

Indian unions to hold one-day national strike

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Tens of millions of Indian workers will join a one-day national strike this Wednesday, September 2, in protest against the pro-investor policies of the 15-month-old Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government.

Led by the self-styled Hindu strongman Narendra Modi, India's BJP-led coalition has accelerated the pace of neoliberal "reform." It has slashed social spending, curtailed price subsidies and pressed ahead with disinvestment (partial and full privatization) of state-owned industries from Coal India and the railways to ports, airports, and intercity bus service.

The BJP government has also initiated changes to India's labor laws aimed at making it far easier for employers to lay off workers and shutter operations. And in Rajasthan, the BJP state government, at Modi's urging, has begun to privatize the public school and health systems.

Ten labor federations are sponsoring Wednesday's strike. Prominent among them are the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), respectively the labor affiliates of the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

The strike is also being supported by the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the trade union arm of what has traditionally been the Indian bourgeoisie's premier political party, the Congress Party. Speaking to reporters Sunday, INTUC President Ramen Pandey said that Congress Party head Sonia Gandhi had expressly approved the labor federation's participation in the walkout.

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS: Indian Workers Union), which is an offshoot of the Hindu supremacist RSS and politically aligned with Modi's BJP, had said that it was going to participate in Wednesday's walkout. But late last week the BMS withdrew its support, claiming that the government had addressed some of the unions' key demands.

A government delegation led by Finance Minister Arun

Jaitley held talks with the leaders of all the unions on August 26 and 27. In an attempt to convince them to call off the strike, Jaitley made a handful of vague promises—promises akin to ones the government has previously broken.

This included moving toward a 15,000 rupee (US \$230) per month national statutory minimum wage. Existing minimum wage rates, however, are largely disrespected and unenforced, with more than 90 percent of the workforce employed in the "informal" or almost entirely unregulated sector. Moreover, the Modi government recently pushed through legislation that allows small and medium enterprises in many "formal" sectors, including most industry, to self-certify their compliance with labor regulations, including those governing occupational health and safety.

Jaitley also said that the government is ready to legislate social security coverage for contract workers. This again is a fraud. In the name of providing pensions, health and other social protections to workers, the Modi government has been heavily promoting government-mandated, but privately administered social insurance schemes, under which pensions and other key protections would be tied to workers' income and the vagaries of the capitalist financial markets, not entrenched as social rights.

In respect to labor law "reform," Jaitley promised tripartite consultation with the union leaderships and big business, while continuing to emphasize the need for "flexibility"—i.e. for employers to be able to dispense with workers at will—so as to attract investment.

The government simply ignored the majority of the unions' demands, including those pertaining to protecting workers from rampant inflation, creating jobs, and halting privatization and the contracting out of work.

Jaitley and the BJP were nonetheless hoping that they could avert Wednesday's walkout and this for two reasons.

First, they fear that any significant disruption in Indian production and economic life will adversely impact their drive to drum up foreign investment by promoting India

as the go-to destination for cheap labor. One of Modi's key selling points in his "Make in India" campaign is that wages in India are significantly lower than in China and that this gap has grown in recent years. This is because Chinese employers have had to concede wage rises in the face of mounting worker unrest.

The government also recognizes that class relations are fraught and is concerned that any worker mobilization, however limited and politically neutered by the unions, could serve as a stimulus to worker resistance.

The Indian economy has grown significantly since the Indian bourgeoisie, in 1991, abandoned its state-led development strategy in favor of making India a cheap-labor production center for world capital. The fruits of this growth, however, have been almost entirely monopolized by the corporate elite and the most privileged sections of the middle class.

In real terms, workers' wages have stagnated, and this in a country where large swathes of the population survive on less than US \$2 per day and there is no social safety net to speak of. Much of the population is jobless or underemployed. Even the Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Assocham) concedes that the years of rapid economic growth in the last decade when India's economy was expanding by 8 percent or more per annum were years of "jobless growth." Assocham estimates that five million jobs were actually lost between 2004-5 and 2009-10.

On the part of the trade unions and the various political parties with which they are allied, Wednesday's strike is a rightwing maneuver aimed at containing the growing anger in the working class and covering up their own role in the implementation of the Indian bourgeoisie's neoliberal agenda.

Such one-day protest strikes have now become virtually annual events, with the unions insisting, despite the ever-widening assault on the working class and rural toilers, that the government, whether led by the Congress, BJP, or various regional and casteist bourgeois parties can be pressured into adopting "pro-people" policies.

As in the previous fifteen one-day general strikes since 1991, the Stalinist CPI and CPM and their union affiliates, the AITUC and CITU, are playing the leading political role.

While the Stalinists will rail against the "neoliberal" policies of Modi, they propped up a succession of governments between 1991 and 2008, many of them Congress-led, that pressed forward with pro-market reform. Moreover, in those states where the CPM and CPI

and their Left Front allies have formed the government—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura—the Stalinists have pursued what they themselves term "pro-investor" policies. This includes lavishing tax concessions on big business, slashing social spending, banning strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sector and violently suppressing peasant opposition to land expropriations for big-business development projects.

The Stalinists touted the planned participation of the rightwing, pro-government BMS in Wednesday's strike as testimony to the breadth of the opposition movement. And they continue to hail the participation of the Congress-led INTUC and the labor fronts of various regional parties—including that of the Shiva Sena, a fascistic party that is part of the BJP's National Democratic Alliance coalition—"as an important development." By so doing, the Stalinists are helping provide these discredited rightwing parties with "progressive" credentials and preparing to once again politically subordinate the working class to various electoral fronts and parliamentary and governmental maneuvers with them.

There is no question but that the working class is on a collision course with the Modi government and the Indian bourgeoisie as a whole. But to prevail in the coming confrontation it needs an entirely new strategy based on the independent political mobilization of the working class and a socialist and internationalist program.



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