

India: Growing support for 48,000 Telangana workers fired for striking

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There is growing support for the 48,000 Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers who were arbitrarily fired October 6 by State Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao for defying his order they immediately end a strike launched just hours before.

But because the unions and the Stalinist parties are blocking this support from being mobilized in an industrial and political offensive against Telangana's rightwing Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government and against the Narendra Modi-led central government, which stands behind it, the TSRTC workers' courageous struggle is in grave danger.

Indeed, Chandrasekhar Rao is preparing to escalate his assault on the TSRTC workers. The Chief Minister has indicated his cabinet will finalize plans to privatize much of the state-owned bus service when it meets today.

The government's assault, which has included illegally withholding the workers' pay for September, has already exacted a heavy toll. Eleven workers have died since the strike, now in its 28th day, began. Four committed suicide, and seven others have been killed by heart attacks induced by anxiety for their jobs and livelihoods.

From the outset, Chandrasekhar Rao has arrogantly refused any substantive talks with the Joint Action Committee (JAC) formed by the TSRTC unions. On orders from the state High Court—which manifestly fears the strike could spark mass social unrest—management and JAC representatives met October 26. But the TSRTC negotiators went out of their way to snub and insult the four JAC officials. A phalanx of police greeted them when they arrived for the talks, and on their entry management insisted that the JAC officials hand over their cellphones.

The workers have a long list of grievances. These include horrid working conditions, overwork, and low pay. However, their main demand is for the merger of the TSRTC, an autonomous state-owned company, with the state government, so as to avail themselves of the greater job protection and benefits accorded state employees.

Chandrasekhar Rao has vowed “as long as the Earth exists TSRTC won't be merged,” adding, “if we merge them, 57 more corporations will come forward with the same demand.”

In a further provocation, the Telangana Chief Minister has said that the door is open to the TSRTC workers returning to their jobs, but only if they agree to dictatorial terms. As a condition for their “re-employment,” they would have to waive their democratic, legally recognized, right to union representation, and give an undertaking that “they would not join any employees' union.”

Two factors are emboldening Chandrasekhar Rao and his Telangana regional-chauvinist TRS in their assault on the TSRTC workers.

First, the TSRTC unions and the Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—and their union affiliates, the AITUC and CITU, are isolating the TSRTC workers. They have failed to mobilize other workers in the state to come to the defence of the victimized bus workers, let alone sought to raise the bitter class struggle now being fought in Telangana before the working class across India.

At the same time, they are encouraging workers to place their faith in the phony claims of support offered by the big business Congress Party and the state unit of Modi's Hindu supremacist BJP—just as they previously boosted Chandrasekhar Rao and the demand for a

separate Telangana state—and they are similarly promoting the High Court as a friend of the workers.

In 2015, the High Court helped the TRS government break a strike by the TSRTC workers, by declaring it illegal. Today, it is similarly seeking to subvert the TSRTC workers' struggle and, above all, to prevent it from becoming the catalyst for a broader working-class upsurge. The court's ruling admonishing the government for spurning all talks was a caution to Chandrasekhar Rao that he should keep open the option of using the unions to impose a sellout settlement.

The second factor encouraging Chandrasekhar Rao is the strong political support he can count on from New Delhi.

Confronted with a deepening economic crisis, the Modi government is turning to authoritarian forms of rule and whipping up communalism to mobilize its Hindu right supporters and divide the working class. This has been exemplified by the government's August 5 constitutional coup against Jammu and Kashmir, which stripped the country's lone Muslim-majority state of its special constitutional status, and the subsequent, ongoing security clampdown.

As part of an intensified push for “pro-investor reforms,” Modi and his BJP government are mounting a massive privatization drive, targeting under the guise of “economic reform,” even large profit-making, state-owned Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) for disinvestment.

In January of this year Modi government's Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari called upon state governments to privatize their state-owned road transport network along the lines of the public-private partnership “model” adopted in the British capital, London.

While public road transport has long been considered as a state obligation in India, especially given that the overwhelming majority of the poverty-stricken population relies upon it, Gadkari claimed it constitutes an unacceptable drain on the public exchequer.

The TSRTC is currently a state corporation, but management is expected to run it like a private for-profit business, squeezing greater output from the workforce for less money. So as to provide a pretext for its outright privatization, the TRS government has deliberately starved it of state funds, driving the TSRTC deeper and deeper into the red.

According to reports, the TSRTC incurred a loss of Rs. 9.3 billion (\$133 million) while it received a miniscule grant of Rs. 1.14 billion (\$16 million) from the KCR-led Telangana government in 2019. Its annual interest payment alone is Rs 3.65 billion (\$52 million).

The TRS government has deployed police in huge numbers in several parts of the state to intimidate and suppress the growing movement in support of the strike. Hundreds of workers, students, youth, artists and journalists have been arrested and taken to police stations in the state capital Hyderabad.

On October 25, students at Hyderabad's Osmania university mobilized mass support for the striking TSRTC workers, holding a public meeting in defiance of the university administration. To stop the meeting, the university administration went so far as to cut off all electricity at the venue. Nevertheless, thousands of persons including TSRTC workers, students and other supporters attended.

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