

Indian government fires hundreds of teachers as Tamil Nadu strike faces a crossroads

By Arun Kumar
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Ongoing indefinite strike action by hundreds of thousands of Tamil Nadu teachers and government employees has reached a political crossroads. The strikers, who confront a massive state crackdown by the right-wing All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government, are being isolated by the unions.

On January 29, the government stepped up its attacks, dismissing 700 striking teachers and over 1,200 state government employees. Their positions have been declared vacant and will be filled by strike-breaking temporary staff, which the government began recruiting last Friday for a monthly salary of 10,000 rupees (\$US140).

Teachers and other state government employees walked out on January 22 over nine demands, including abolition of a Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) and reestablishment of the previous government-funded pension system, as well as higher wages and improved working conditions.

These long-outstanding demands have been rejected from the outset by the AIADMK government, which has unleashed a range of repressive measures, including mass suspensions and dismissals, police arrest of strikers and protesters, and the recruitment of temporary teachers as strike breakers.

Tamil Nadu teachers and other government employees have made clear in protests across the south Indian state their determination to fight, but the Joint Action Council of Teachers Organisations-Government Employees Organisations (JACTTO-GEO), having been forced to under pressure from its members to call the strike, opposes any expansion of the industrial action.

By isolating the industrial action, the JACTTO-GEO, which covers hundreds of thousands of members, has

opened the way for the state government to intensify its anti-democratic attacks.

On Monday the state government told the Madras High Court that it would not meet with the union. A lawyer for the JACTTO-GEO assured the court that the union federation was ready to end the strike “immediately” if the government agreed to talks.

The court called on teachers to return to work on Tuesday, declaring that the strikers, not the government, were threatening the future of their students who are due to sit annual examinations. Later that day, 3,000 teachers were detained and their protests broken up by police. They were held in various halls for several hours and then released.

Tamil Nadu’s chief educational officer, Thiruvavur Selvi, told the media that 99.9 percent of government schools in Chennai, the state capital, had returned to normal because most teachers had returned to work. Others have reportedly resumed teaching in some other districts, including Villupuram and Krishnagiri.

According to other media reports, over 96,000 teachers, or 63 percent of teachers in Directorate of Elementary Education schools, have rejected government directives and are continuing demonstrations and sit-down protests.

Other state government workers also remain on strike. On Tuesday, more than 15,000 government employees were arrested and detained in the state’s southern districts after they attempted sit-down road protests. Over 11,000 JACTTO-GEO members were also detained when they staged a road blockade in the Tiruchi region. All those arrested on Tuesday were released later that day.

Students and parents have also participated in teachers’ protests or staged their own solidarity demonstrations. In Udthagamandalam, police detained

arts college students for establishing a road blockade to back the strikers. On January 29, students from government schools and colleges in Dindivanam and Pudukottai demonstrated to support their striking teachers.

The JACTTO-GEO, which fears that the strike could escalate out of its control and encourage other sections of the Indian working class to take action, vehemently opposes any widening of the industrial action or appeals to teachers facing the same attacks elsewhere in India. It continues to insist that the isolated industrial action will force the government to capitulate to strikers' demands.

Just a few weeks ago, up to 180 million workers in India joined a two-day general strike—on January 8 and 9—against pro-big business policies and austerity measures by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The JACTTO-GEO, however, did not call on its members to join the general strike, whose demands included abolition of the new CPS and opposition to the privatisation and outsourcing of government sectors—the same issues that have forced Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers to walk out.

Having done everything to isolate teachers and government employees, the JACTTO-GEO claimed that it would continue the strike until the government invites them to talks. They are desperately appealing to the government for a face-saving deal to end the strike.

India's main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—are playing a key role in isolating the Tamil Nadu strikers. The Center of Indian Trade Unions and the All India Trade Union Congress, the CPM and CPI union federations respectively, are partners of the JACTTO-GEO.

These organisations, which have millions of captive members, have issued various perfunctory statements criticising the AIADMK government and condemning police arrests and dismissal of striking teachers.

Yesterday, the so-called Left Front and five associated unions, including the Tamil Nadu Secretariat Officers' Association, called for a token one-day strike today in support of the teachers. Similar demands, including abolition of the CPS scheme, were issued. The strike has only one purpose—to let off steam and

attempt to dissipate growing working-class demands for a genuine fight against the government attacks.

Striking Tamil Nadu teachers and workers, whose actions are part of a growing resurgence of international class struggles—in North America, Mexico, Europe, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and elsewhere—must break from the unions. Tamil Nadu strikers must develop their unity with workers throughout India, South Asia and internationally and reach out to teachers in the US and elsewhere fighting to defend and improve their wages, working conditions and basic rights.

In order to take forward their struggle, Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers should follow the example of striking Mexican auto workers and Sri Lankan plantation workers and form their own action committees, independent of the unions. In these committees, workers can democratically discuss and decide on their own demands and industrial action, and adopt the anti-capitalist and international political program on which their fight must be based.

Central to this struggle is rejecting the nationalist political agenda of the CPM and CPI. These Stalinist organisations have no fundamental differences with the Hindu communalist BJP and the AIADMK. Their aim is to replace these parties with “alternative” capitalist governments, led by the Congress Party or alliances of various right-wing regional parties, to make India attractive for big business by deepening the social attacks on the working class.

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