

India: General strike challenges BJP government

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One year ago, on September 2, 2015, a general strike by 150 million workers brought India to a standstill. Ten trade unions called the strike, demanding implementation of a 12 point charter that included demands for a significant pay rise, a monthly minimum wage of 15,000 Rupees, a pension of 3,000 Rupees for all workers and against privatisations and anti-trade union laws.

The strike clearly was a mighty sign of resistance against the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Narendra Modi, which has been in central government since 2014. It also forced the government to form a committee of cabinet ministers, including figures like Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and Labour Minister Bandar Dattatreya, to bargain with trade union leaders,.

The committee met just once with the union leaders of the 2015 general strike. Even though the strike shook the Indian ruling class and its political parties, and won some concessions or at least delayed attacks in several sectors, it was not enough to force the government to agree to the central demands of the charter.

More provocatively, since then, although the government had several meetings with trades union leaders, these were not with the unions that led the general strike. On the contrary, it was only with the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, BMS, the trade union of the paramilitary, right wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS, which is close to the BJP government.

A rise in prices, as well as ongoing provocations and attacks by the government, ultimately led to the call for an all-out general strike today, September 2, 2016, by the joint platform of Central Trade Unions, CTUs, together with the Independent National Federations of employees of different industries and services including the Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers.

In a declaration on August 31, Jaitley tried to appease the trade unions and to persuade them to call off the strike. He promised to raise the minimum wage to 350 Rupees per day and reforms of the trade union laws. However, the pay rise would exclude many workers, creating a division amongst those who are called out to strike and, in any case, would only mean a monthly wage of 9,000 Rupees, just half the figure demanded by the trades unions.

Furthermore, members of the cabinet declared that several of the demands made by the trades unions were not their business, because they were political. Behind this is surely the fear that not only the Congress party, which controls several of the striking trade unions could benefit, but that the ranks of the striking workers could become more confident in interfering in political issues more generally.

Not surprisingly, the BMS supported the government proposals and declared that it would not go on strike, which it had not planned to do anyway. While BMS leaders' statements are obviously intended to help the government and the media to divide the ranks of the strikers, their move shows something else, too. They

are afraid that their own rank and file members are going to join the strike, as has happened last year at a local level.

Fortunately, the All India Trade Union Congress, AITUC, and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, CITU, did not call off the strike, but reaffirmed their attempts to make the strike even bigger than last year, with the goal to bring as many as 180 million workers out on strike. This number alone clearly shows that the Indian working class has become one of the most important actors within the international class struggle. In recent years, trade union organisation has made important steps forward in India.

At the same time, the fact that it took the trade union leaders more than a year to bring out the workers again for their unfulfilled but urgent demands, shows that politically there is still a long way to go. This is made even clearer, when it is remembered that half of those leaders are in the pocket of the Congress Party, which ruled India for more than half a century, while other, more left wing, leaders are affiliated to the reformist Communist party of India (Marxist) CPI(M).

The ruling class and the BJP are certainly afraid of this week's general strike, and rightly so, but they are even more fearful of meeting the unions' demands because this could empower workers and encourage them to raise more demands while 'alienating' foreign investors. Unfortunately, some of the trade union leaders also seem to be afraid of taking really decisive measures. Their fear, however, is that this could lead to a situation where their normal strategy of compromising with government officials could become inoperable if workers form democratic strike committees at local, regional and even national level to coordinate and lead their action.

Astonishingly, over the last year, some union leaders were actually still 'surprised' that the government would not meet with them but only with the BMS leaders. One of the main immediate tasks therefore is to ensure that they are not surprised again if the government does not meet their demands. Socialists in India should demand that those leaders do not postpone the next strike action to September 2, 2017, but instead strengthen links between the unions as well as encouraging rank and file organisation which will be crucial if more than a 'simple' one day general strike is needed to force the government to its knees.

Nonetheless, despite these important political questions, today's general strike is an encouraging step forward for the working class movement on the Indian subcontinent and internationally. It is also a slap in the face to those bourgeois apologists who try to convince the oppressed globally that 'there is no such thing as a working class, and even if there were it would no longer be the agent of change in society?'. The courageous Indian workers are showing today that this is an outrageous lie. Socialists on the Indian subcontinent should make sure that those workers understand their own role as the agents of change, linking the fight for immediate economic demands to the fight for socialism and freedom under the banner of a new revolutionary party in India.

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