

Indian state government arrests at least 14 union leaders

By Kranti Kumar
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The state government of the northern Indian state of Haryana, ruled by the Hindu-extremist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has arrested at least 14 union leaders after more than 200,000 public workers carried out a job action last Friday in solidarity with striking public transport workers at the state-owned Haryana Roadways.

Police, citing the government-declared Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), also conducted Friday night raids at residences of other union leaders. Police have also declared that they are on the lookout for other union “activists.”

The ESMA declaration bans strikes in what the government defines as “essential-services” and is the favoured political weapon of state-governments to repress struggles by public-sector workers.

Haryana Roadways workers have been waging a months-long struggle against repeated attempts by the BJP state government to privatize public transport. Their latest strike started on October 16 against the government’s attempt to bring in over 700 buses from a private contractor whose drivers and conductors will be paid far less and will work far more hours than public transport workers.

According to the monthly salary table published by the Haryana government, a bus driver’s or conductor’s pay scale ranges from Rs. 5,200–20,200 (USD \$75–270) plus a small bonus.

So widespread is the anger against the pro-business state government that it took hardly any prompting for other public workers to come out in solidarity with the transport workers and shout slogans against the hated BJP government.

All workers understand that the government’s attempt to privatize public transport is the first step towards privatizing other government services, which

will result in both service cuts and sweeping attacks on wages, job security and working conditions.

The policies of the Haryana BJP government reflect the stridently pro-business outlook of the national government, which is also led by the BJP under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu-supremacist strongman. The Modi government has continuously imposed pro-business policies since coming to power in 2014. Parallel with this, the Modi-government has encouraged attacks upon religious minorities, especially Muslim workers, to split the working class.

In early September, the Haryana government unleashed a huge police force to severely beat workers and arrest 23 union leaders. The state repression was aimed at preventing announced plans for a “chakka jam” (complete-shutdown) by transport workers.

There has been a wave of strikes over the past several months by wide sections of the working class in Haryana, including tens of thousands of healthcare workers, junior engineers of state electricity boards and recently appointed assistant professors.

This state acquired international notoriety after the then Congress-led state government mounted savage repression against autoworkers at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar. Thirteen leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which had been formed through a rebellion by workers against the corporate stooge union, were framed up and sentenced to life in prison.

Under Modi’s “Made in India” program, working conditions have become increasingly brutal as the government cracks down on working class resistance in order to attract foreign investment. Resistance, however, is growing, and the battle by Haryana public sector workers takes place amid a rising tide of class

conflict.

One of the most notable ongoing struggles is the strike by thousands of two-wheeler (motorcycle) autoworkers in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The state government there has also responded with repression, including mass arrests and bans on picketing the strike-bound plants.

In Delhi, the national capital region, which neighbors the state of Haryana, the long-struggling workers of the Delhi Transport Corporation have vowed to proceed with a one-day strike against the municipal government today, although the Delhi government has invoked ESMA to provide a pretext for violent suppression.

According to reports, this is the first major strike against DTC since 1988.

The National Capital Territory of Delhi is currently led by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP, Common Man's Party) of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. The AAP shot to prominence by railing against the corruption of the main bourgeois parties, the BJP and the Congress Party, and promising better public services.

The Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC), which provides daily transportation to hundreds of thousands of commuters, employs over half of its workforce, including drivers, conductors and mechanics, under temporary contracts. These workers were informed in late August by the Kejriwal government that it plans to cut their pay in the range of Rs. 3,500–4,500 (USD \$47.88–61.56) per month, amounting to a nearly 25 percent cut of their monthly wages.

The Delhi government cited as its justification an August 4, 2018, decision of the Delhi High Court that had invalidated a 2017 order by the AAP government to business and government departments to hike minimum wages. The government had issued a notification that the prescribed minimum wages for unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers be increased to Rs. 13,350 (USD \$180), Rs. 14,698 (USD \$200) and Rs. 16,182 (USD \$220) per month respectively.

The order was challenged in the Delhi High Court by private businesses and, unsurprisingly, given that the whole Indian judiciary operates openly under a pro-business outlook, ruled in their favor by tossing out the government order. This decision provided the requisite cover to the AAP government to roll back even the meager hike awarded to the DTC contract workers.

In the face of this assault, the Stalinist Communist Party of India-affiliated union leading the DTC strike has refused to mount any sustained strike action by contract and permanent workers, let alone linking up the DTC workers with the strikes in the neighboring state of Haryana. Instead, the Stalinist-led union has opted for a single day of action.

The latest eruptions of working class militancy in Haryana and Delhi are part of the resistance to the efforts of the state and central governments to offload the economic crisis, including the massive debt crisis in the so-called emerging markets, onto the backs of workers.

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