduce new impediments to union organization.

The strike was called by the leaders of the Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions and Federations (JPCTUF) and supported by organizations representing farmers and agricultural workers.

The JPCTUF is comprised of 10 central labour bodies and several sectoral labour federations. Among the largest and most politically influential are the two major Stalinist-led labour federations—the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-aligned Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated with the Communist Party of India. The Congress Party's Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) is also a prominent member of the JPCTUF.

Wednesday's national protest strike had originally been planned for May 20. But the JPCTUF called it off in response to the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's provocative and illegal May 7 "Operation Sindoor" military strike on Pakistan, which brought South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states to the brink of all-out war. By capitulating to the anti-Pakistan nationalist-communist war fervor, the JPCTUF and its political allies strengthened the Modi government's grip and aided its agenda—both domestically against workers and abroad in pursuit of its predatory foreign policy objectives.

The strike involved large sections of the working class, cutting across the communal and caste divisions that are incessantly promoted by the ruling class and its political representatives. It involved government employees, workers from India's still extensive network of public sector enterprises, those employed in globally-integrated manufacturing industries like auto and to a lesser extent workers from the so-called informal sector.

Industries like coal mining, steel making, banking, postal services and public bus transport were severely disrupted. Some car plants, including an Ashok Leyland plant in Hosur, Tamil Nadu, had to partially shut down; while others, including those of Maruti Suzuki and Hyundai, claimed to have dealt with high levels of "absenteeism" by slowing line speeds and drafting managers.

Rail services were generally not impacted, except when—as in West Bengal, Odisha and Bihar—protesters occupied railway lines.

Support for the strike varied sharply by region.

In Kerala, where the state government is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, daily life was paralyzed, despite a vow from the

state Transport Minister that Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) buses would operate as usual.

In West Bengal, where the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) had vowed to break the strike, there were angry clashes in multiple districts between strike supporters and the police and TMC goons. According to news reports, more than a thousand strike supporters were arrested. A TMC spokesman defended the state repression, terming the strike "hooliganism disguised as protest."

* In Gurgaon, a manufacturing centre on the outskirts of Delhi, thousands of workers from the auto, construction, bank, health and child care sectors marched from Kamla Nehru Park to the post office and held a rally.

* In Assam, in India's northeast, tea garden workers staged demonstrations across the state.

* In Bengaluru, around 5,000 striking workers gathered at Freedom Park, raising slogans and holding placards. Elsewhere in Karnataka, thousands of striking workers held a protest march in Hubballi.

* In Tamil Nadu, bus and auto-rickshaw service was disrupted, especially in Chennai, the capital and largest city, and the manufacturing centres of Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli. Numerous bank and insurance branches were shut down, and auto production was disrupted.

* In Jharkhand the strike paralyzed all operations at the Central Coalfields Ltd. and Eastern Coalfields Ltd. It also shut down the head office and all 450 branches and regional offices of the Jharkhand State Gramin Bank, including those in neighbouring Bihar.

* In Maharashtra, India's second most populous state, auto, pharmaceutical and engineering firms reported reduced output due to worker absenteeism, disruptions to just-in-time production, and power cuts. In the western part of the state, the walkout of workers at the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company disrupted the power supply to industrial clusters.

* In Bihar, where state elections are to be held later this year, opposition parties staged protests in conjunction with the strike across the state.

* In Uttar Pradesh (UP), as across the country, workers faced with the threat of privatization gave strong support to the strike. Services were either halted or disrupted at banks and insurance offices across India's most populous state. Also, 270,000 electrical workers walked off the job to protest the impending privatization of two UP government-owned electrical distribution companies, PVVNL and DVVNL.

Chetan, a striking bank employee who works at Canara Bank in Karnataka, told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, "Public bank services are supposed to be run for service-minded work and not for profit, but the government runs it like a for-profit organization. Now, the Modi government wants to privatize these banks as fast as possible."

Commenting on the hardships workers face, he said, "The government

talks of inflation being managed and under control. One kg of potatoes is 40 rupees (\$US 0.46) here, and one apple is 45 rupees. How come they say it is under control? These are mere manipulations of the Central Pricing Index (CPI) by the government.”

A private sector worker with 25 years’ experience spoke out against the plans of the Congress Party-led Karnataka to join the BJP government in Gujarat in extending the workday to 12 hours. “Eight hours is for work, 8 hours is for sleep and 8 hours is for our personal well-being. When they demand we work more, how could we agree to it?”

