

Massive worker participation in three-day India Coal strike

By Kranti Kumara
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Last week's three-day strike of Coal India Limited (CIL) workers had a huge impact on coal production at the Indian government-owned company, indicating that a large majority of its more than 500,000 regular and contract workers joined the walkout.

The miners and ancillary workers mounted the walkout—which ran from Thursday, July 2, through Saturday, July 4—in defiance of management threats that they would be punished for joining an “illegal” job action. CIL reportedly deployed large numbers of personnel from the paramilitary Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) with the double aim of intimidating the workers and preventing striking permanent workers from persuading precariously employed contract workers to join them in walking out.

On the first day of the strike, CIL management claimed that it was having no impact on production. This transparent attempt to demoralise and confuse the strikers manifestly failed.

Earlier this week, CIL said that during the three-day work stoppage, average daily production fell by 56 percent to 573,000 tonnes, as compared with an average daily production of 1.29 million tonnes during the 10 days prior to the strike. A company executive who spoke to India's *Economic Times* stated that lost revenue amounted to at least Rs. 4 billion (\$US54 million). In the 2019–2020 fiscal year, CIL's total revenue was about Rs. 1.24 trillion (US\$16 billion). The company accounts for 80 percent of the country's total output of coal, which is the primary fuel used in electricity generation in India.

The company has now also said that there was on average 36 percent worker attendance during the three days of the strike. While management's claims should not be taken at face value, given CIL's previous lies and obvious interest in understating support for the strike, this would mean almost two-thirds of the workers were off the job at any time during the walkout.

The miners were protesting against the latest privatisation measures of India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. In mid-May, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP made a “quantum jump” in pro-investor “reforms” the centrepiece, alongside forcing workers back-to-work amid a surging COVID-19 pandemic, of their post-lockdown “economic revival” plan.

As part of this plan, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that coal mining, which has been the exclusive preserve of CIL and other central and state government-owned enterprises since Indira Gandhi's Congress party government nationalised the Coal Industry in 1975, will now be thrown open to private bidders.

Henceforth, private companies, both foreign and domestic, will be able to bid for coal blocks. In the future, they may even be permitted to export coal despite India currently importing 20 percent of its coal requirements, costing about Rs. 300 billion (US\$4 billion) annually.

In opening the coal industry to the private sector, the BJP government is realising a longstanding aim of BJP- and Congress Party-led governments alike. Last November, Reuters reported that government sources had said they intend to make coal mining in India attractive for “global miners such as Glencore PLC, BHP Group, Anglo American PLC and Peabody Energy Corp.”

In announcing the government's privatisation plans, Sitharaman said, “We have been suffocating the [coal] sector by regulating it, and preventing it from producing what is required by industry.” In other words, the environment and miners' jobs and working conditions are to be ravaged in the interests of private profit, while the government justifies the enhanced exploitation in the name of “efficiency” and “self-sufficiency.”

The strong support for the strike reflects an awareness among the CIL workers, who already labour under brutal conditions, about the threat this poses to their jobs and

wages, and to the environment.

The entry of giant transnational mining companies will inevitably herald a further increase in the contractualisation of labour. Already at CIL, as at most other Indian public sector enterprises, the past two decades have seen a massive increase in the proportion of lower-paid, precarious contract workers. Currently, more than 200,000 workers, or some 40 percent of CIL's workforce, are supplied by "body shops" or labour agencies

The workers are also opposed to CIL's plan, adopted under pressure from the Modi government, to hive off the company's design, planning and exploration arm, Central Mine Planning & Design Institute Limited (CMPDIL), into a separate entity. This move would allow CMPDIL to perform work for private companies so as to generate profit. It would also pave the way for CMPDIL's privatisation and open the door to CIL employing private mining consultancy companies.

Despite last week's strike, the BJP government is pushing full-steam ahead with its plans to open the coal industry to the private sector. It is currently soliciting bids for the first round of coal-block sales.

Meanwhile, Mahanadi Coalfields Ltd., CIL's Odisha-based subsidiary, has announced it will dock workers who participated in the "illegal" July 2-4 strike eight days' pay.

The company and government have been emboldened by the knowledge that the five trade union federations that called the July 2-4 strike are adamantly opposed to an indefinite strike that would paralyze electricity production across the country and, above all, to a working-class political challenge to the Modi government and to the ruling class agenda of austerity, privatisation, and a "global comprehensive partnership" with US imperialism that it is implementing.

Were the coal miners to make their struggle against privatisation the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive, there is no question but they would win mass support. In the months prior to the BJP government imposing its ill-prepared anti-COVID 19 lockdown, there was a mounting wave of militant worker struggles and anti-government protests. This included a one-day all-India general strike against the BJP government's big business policies in which tens of millions participated and countrywide mass protests against the Modi's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act.

The pandemic has only intensified the social crisis

facing India's workers and toilers. The government's hastily organised lockdown left tens of millions without jobs or income. Now the government, with the full backing of the ruling class, is seeking to exploit the crisis to ram through a raft of socially incendiary anti-worker measures, even as India emerges as one of the world's main COVID-19 epicentres.

The five union federations that called last week's strike against Coal India include: the Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC), the union affiliate of the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government; and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union wing of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. For decades, the CPM has functioned as an integral part of the political establishment, supporting and implementing "pro-investor" policies, while systematically containing and suppressing working class opposition. It has responded to the Indian ruling elite's embrace of Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP by shifting still further right and redoubling its efforts to tie the working class to the Congress Party and the Indian state.

The strike call was also endorsed by the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh. The BMS is the trade union arm of the fascistic RSS, the shadowy organisation that founded the BJP and to which Modi and the top BJP leaders continue to pay homage.

In an attempt to contain workers' anger, the five union federations have announced plans to hold a further day of strike action on August 18. That day is the deadline the Modi government has set for private companies, including the transnational mining giants, to submit their coal-block auction bids.

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