

# Indian general strike ends with no demands met

By Arun Kumar  
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Millions of Indian workers continued a two-day general strike on Thursday, having brought key sectors of the economy to a halt, including public sector banks and government-run insurance, postal services, transport, power, coal mines, steel mines, ports and docks, petroleum and plantations. Several private sector industries, such as jute, garments and auto, were also affected.

The strike was a clear display of the deep working-class opposition to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's price subsidy cuts and other "big bang reforms"—pro-market restructuring and privatisation—that threaten to further devastate the jobs, working conditions and living standards of the working class and poor. The "reforms" include opening up the retail sector to foreign giants like Walmart.

Tens of millions of workers participated in the strike. In the public banking sector, which has been earmarked for privatisation, only 13 percent of the 215,000 employees reportedly went to work.

As industrial workers joined the strike on Thursday for the first time, major companies declared holidays in a bid to thwart strikers. Maruti Suzuki India, Suzuki Motorcycle India and Hero Motocorp in Haryana state's Gurgaon-Manesar Special Economic Zone closed down plants. These companies plan to compel employees to work on another holiday.

Workers confronted threats and physical violence both from the central and state governments. More than 100 workers were arrested in the Noida industrial centre, near Delhi, and companies lodged 150 charges of "rioting" against union leaders and activists.

In the state of West Bengal, thugs from the ruling right-wing Trinamool Congress party reportedly chopped off the ear of a panchayat (local administrative body) worker for participating in the strike in the

Murshidabad district of Jalangi. In an effort to prevent the stoppage, the state government threatened disciplinary action against strikers.

The Centre for Indian Trade Unions and the All India Trade Union Congress, which are both affiliated with Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India, respectively—deliberately limited the strike to two days. They only called the stoppage in the first place in order to defuse the growing hostility of workers toward the government and big business, and to sow illusions that workers could pressure the UPA government into reversing its economic course.

In West Bengal, the CPM confined the strike to one day, saying it did not want to "affect the Left's image badly." This stance reflects the Stalinists' concerns to appease and protect major investors. The CPM-led Left Front state government was defeated in the 2011 elections, after 34 years in office, due to the hostility of working people over its ruthless imposition of pro-investor policies.

As part of their strategy, the Stalinist-led unions used the strike to deepen their collaboration with unions affiliated to the major bourgeois parties—both the ruling Congress party and the opposition Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu supremacist formation.

At the conclusion of the stoppage, the Left Front issued a statement declaring: "This strike has been historic in that all the central trade unions gave a joint call for the first time for a two-day general strike." The Stalinists' enthusiasm for their unity with Congress and BJP-led unions reflects their objective of forming electoral alliances with one or more of these openly capitalist parties. Amid the mounting anger among workers to the UPA government, the Stalinist parties are lining up with the BJP and right-wing regional

parties in joint campaigns.

The Left Front statement added: “The Central government has to immediately address the demands raised by the general strike and take steps to fulfill them, otherwise bigger actions will follow.” This comment is nothing but an appeal to the UPA government for some face-saving concession to head off the widespread anger among workers and the poor towards its big business agenda.

No amount of pressure will change the direction of the Congress-led government, or any incoming BJP regime. The ruling elite as a whole is determined to intensify the assault on the working class and poor. Speaking to the media before parliament’s budget session, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: “It is now a challenge for all of us to take credible action to ensure that we are least affected by this global slowdown.”

The Indian ruling class, like its counterparts in Europe, North America and elsewhere in Asia, will carry out policies that make workers and poor pay for the deepening crisis of world capitalism. With recessionary trends in its main export markets in the US and Europe, India’s economic growth rate declined to 5 percent last year, the worst result in a decade.

Big business and international financial markets expect Finance Minister P. Chidambaram to impose drastic spending cuts and austerity measures in the budget. According to media reports, Chidambaram plans to make history by presenting an especially harsh austerity budget before a national election, which is due next year.

The demands of the corporate elite have only intensified in response to the strike. A *Hindustan Times* editorial declared: “As things happened, people from Lucknow to Thiruvananthapuram (capital of Kerala state) were affected by stalled transport, banking and other essential services besides being menaced by violence.” It insisted: “Policymakers must call their bluff by going full steam ahead with reforms.”

By calling the strike, the Stalinist-led unions sought to let off steam, and keep workers launching any independent struggle to defend jobs and living standards. The Stalinist parties have long been part of the political establishment, having propped up national governments in the past, as well as holding power in West Bengal and other states. Their unions function as

tools for policing the working class.

Indian workers need a socialist perspective to fight the social counterrevolution spearheaded by the UPA government. This means breaking from the unions and building new organisations, such as action committees, to take the fight into their own hands. The only answer to the capitalist crisis is the struggle, together with workers across South Asia and around the world, for the establishment of workers’ and peasants’ governments that will implement socialist policies.

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