

The political significance of India's two-day general strike

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Tens of millions of workers across India joined a 48-hour strike this Tuesday and Wednesday to voice their opposition to the “pro-investor” policies of the country’s rabidly rightwing government.

The strike involved vast sections of the working class—from mines and manufacturing to banking, transport and other government services—and cut across the caste and communal divisions the Indian ruling class has incited for decades as part of a deliberate “divide and rule” strategy.

This week’s general strike in India, one of the largest strikes in history, is part of a growing upsurge of the world working class.

In neighboring Bangladesh, tens of thousands of poverty-stricken garment workers mounted strikes and demonstrations this week in the face of escalating state repression and violence. On Tuesday, a 22-year-old worker was killed when police assaulted protesting workers.

In Sri Lanka, off India’s southeast coast, plantation workers have been mounting a months-long agitation against poverty wages. This included a nine-day strike by 100,000 workers in December launched in defiance of the state-supported unions.

Hundreds of thousands of workers have taken part in France’s “Yellow Vest” movement against the austerity policies of President Emanuel Macron.

In the US, the United Teachers Los Angeles union is desperately maneuvering to avert a strike by more than 30,000 educators against the dismantling of public education by the union-backed, Democratic Party-led school district and California state government.

Among autoworkers in North America and Europe support for a militant challenge to the plans of the transnational auto companies to slash jobs and shutter plants is growing. Acting independently of the corporatist Unifor union apparatus, workers at the GM plant in Oshawa, Canada staged a series of job actions this week after the automaker reaffirmed its decision to close the plant and four others in the US.

After decades in which the class struggle was artificially suppressed by the phony establishment “left”—the trade unions, social-democratic and Stalinist parties, and their pseudo-left appendages—the working class is beginning to assert its own independent interests.

India exemplifies the brutality of 21st-century capitalism.

Seventy percent of India’s population or upwards of 900 million people eke out an existence on less than \$2 per day. Meanwhile, the elite and its media celebrate the exponential growth of India’s billionaires, from two in the mid-1990s with some \$3 billion in assets to 131 today, gorging on wealth equivalent to 15 percent of India’s GDP.

Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were brought to power in 2014 to subject India’s workers and toilers to even harsher exploitation. The Modi government has implemented savage austerity, promoted contract labour, and accelerated privatization; while stoking communal reaction and transforming India into a frontline state in US imperialism’s military-strategic offensive against China.

But as this week’s strike palpably demonstrated, the Indian working class is not just an object of exploitation. It wields immense social power.

The re-emergence of the international working class provides the objective foundations for a counter-offensive against world imperialism—its globally-organized transnational corporations, its wars and intrigues, and its turn to authoritarian methods of rule and the cultivation of ultra-right and fascist forces.

The task now is to politically arm this insurgent movement of the working class with an international strategy and new organizations of struggle, so it can create a new social order, free of want and war—international socialism.

A key element in blazing a new political path for the working class is the merciless exposure of the pro-capitalist organizations that claim to speak in the name of the working class, whether it be the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US, the CGT in France, or the Left Party in Germany.

The all-India protest strike was politically led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its trade union affiliate, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Also playing significant roles were the union federation of the CPM’s sister Stalinist party, the CPI, and the trade union appendages of the big business Congress Party and the DMK, a rightwing Tamil Nadu-based party.

All these parties have played a pivotal role in implementing the Indian bourgeoisie’s drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital. Between 1991 and 2008, the CPM and CPI sustained in power a succession of governments, most of them Congress Party-led, that spearheaded the neo-liberal

agenda and pursued closer ties with Washington.

Workers joined this week's strike to oppose the social devastation wrought by more than a quarter-century of "pro-market" reforms. However, for the Stalinists it was a grubby political maneuver aimed at corraling the working class behind bringing to power of an alternative capitalist government—whether led by the Congress Party or a series of smaller, rightwing regional parties—after the April-May general election.

The Stalinists seek to justify their systematic subordination of the working class to the parties and institutions of the bourgeoisie by pointing to the crimes of the BJP and its Hindu right allies.

To be sure, Modi and his BJP are bitter enemies of the working class. But if the Hindu right has been able to grow into such a menace, it is because the Stalinists have fertilized the ground for reaction to grow. With the Stalinists preventing the working class from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis, the BJP has been able to demagogically exploit popular anger over the ruinous impact of the pro-market policies implemented by the various Stalinist-backed "secular" governments.

The only viable strategy to defend democratic rights and defeat reaction in India, as in the United States, France and around the world, is one based on the international class struggle and the independent political mobilization of the working class against the decrepit capitalist order.

Indian workers must prepare for struggle against the Modi regime and the next government—which, whatever its composition, will be tasked by its bourgeois masters with dramatically intensifying the exploitation of India's workers and toilers—by building new organizations of struggle.

In this they should follow the example of the Abbotsleigh tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, who under the guidance of the Socialist Equality Party have established a rank-and-file action committee completely independent of the trade union apparatuses that have connived in their brutal exploitation for decades.

Such rank-and-file workplace committees must develop a working class counteroffensive by unifying the struggles of workers across India and by reaching out to workers around the world, with whom they are closely interlinked by the very process of global capitalist production.

These committees should take up the fight to free the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers jailed for life on frame-up murder charges. These workers, whose only "crime" is to have fought against poverty wages and contract-labour jobs, have been scandalously abandoned by the Stalinists and the unions because they fear their militant example. A campaign linking the fight for the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki 13 to the broader struggle against sweatshop conditions and precarious employment would galvanize the widespread support for these class-war prisoners in the working class and serve as a rallying

point for class struggle.

Indian workers and youth must join with workers across South Asia and around the world in building an international movement against imperialist war on the basis of a resolutely socialist program. By aligning itself with Washington, the Indian bourgeoisie has recklessly encouraged US imperialism in its war drive against China. Moreover, India's ruling elite systematically manipulates its reactionary military-strategic conflicts with Pakistan and China to stoke communalism and jingoism with the aim of intimidating and splitting the working class.

Above all, Indian workers need a revolutionary party, based on an internationalist socialist program and strategy and embodying all the strategic lessons of the struggles of the world working class, to prosecute the struggle for workers' power. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its national sections, such as the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka).

Founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938, the ICFI has defended and developed the program of Permanent Revolution, which is the program that animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and the struggle against its Stalinist bureaucratic degeneration. Among its key teachings is that, in countries of historically belated capitalist development, the tasks of the democratic and socialist revolutions have become intertwined. None of the fundamental aspirations of the oppressed masses—from the liquidation of landlordism and casteism, to the social rights of the working class and genuine social equality—can be secured outside of the working class forging its political independence, and rallying the rural masses behind it on an anti-capitalist program and in the struggle for workers' power.

We urge Indian workers and youth to spearhead the fight against social inequality, capitalist reaction and war by joining the fight to build the Indian section of the ICFI.

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