

Hundreds of thousands of Indian coal miners launch three-day strike against privatisation

By Arun Kumar
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Hundreds of thousands of Indian coal miners employed by government-owned Coal India Limited (CIL) launched a three-day strike yesterday against the privatisation plans of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. Some reports indicate more than 500,000 full-time and contract workers have downed tools.

The miners launched their job action in open defiance of threats made by CIL Chairman Pramod Agrawal, who warned that any strike would be deemed illegal. Workers would face "no work-no pay and other penal actions," he declared June 29, because the coal industry has been declared a public utility service.

The strike is expected to result in production losses of 4 million metric tonnes of coal. The authorities have responded forcefully, with at least five arrests reported in the Jhanjra area of the Eastern Coalfields in West Bengal. According to a union spokesperson, management has called in outsiders to work for CIL's Southeastern Coalfields subsidiary, which operates in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, creating an "extraordinary situation" without precedent for CIL.

Facing an economic crisis that has been transformed into a collapse by the coronavirus pandemic, the Modi government has announced a "quantum jump" in pro-investor reforms, including throwing open the coal industry to private investors and privatizing parts of CIL.

In a final attempt to prevent the strike, Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi, Coal Secretary Anil Kumar and trade union leaders held a virtual meeting on Wednesday. However, with the government refusing to make any concessions, the unions were forced to go ahead with the strike. The main demands of the strike are the withdrawal of plans for commercial mining and foreign direct investment in the coal industry, and the overturning of the decision to de-link Central Mine Planning & Design Institute Limited (CMPDIL) from CIL. The strikers are also demanding the enforcement of enhanced wages for contract workers at CIL and the Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), another public sector-coal company, jointly-owned by the Indian and Telangana state governments.

The major unions who called the strike include the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which are affiliated to the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI), respectively. The strike was also endorsed by the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which is affiliated to the Congress Party, the

traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS).

These unions have no intention of mobilising the social power of the working class against privatisation and the Modi government. Rather, their main concern is to maintain control over the mounting opposition to the government, which has been further fuelled by Modi's callous disregard for the devastating health and social impact of the pandemic, and tie it to the Congress and other right-wing opposition forces.

The coal strike is the first major industrial action by Indian workers since the outbreak of the pandemic. The anger among coal miners is so widespread that even the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which is affiliated to Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was forced to join the strike call.

In an attempt to defuse the militancy among the miners, the unions organised protests on June 10 and 11. However, the Modi government announced its decision to auction 41 coal blocks throughout the country for commercial mining on June 11 and launched the process of auction on June 18. On the same day, the unions issued the three-day strike call.

CIL Chairman Agrawal also sought to deceive the workers, claiming that they would not be affected by the government's move because "no coal block allotted to CIL is going to be auctioned." CIL at present "has 463 coal blocks that can meet the requirement of thermal coal for the foreseeable future," he said. Contrary to his claims, allowing private capital into the coal sector will inevitably intensify the pressure to attack the jobs, wages and conditions of CIL workers.

In an attempt to whip up reactionary Indian nationalism against the workers' opposition to its privatisation drive, the Modi government claimed the decision to allow commercial mining and FDI in the coal sector is aimed at developing a "self-reliant" India and to drastically reduce coal imports. *ThePrint* website reported that as he launched the auction, Modi said, "We are not just launching the auction for commercial coal-mining today, but bringing the coal sector out of decades of lockdown."

Coal India's daily production of around 2 million tonnes of coal accounts for over 80 per cent of the country's coal production. India also imports around 250 million tonnes of coal annually.

Business Today reported that major corporate players could barely contain their excitement as they rush to compete with each other to profit from the Modi government's accelerated privatisation drive. "The major beneficiaries of Finance Minister

Nirmala Sitharaman's fourth tranche of economic relief package (announced in mid-May) will be business groups like Adani, Anil Ambani's Reliance Group, Vedanta and Kalyani, besides companies like Tata Power, JSW Steel, GVK, Hindalco and GMR," enthused *Business Today*. "Adani Group," it continued, "will be able to tap new opportunities coming up in sectors like coal, minerals, defence, power distribution and airports, while Vedanta and Aditya Birla group's Hindalco will be able to cash in on projects in coal and minerals mining."

