

Millions of Indian workers join one-day protest strike against Modi's class war assault

Our reporters
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Millions of workers—including bank employees, defence industry and other manufacturing workers, government employees and agricultural labourers—joined Thursday's all-India protest strike against the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's class-war assault. In some parts of India large numbers of small farmers also participated in protest rallies.

Thursday's action was a further indication of the mass social anger against Modi's far-right, Hindu supremacist government and the state of Indian society more generally.

In response to mounting great-power conflict and increasing global economic turbulence, including Trump's trade war, the Modi government has dramatically accelerated its drive to intensify worker-exploitation in recent weeks.

The government is pushing through a sweeping labour law "reform" that guts minimum wage, occupational health and safety and other workplace standards; promotes precarious contract employment; eviscerates protections against mass layoffs; and establishes a vast array of new restrictions aimed at robbing workers of the legal right to strike.

In December, the government announced the end of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee program (MGNREGA), abolishing the statutory right of one member of every rural family to 100 days of menial minimum-wage work per year. While chronically underfunded and oversubscribed, the MGNREGA has provided a critical lifeline for tens of millions of rural poor for the past two decades. The BJP rural relief program that will replace the MGNREGA has two main objectives: slashing government expenditure and depressing rural wages.

At the start of this month, the government presented the budget for the fiscal year beginning April 1. It continued a years-long social spending austerity drive, offered still more subsidies for business and boosted India's military spending a further 15 percent to US \$88 billion. Since 2000, India's annual defence budget has increased more than five-fold. Expanding India's military might has been a key objective of New Delhi, under BJP and Congress Party governments alike, and is a central element of its anti-China "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

Thursday's strike was called by ten central labour federations, including the Congress Party-aligned Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC). However, it was politically led by the labour federations affiliated with the two principal Stalinist parties—the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is aligned with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the Communist Party of India's All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC).

The Stalinists are boasting that 300 million people—or one in five

Indians—participated in the strike or protests related to it. This is, to say the least, a wild overestimation and one that should not be dismissed as mere over exuberance or theatrics.

It is a deliberate attempt to befuddle workers as to the one-day strike's significance and, even more importantly, the political perspective underlying it.

The Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions (JPTCU) has called half-a-dozen one-day "general strikes" against the Modi government over the past decade.

In so doing, their aim has not been to develop a mass industrial and political working class counter-offensive against the Modi government and the Indian ruling class as a whole. Rather, these actions have been a cynical maneuver on their part, directed at maintaining some degree of credibility as an "oppositional force" and control over an increasingly restless working class.

While they thunder against Modi, the unions have systematically isolated and suppressed one militant worker struggle after another. Led by the twin Stalinist parties and their CITU and AITUC, the unions have worked to channel the opposition to the BJP government and the would-be Hindu strongman Modi behind the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, and its right-wing ethno-nationalist and caste-ist allies. Their goal is to shackle the working class to the Congress-led INDIA electoral coalition and the prospect of bringing to power an alternate right-wing capitalist government—one no less committed to "pro-investor" reform and the Indo-US alliance than Modi's—at the next election not slated until 2029.

Millions of workers did join Thursday's strike, seeking a means to fight back.

But reports suggest—contrary to the Stalinist leaders' boasts—that the overall participation in Thursday's strike was less, possibly considerably less, than in other recent JPTCU-called national strikes.

For example, few if any workers joined the strike in two of the country's largest industrial and auto-manufacturing hubs, the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, which lies on the outskirts of Delhi, and the Sriperumbudur–Oragadam Industrial Corridor, near Chennai.

This is not because of any lessening of workers' opposition to the Modi government, but because of diminishing confidence in the pro-capitalist unions and fears of state-supported management reprisals.

The strike call was massively followed in the eastern state of Odisha and in the south Indian state of Kerala, the only one of India's 28 states where the Stalinists lead the state government. Elsewhere the extent of worker participation varied widely.

In Odisha, where the BJP only recently came to power at the state level, banking, public transport, schools, markets and government

offices were heavily disrupted. Roads and railways were blocked in cities such as Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and Rourkela by *rail rook* and *chakka jam* actions (blockades.)

