

India: Unions betray Tamil Nadu teachers' and government workers' strike

By Arun Kumar
1 February 2019

The Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisations and Government Employees' Organisations (JACTTO-GEO) abruptly axed indefinite strike action by tens of thousands of its members on Wednesday.

Having done everything to isolate the strike, which it called on January 22, the JACTTO-GEO cynically claimed that its shutdown of all industrial action across the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu is only “temporary.”

None of the strikers' nine demands—which have been outstanding since 2016—have been met. They include abolition of the Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) and re-establishment of the previous government-funded pension system, higher pay and no outsourcing of government services.

The union alliance called no meetings of workers to endorse the shutdown. Nor did it provide any details about the fate of hundreds of victimised or suspended teachers and state government workers.

The JACTTO-GEO was compelled to call the strike under pressure from its members over the regressive CPS system and other attacks on their wages and working conditions by successive governments at both central and state levels.

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government rejected outright the workers' demands and initiated harsh measures to break the strike. This included mass arrests of strikers and protesters, the suspension and dismissal of hundreds of teachers and government employees, and the recruitment of temporary teachers as strike-breakers.

The JACTTO-GEO responded with desperate appeals to the state government, declaring it would immediately end all industrial action if the government

would begin talks.

Faced with the JACTTO-GEO's opposition to any expansion of the walkout and hostile to the union alliance's increasingly slavish assurances to the state government, a majority of teachers in Chennai, the state capital, returned to work on Tuesday.

Teachers and government employees in other parts of the state, however, remained on strike in defiance of the government crackdown and sacking threats. On the same day that the JACTTO-GEO ordered its members to return to work, tens of thousands of strikers were involved in protests and road blockades in several districts.

Parents and students also held demonstrations in support of teachers, demonstrating the possibility of mobilising thousands of other workers and oppressed layers throughout the country. Other sections of workers, including central government employees and state electricity board workers, expressed their solidarity with the strikers.

The Tamil Nadu government claimed it could not afford the teachers demands. The pro-AIADMK government media and other right-wing elements attempted to pit oppressed layers against strikers by claiming that teachers and government employees are privileged, well paid and enjoy various benefits.

Tamil Nadu teachers, in fact, face disastrous conditions. At the end of last year, the state government announced the closure of more than 3,000 schools and around 8,000 school midday meal centres. According to prominent educationist Prince Gajendra Babu, government schools in Tamil Nadu are understaffed and seriously under-funded.

“No sanitary employee, watchmen or physical education teacher has been appointed at primary schools,” Babu commented in an article last year. As

well as maintaining office records and cleaning the schools, teachers were responsible for teaching five subjects. “How do you expect a parent to allow his/her child to join such a school?” he asked.

India’s Stalinist parties played a criminal role in the axing of the strike and the betrayal of workers’ demands.

A treacherous joint appeal was issued on Wednesday by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their partners—the Maoist Communist Party of India-Liberation and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist). The statement called on the JACTTO-GEO to consider the “expectations and well-being of the students and the parents” and end all industrial action. These Stalinist parties and their respective union organisations then called off a token one-day strike planned for Thursday.

The striking teachers and state government workers were not alone in calling for abolition of CPS and opposing the outsourcing of government services. Millions of Indian workers confront similar attacks, carried out by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led central government and various state governments.

A few weeks ago, up to 180 million workers joined a two-day general strike—on January 8 and 9—to fight the pro-big business policies of the BJP government. The JACTTO-GEO, however, refused to call on its members to join the national walkout.

As this week’s betrayal and that of the recent national general strike demonstrate, the 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.

The betrayal of the Tamil Nadu strike again poses the necessity for a break from the unions and development of independent forms of working class organisation.

In order to secure the reinstatement of all suspended and victimised workers and advance the fight for decent government-funded pensions and other basic rights, Tamil Nadu teachers and government workers should follow the example set by Mexican auto

workers and Sri Lankan plantation workers and form their own action committees.

These democratically-controlled organisations must reach out to teachers and government workers throughout India and internationally to begin preparing the sort of industrial action and political demands required to defend their jobs, living standards and basic rights.

Central to this struggle is the rejection of the nationalist political agenda of the CPM and CPI and their political allies, and a turn to building a new socialist leadership in the working class across Asia and internationally.

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