Most of the trade unions involved in the three-day strike are linked to parties that have been directly involved in implementing pro-market restructuring over the past three decades. Congress and the BJP have both led national governments that have sold off public assets, including public sector enterprises (PSEs), at fire-sale prices; corporatized and partially privatized other PSEs; raised or scrapped caps on foreign investment; lavished business with round after round of tax cuts; and promoted the proliferation of cheap-labour precarious contract jobs in both the public and private sectors.

From 1991 through 2008, the CPM and CPI supported a succession of right-wing national governments, most Congress Party-led, that implemented privatization, deregulation and other "pro-market" policies, while pursuing closer ties with Washington. In those states where the CPM and CPI have formed the government—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura—they have similarly pursued pro-investor policies.

In an attempt to promote the Congress as an opponent of privatisation, INTUC president Chandra Shekhar Dubey claimed, "Remember the time when coal workers had to suffer a lot in collieries under private owners and the Indira Gandhi government nationalised the coal sector in the early seventies for saving them from the distress." *Telegraph India* quoted Dubey as saying, "We cannot allow our workers to go back to the same situation after half a century."

In line with the Stalinists' never-ending attempts to promote the big business Congress Party as a "lesser evil," D.D. Ramanandan, general secretary of the All India Coal Workers' Federation, which is affiliated to CITU, applauded Dubey's remarks. "That's true," he said. "It's like going back to square one."

The fact of the matter is that the first moves to privatise coal blocks were made by Congress-led governments. It was only after the Supreme Court in 2014 cancelled the coal-block allocations the Congress-led UPA government had made, due to a lack of transparency and competitive bidding, that the Modi government brought in the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act of 2015 to return these coal blocks to the private sector through auctions.

The Stalinists are attempting to divert the genuine opposition of workers to privatisation along reactionary nationalist lines. The CITU's statement on the strike, while lamenting that the Modi government went ahead with its privatisation plans despite the protests organized by the unions last month, embraced the Prime Minister's nationalist rhetoric. It called for "all our respective state chapters to extend their solidarity support to this agitation to defend this core public sector in the national interest and for our nation's self-reliance in this sector."

In the months leading up to the outbreak of the coronavirus

pandemic, mass opposition among the working class, youth and rural toilers was developing against the Modi government. This found expression in the January 8 general strike opposing its austerity measures and pro-investor policies, and the mass protests against the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Modi government exploited its ruinous ill-prepared coronavirus lockdown to launch a crackdown on protests, particularly those against the CAA. The coal miners' strike indicates that working class opposition is erupting once again.

The Stalinists responded to the pandemic by lining up with the Modi government in the name of "national unity" to fight the virus, while making limited criticisms about the inadequacy of the measures taken by the government to contain the pandemic and provide basic necessities for the people during the lockdown. When border tensions escalated between India and China last month, the Stalinists again rallied behind the Modi government, and called for the defence of "national interests," i.e. the reactionary geopolitical interests of the Indian elite.

The three-day coal miners' strike is part of an emerging international upsurge of the working class that is developing ever more openly in rebellion against the corrupt pro-capitalist unions. In the United States, autoworkers have formed their own rank-and-file safety committees independently of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union to demand safety measures be taken in the factories against the coronavirus.

Any genuine struggle by workers to defend jobs and conditions requires a complete break from the corporatist trade unions, the formation of rank-and-file committees of miners and a turn to other sections of workers in India and internationally who confront similar attacks. Such a struggle can only go forward if it is based on a genuine socialist program to restructure society to meet the needs of the vast majority of working people, not the profits of a wealthy few.

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