

Indian security forces gun down coal mine worker

By Arun Kumar and Kranti Kumara
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An estimated 25,000 workers walked off their jobs Tuesday at the giant government-owned NLC (Neyveli Lignite Corporation) plant in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to express their outrage over the cold-blooded murder of a young mineworker the day before by the paramilitary CISF (Central Industrial Security Force). The trade unions called the 24-hour strike to dissipate anger among NLC workers who staged spontaneous protests immediately after the killing Monday.

The victim was Rajkumar, a 31-year-old contract worker at the mining and power-generation company in Neyveli. This incident occurred at around 1pm local time after Rajkumar—who worked at Mine 1—and his colleague Krishnamoorthy asked security personnel at Mine 2 if they could see a fellow worker at the mine.

After security guards adamantly refused on the grounds that they had no written authorization to gain entry a heated argument ensued. CISF constable Ram Singh suddenly pulled out his rifle, aimed it at Rajkumar's head and pulled the trigger, killing him on the spot. Shocked by this murderous attack, Krishnamoorthy fled the scene and alerted fellow workers and nearby villagers.

Upon hearing gunshots and as the word spread, scores of workers and people from nearby localities gathered in large numbers leading to a tense standoff. When the protestors attempted to picket Mine 2 CISF police resorted to attacking the workers and villagers with batons.

Several hundred additional police, including the Rapid Action Force, were then deployed near the Mine 2 gate as angry workers ransacked the CISF office, prevented the police from removing the dead body and demanded the immediate arrest of the CISF killer.

Workers responded to the baton charge by pelting the police force with stones and the area quickly turned

into a bloody battlefield. The police then fired tear gas and chased workers a kilometer away.

At least 38 workers were seriously injured and 14 critically wounded in the pitched battle. The latter are receiving treatment at private hospitals 200 kms away in the state capital Chennai while the remaining have been admitted to the nearby NLC hospital.

Small traders in the nearby localities of Vadalur and Mandarakuppam closed down their shops and many transport workers went on strike to show their solidarity with Rajkumar and other mineworkers.

The distraught mother of the victim made the following comments to the WSWS: “Raja was managing the entire family of eight. Now I am worried about my daughter-in-law because she has lost her husband at her young age with two children. We pay land tax and the electricity bill for this small residence to the NLC. That amounts to Rs.800 (US\$12.90). There is no one to look after my daughter-in-law and my family.”

It was only after the spontaneous uprising of both permanent and contract workers that the trade unions organized the 24-hour strike, dismissively termed a “token” strike by the Indian media. All of the unions active in this area are affiliated with either reactionary Tamil Nadu-based political parties or the Stalinist CPI (Communist Party of India) or CPI (M) (Communist Party of India-Marxist). All of the unions have a long history of repeatedly betraying these long-suffering workers in the back.

One of the trade union leaders noted that the CISF—one of a number of armed paramilitary police, apart from the armed forces, which is under the command of the Indian government—was first deployed back in May 1994. Ever since, he said, the relationship between the CISF personnel and workers has been

tense. He also said that the NLC spends Rs. 5 billion (\$82 million), fully 20 percent of its yearly profits, for the maintenance of this armed force.

In contrast, NLC officials have repeatedly refused to regularize contract workers who make up fully half the workforce despite a court order by the Indian Supreme Court. These workers, who have been agitating to be made permanent for years, are paid far less than their permanent counterparts and lack free health care and leave.

Confronted by the seething anger of workers, the NLC Chairman and Managing Director told the daily, *The Hindu*, that this was the first time in history of the NLC that a worker has been shot dead by a CISF 'jawan' (soldier). He said the soldier should have "exercised patience" and used batons to chase away the workers. If they had to use firearms, he declared with feigned compassion, the guard should have shot the workers in the legs!

The cold-blooded murder of Indian workers is no aberration or isolated incident. NLC management has actively encouraged hostility towards contract workers in particular. In an atmosphere of dehumanization and industrial slavery it is no wonder that this particular CISF "jawan" felt justified to execute Rajkumar.

Several trade union leaders and journalists have also been attacked by the CISF and the state police force. Police have also damaged bicycles and motorbikes belonging to the workers that were parked on both sides of the road.

The NLC is a highly profitable government-owned and managed corporation located about 200 kms south west of Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai (formerly Madras). It operates three open cast mines with 28.5 million tons annual capacity at Neyveli and one open cast lignite mine with a capacity of 2.1 million tons annually at Barsingsar in the state of Rajasthan. It also operates three thermal electric power stations at Neyveli and one at Barsingsar, Rajasthan.

The CISF policeman who killed Rajkumar was only arrested after authorities feared workers might take matters into their own hands. The policeman has been remanded to 15-day custody following a court order.

The District Collector, who is the chief administrative and revenue officer of a district, ordered an inquiry. The trade unions have called for the filing of murder charges and demanded adequate financial

compensation to the family of the victim and a permanent job for a family member.

The charged atmosphere at the NLC is the result of the brutal conditions both permanent and contract workers have faced over a protracted period. The contract workers are demanding the implementation of the 2012 Supreme Court order for regularization of their employment. Management has stonewalled and claims it has prepared a list based on seniority. This "list" only came about after repeated agitation by workers.

Management has cynically exploited the vaguely worded court order, claiming it includes no time frame. It has stated workers will be made permanent as vacancies arise. As of now not a single contract worker has been made permanent.

Last July the trade unions sold out an "indefinite" strike against government plans to privatize NLC after only 13 days (see: India: NLC workers angered by sell-out of their anti-privatisation strike). Recognizing that the privatization plan threatened all NLC workers, contract workers joined the strike by their permanent colleagues. Both groups of workers defied a court order declaring the strike "illegal" and threats of imprisonment.

The sellout once again exposed the treacherous role of the unions, which are affiliated to political parties that are all committed to the Indian elite's program of "developing" India as a cheap-labor platform for global capital.

The betrayal of the strike strengthened the hand of the NLC management, which has since imposed speed-up and threatened workers with disciplinary actions. This killing of Rajkumar comes within this context.

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