

Tamil Nadu's DMK government uses police violence to suppress sanitation workers' anti-privatization protest

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The Tamil Nadu DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) state government, with which the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), is closely allied, has repeatedly unleashed violent police assaults against sanitation workers protesting the Greater Chennai Corporation's decision to privatize manual garbage collection and street sweeping services.

The workers started their protests soon after the Chennai municipal government, the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC), announced in July 2024 its decision to outsource sanitation services to private companies in two of the 15 municipal zones—Zone 5 (Royapuram) and Zone 6 (Thiru Vi Ka Nagar.) The GCC has already pushed through the privatization of sanitation services in much of Chennai.

The 2,000 sanitation workers—who are overwhelmingly women from the most impoverished “lowest caste,” Dalits (formerly “untouchables”)—are protesting because they are well aware that under a private contractor, their already miserable working conditions will vastly deteriorate. Despite repeated government attempts to suppress their struggle, the workers have tenaciously kept up their opposition to privatization for over a year. For two weeks last month, from August 1 to 13, they staged a militant strike.

The latest police attack occurred around noon on Thursday, September 4 at Chennai's “May Day Park,” a park so-named to purportedly honor the working class. Hundreds of workers had gathered at the park for a meeting called by the two unions leading the agitation, the Left Trade Union Centre (LTUC) and the Uzhaippor Urimai Iyakkam (Toilers' Rights Movement). They had gathered to discuss what further actions to take after the Madras High Court recently gave a ringing endorsement of the DMK government's privatization drive.

Claiming that the gathering was “unauthorized,” scores of police swooped in and closed the park's gates to prevent the entry of more workers. When the mostly female workers sat down in front of the gates in a sit-down protest, female police constables violently manhandled them and subsequently arrested at least 300. More than five police vehicles and a bus were used by the police to transport the workers to different locations. The detainees shouted slogans as they were sped away in police vehicles and buses. Several workers were injured, with at least one of them requiring hospital treatment.

However, the most egregious police attack occurred on August 13, after the Madras High Court, the state's highest judicial body, issued orders to the DMK government to remove the workers' protest encampment in front of the landmark Ripon Building, where the GCC is seated. This court order came in response to a so-called public

interest litigation petition, filed by one D. Thenmozhi, demanding the enforcement of police notices served on the protesting workers to vacate their protest encampment. It has been reported that far from being an ordinary citizen, Thenmozhi has close ties to the ruling DMK.

With this judicial backing, the DMK state and city governments, who are viscerally hostile to these workers, went about implementing the court order with gusto.

The 2,000 workers had been protesting peacefully in front of the Ripon Building since August 1. The government, not wanting to create a scene during the daytime, deliberately waited until midnight to unleash hundreds of police to violently clear the encampment. Most of the workers were resting or sleeping at the encampment when the police assault occurred.

The police brutally manhandled the protesters, beating many. Numerous workers were injured and hospitalized due to this wanton police assault. The police hauled away hundreds of striking workers in buses so as to further intimidate and harass them. After spending a harrowing night in detention, they were released the next day.

Advocate Nilavumozhi Senthamarai and law student Valarmathi, who have been supporting the sanitation workers, were also arrested. Nilavumozhi released a video where she said that the two were dragged to the Chintadripet all-women Police Station, where they were assaulted and their phones seized.

Altogether, four attorneys and two law students were arrested during the August 13-14 night assault.

The Madras High Court declared their arrest illegal on August 14 and ordered their release, but nonetheless imposed as a condition the flagrantly arbitrary and anti-democratic order that they “should not give interviews to the media.”

Hundreds of sanitation workers in Tamil Nadu's third-largest city, Madurai, have launched a similar anti-privatization agitation, striking for five days starting August 18.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), which has promoted the DMK as a progressive party standing for “social justice,” has issued a mealy-mouthed appeal to the fiercely pro-business DMK. In an editorial in their official Tamil organ, *Theekathir* (Spark of fire), Tamil Nadu CPM State Secretary P. Shanmugam gently reminded the DMK that the “concept of outsourcing went against social justice and urged the state government to abandon it.”