A couple of information technology (IT) workers, who also asked to remain anonymous, continued the discussion. “The strike,” said one, “is quite needed. We are facing lots of issues, with the push to increase our work hours to 12, even 14 hours per day.” His workmate went on to note that the BJP-led Union government, as well as the state governments—whether led by the Hindu supremacist right or, as in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the opposition, is “diluting the labour codes” to increase worker exploitation.

A second Canara Bank employee voiced his concern about the low wages and brutal working conditions faced by Zomato and Swiggy food delivery workers and others in the “informal sector,” as well as the manner in which the banks, irrespective of whether they are private or still government-owned, intend to use artificial intelligence (AI) to slash jobs.

These conversations underscored that workers are prepared, indeed eager, to take action against the Modi government, which is ever more brazenly employing state repression and communalist incitement to suppress social opposition, stoke Hindu supremacist reaction and split the working class.

It is now pushing for all 36 states and Union Territories to implement its labour code “reform.” Not only do the BJP-drafted labour laws gut protections for workers in larger enterprises from layoffs and closures, promote precarious and lower paid contract-labour jobs, and eliminate the mandatory provision of such basic mandatory as toilets and drinking water. They would make most worker job actions illegal.

Underscoring the broad support within the ruling class for the assault on workers’ rights, a Tamil Nadu High Court judge railed last week against a threatened strike by Hyundai workers. “When the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister invite industries to come here to start businesses, if you keep staging protests, who will come to invest? How will the country progress?”

Workers seized on Wednesday’s one-day general strike as a means to assert their independent class interests against the Modi government and the Indian ruling as a whole. However, for the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Stalinist parties—the CPM and CPI, and their Maoist adjunct, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation—it was a sordid political maneuver, aimed at propping up their rapidly diminishing authority over the working class.

As the Stalinists themselves admit, Wednesday’s strike was the 23rd countrywide “general strike” the CITU and AITUC have led since the Indian bourgeoisie turned in 1991 to “neo-liberal policies. That is, since it put paid to its state-led capitalist development project and turned to full integration into the US-led world capitalist order.

These protests—20 of which were one-day strikes and three in 2013, 2019 and 2022 extended to two days—have never been directed at the development of an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural masses behind it against Indian capitalism, its “pro-investor” policies and “global strategic” partnership with US imperialism.

Rather, they have been aimed at keeping the opposition of the working class trapped within the framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics and trade union collective bargaining struggles. For years this was epitomized in the Stalinist calls for right-wing governments, whether led by the Congress Party or BJP, to adopt “pro-people” policies.

One of the major complaints of the CITU, AITUC and the JPCTUF is

that the Modi government has for years failed to convene the tripartite government, union, big business National Labour Conference to discuss the managing of “labour relations.”

The reality is the Stalinists have systematically suppressed the class struggle. While they declaim against neoliberal policies, they have propped up in parliament one Union government after another as it implemented them. Moreover, in those states where the CPM has held office, it has itself pursued what it terms “pro-investor” policies. In West Bengal, the CPM-led Left Front government privatized and shut down “sick enterprises,” outlawed strikes in the IT sector, and violently suppressed peasant protests against land expropriations for big business projects.

Anxious to promote its credentials with investors, the current CPM-led government in Kerala tried to disassociate itself from Wednesday’s strike, with the issuing of directives to government employees and KSRTC and Kerala State Electricity Board workers not to join the strike under the threat of reprisals.

The Stalinist parties and their affiliated unions point to the crimes of the Hindu supremacist Modi regime not to indict Indian capitalism and summon the working class to struggle but rather to chain it to the Congress Party-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, which aspires to replace the BJP with an alternate right-wing capitalist regime, no less committed to increased worker exploitation and the anti-China Indo-US strategic alliance.

Workers in India, as around the world, cannot assert their class interests unless they build new organizations of class struggle, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and in political opposition to the phony anti-worker establishment “Left” parties.

These include a network of workplace action committees that will unite all workers, contractual and permanent, across all sectors and communal and caste divisions, and strive to unite their struggles with workers internationally, while opposing the Indian bourgeoisie’s reactionary great-power interests and anti-working class actions.

Above all, the working class needs a mass revolutionary party founded on the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution to rally the rural toilers behind it in the fight to overthrow Indian capitalism and world imperialism, eradicate casteism and communalism and secure social equality through the establishment of the United Socialist States of South Asia.



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