Kerala witnessed a near-total shutdown as buses and shops stayed closed and auto-rickshaw unions joined. At the same time, the Stalinist-led Left Democratic Front government, which has been heavily promoting Kerala as a prime destination for global investment, issued a “*dies non*” order treating employees’ absence as a service break.

Assam, parts of Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Bihar, and Goa also saw considerable disruptions in banking, insurance and public sector operations.

By contrast, BJP-ruled and major industrial states such as Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal reported little effect. Public transport, schools, factories and offices operated normally, and many areas considered traditional “left” strongholds failed to mobilize. In much of northern India, the strike was limited to minor demonstrations and reduced attendance at government offices.

Where the strike did have a major impact, it was largely due to the participation of public sector workers—especially in banks, insurance, postal services, coal and other mines, gas pipelines and road transport.

Private-sector industrial and IT workers largely stayed on the job, deterred by state/management intimidation and union passivity.

Rural workers and farmers also participated. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha and All India Kisan Sabha called for a Bharat Bandh (all-India shutdown) against the India–US trade deal and the dismantling of rural welfare measures. Farmers warned that cheap US imports would erode minimum support prices and devastate smallholders.

Placards reading “Reject Labour Codes” and “Oppose anti-worker policies” were common at protests. Demonstrators also opposed the dismantling of the MGNREGA and demanded its full restoration. Large anti-government rallies were held in many cities, including Hyderabad, Patna, Ranchi, Raipur and Visakhapatnam. In Jharkhand and Nagpur, coal and transport workers staged sit-ins.

Supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in Bengaluru (Bangalore), Karnataka’s largest city. They distributed a Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) statement supporting the strike titled: “To defeat reaction and secure social equality, workers must forge their independent class power!” A subhead read: “Build rank-and-file committees! Rally the rural toilers in a mass counter-offensive against Indian capitalism and all its political representatives, from the BJP, Congress and the DMK to the Stalinist CPM!”

The Congress Party national leadership claimed to support Thursday’s strike. But since returning to power in Karnataka in 2023, the Congress Party-led state government has missed no opportunity to demonstrate its slavish support for big business. It is among the state governments that have gone the furthest in implementing the BJP’s labour “reform” and it mobilized huge numbers of police to block the march the unions were planning to hold on Thursday from Bengaluru’s Town Hall to Freedom Park.

The state’s Congress government deployed heavy police presence to block a march from Town Hall to Freedom Park. More than 125 strike supporters were taken into “preventive arrest” after the state government invoked the draconian Section 144 of the Criminal Code to ban all rallies, protests and meetings in support of the strike.

Participation in the proscribed Bengaluru march was modest. Small groups of women, Anganwadi (public health) workers and employees

from companies like Bosch and Afran joined. The limited turnout underscored the unions’ failure to mobilize against state repression. As one aerospace worker, Jadesh Kumar, told the WSWs, both BJP and Congress governments “serve the same capitalist interests.” Kumar asked, “Why do we need these labour Codes? It is to further enhance modern-day slavery. Workers won’t be given any permanent jobs and will be kept as contract employees always. And the so-called problematic worker will simply be removed by management without any explanation now.”

The SEP statement explained the need for the working class to adopt a new strategy, based on class struggle and socialist internationalism:

For decades, the Stalinist parties including the CPM, under the pretext of fighting Modi’s Hindu supremacism, have systematically propped up the Congress Party as a supposedly “secular” alternative to the BJP. In doing so, they have subordinated the working class to a faction of the same capitalist establishment responsible for deepening social inequality, communal divisions and pro-market “reforms.” By blocking the independent political mobilization of the working class—the only social force capable of defeating both Hindu supremacism and the capitalist system that breeds it—they have politically disarmed workers. This class collaboration has paralyzed opposition, enabling the BJP and Hindu communal forces to expand their influence and consolidate power. Only an independent movement of the working class, armed with an international socialist program, can put an end to communal reaction and capitalist exploitation alike.



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