Although Shanmugam claimed to have met with the sanitation workers, the CPM has refused to mobilize the tens of thousands of industrial and other workers in the Greater Chennai area who are

members of the party's trade union unit, the CITU, or Center of Indian Trade Unions, in defence of the sanitation workers. The CITU has long been betraying strikes by workers they have organized in Tamil Nadu, such as at Samsung, BYD and Foxconn, and the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation.

Despite a Madras High Court order to pay the workers, Rs. 761 (less than \$9) per day, which translates to a poverty wage of Rs. 22,830 for 30 continuous days of work per month, the private contracting company has slashed their wages to a mere Rs. 565 (\$6.65) per day.

This massive wage reduction is a central concern. As workers stated to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), the proposed contract salaries are "meager" and "not compatible with the soaring prices of essential goods, making it difficult to feed our families."

The protesting workers were employed by the GCC not as permanent workers but as contract workers or as temporary workers under the National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM), the national BJP government's purported program to generate "economic activity" among the impoverished masses in urban areas. The sanitation workers have long been demanding permanent employment through the NULM system and for benefits such as paid holidays, safety equipment and sick leave.

The workers have expressed concern over the lack of any job security, including the fact that, as contract workers, they could be "fired at any time," and the absence of essential benefits such as paid leave, overtime pay or compensation for work-related injuries.

Many workers also recounted decades of service under conditions that were frequently hazardous. They described to the WSWS how they are forced to work without leave, even on official holidays. During "rains, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic," and without protective equipment, they have to "scoop up garbage, dead cats and dogs with their bare hands."

One worker, an employee of GCC for 15 years, noted to the media the direct link between attendance and pay: "If we show up, we get paid; if not, nothing."

The sanitation workers in Zones 5 and 6 are among the last in the GCC whose jobs have yet to be fully privatized, with garbage pickup and sweeping services having been previously outsourced to private contractors in 11 other zones.

The Madras High Court upheld the privatisation move on August 20, saying that it is the DMK government's policy decision. It only directed the civic body to ensure that "temporary workers receive wages at least equal to, if not higher than, their last drawn pay." The court pointedly did not address the workers' fundamental demand for permanent employment.

The DMK-led Tamil Nadu government's response to the protest, its privatization drive and its promotion of precarious contract employment, reveals its total commitment to the ruling class agenda of increased worker-exploitation, austerity and the massive diversion of public funds into swelling corporate profits and expanding India's military might.

During the last state election, DMK Chief Minister M.K. Stalin made a promise of "permanent jobs" for the state's sanitation workers. Predictably, this has proven to be a ruse, with his government relentlessly proceeding with outsourcing solid waste management.

In a cynical damage control move, on August 14, the day after the brutal attack on the striking Chennai workers, DMK Chief Minister Stalin made a post on X (formerly Twitter), asserting that his "Dravidian model government will never compromise their dignity

and constantly supports and protects the common people."

Concurrently, the Tamil Nadu Cabinet approved six welfare schemes, as crumbs, for sanitation workers, including free breakfast, medical treatment, housing, "entrepreneurship subsidies," and educational assistance for their children.

These feeble welfare measures are meant to make tolerable poverty wages, precarious employment, ferocious police assaults and the insults heaped upon the workers' human dignity.

The agitation led by the Left Trade Union Center (LTUC), a Maoist-controlled trade union, has confined and isolated the sanitation workers' struggle, with no attempts made to mobilize other sanitation and sewerage workers across Chennai, let alone the working class as a whole. The LTUC has instead confined itself to making futile appeals to the DMK government.

The events in Chennai reflect a broader trend of systematic privatization of public services and the contractualization of jobs across India. Sectors such as education, healthcare, coal mining, rail transport and India's globally connected auto industry face similar threats. While workers have time and again waged tenacious struggles to defend their jobs and secure better wages and working conditions, they have invariably come up against the sabotage of the existing trade unions, including the CPM-affiliated CITU and the Communist Party of India (CPI)-led All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) that systematically isolate their struggles, while tying them to various right-wing capitalist parties like the DMK and the Congress Party.

A worker named Megavathini articulated to the WSWS a developing class consciousness. He declared, "If contractors and capitalists are uniting and exploiting us, we workers must unite against them."

The experience of the sanitation workers and workers across India highlights the ongoing need for a unified and politically conscious working class movement against capitalism. A key element in the development of such a movement is the building of workers' action committees in every workplace, independent of all the capitalist parties and the trade union bureaucracy.



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