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India's Telangana state government gives fresh ultimatum to 48,000 fired strikers

Today is the deadline that the chief minister of the southern Indian state of Telangana has given 48,000 Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) workers to end their month-long strike against low wages, onerous working conditions, and the impending privatization of the TSRTC or face dismissal.

Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao escalated his attack on the TSRTC bus drivers, mechanics, maintenance workers and ticket collectors at the conclusion of a five-hour cabinet meeting Saturday. He announced that his Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) government has taken an “irrevocable” decision to privatize half of the TSRTC’s routes and issued his back-to-work ultimatum.



Policemen detain activists during a day long shut-down called by Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) and opposition political parties in Hyderabad, India, Saturday, Oct. 19, 2019. Employees and worker unions of TSRTC began the indefinite strike from Oct. 5 across Telangana, demanding a merger with the government, among others. (AP Photo/Mahesh Kumar A.)

From the very beginning of the strike, K. Chandrasekhar Rao or, as he is commonly known, KCR has been determined to break the workers' resistance and purge at least the most militant workers. He arbitrarily declared the strike "illegal" and threatened the workers with termination if they did not report for work by Oct. 5 at 6 p.m., just hours after the strike began.

To the dismay of this petty autocrat, only a thousand workers succumbed to his draconian threats.

Subsequently KCR provocatively declared that the 48,000 who remained on strike had "self-dismissed," illegally withheld their pay for September, and refused any substantive talks with the Joint Action Committee (JAC) of the TSRTC unions. But clearly stung by the mass resistance, KCR did not instruct TSRTC management to issue the 48,000 defiant workers with formal dismissal notices.

Last week, Telangana's chief minister said he would be open to the TSRTC workers returning to their jobs, but only if they agreed 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."

There is widespread support for the TSRTC strikers in Telangana and, in so far as their struggle has become known, across India. Police have arrested hundreds of people for participating in actions in support of the victimized TSRTC workers.

In 2015, the Telangana High Court quickly declared a TSRTC strike illegal, helping the TRS government break it. Fearing that the current clash between the government and the transport workers could become the catalyst for a broader working class upsurge, the High Court has, thus far, been far more circumspect. Some two weeks into the strike, the court declared it would hold in abeyance a ruling on the strike's legality, admonished both the government and unions, and instructed the government to return to the bargaining table.

A call to make the defence of the victimized TSRTC workers the spearhead of a working class counter-offensive against privatization and the casualization of work would resonate across India, since all workers, including transport workers in other states, teachers, coal miners, and those employed by Indian's globally connected automakers, are facing similar attacks.

Instead, the unions and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, are doing everything in their power to quarantine the TSRTC workers' militant struggle, and to encourage them to put their trust in the High Court and the maneuvers of Telangana's opposition parties. This includes the Congress, the party that long spearheaded the ruling elite's push to make India a cheap-labor haven for transnational corporations and a "global strategic partner" of US imperialism, and India's current governing party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

As KCR and his cabinet were plotting the escalation of their all-out assault on the TSRTC workers Saturday, the leaders of JAC were meeting with opposition party representatives, including leaders of BJP's state unit and the CPI.

Following this meeting and while the TRS cabinet meeting remained in session, JAC Convener E. Ashwathama Reddy told a press conference, "Whatever announcement comes [out of the cabinet meeting], [workers] should not worry. The strike will continue."

In fact Reddy's remarks were a devastating self-indictment of the JAC, and underscore the urgency of the TSRTC workers taking the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist unions.

The JAC convenor announced that the unions will request a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-hand man, Amit Shah. "We will meet Home Minister Amit Shah," said Reddy, and explain the situation and request him to look into it."

Shah is an inveterate enemy of the working class, who has been an accomplice in all Modi's crimes, including as Gujarat state chief minister, Modi instigated the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom. A Hindu supremacist demagogue, Shah has repeatedly described poverty-stricken Bangladesh migrants as "termites," while promising to extend the National Citizens Register, under which two million Muslims in the north-eastern state of Assam have been targeted for deportation, across India.

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Modi's and Shah's whipping of communal reaction is aimed at intimidating and splitting the working class, so as to press forward with the imposition of pro-investor policies. In recent weeks, the BJP government has dramatically cut corporate taxes, accelerated its privatization drive, raised or entirely lifted foreign investment caps, and funneled vast sums that could have been used to meet crying social needs to the country's ailing banks.

In moving to privatize the TSRTC, KCR and the Telangana state government are in fact only following the policy advocated by Shah's cabinet colleague Nitin Gadkari, the minister of road transport and highways. Earlier this year, Gadkari publicly exhorted India's state governments to privatize public transport since according to him it is an intolerable drain on the exchequer. No matter that for hundreds of millions of Indians relatively inexpensive public road transport is an essential service for commuting to work or school and for long-distance travel.

Faced with mounting social opposition, capitalist ruling elites from France and Spain to Chile and Ecuador are turning to violent repression. Undoubtedly, KCR has been emboldened in his assault on the TSRTC workers by the strong support big business, the courts, and the political establishment have given to Modi and Shah in their illegal abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status and imposition of a three-month state-of-siege on a region that is home to more than 12 million people.

Speaking to the press at the conclusion of Saturday's TRS cabinet meeting, KCR railed against the striking workers. He again ruled out any negotiations on the workers' principal demand: that the TSRTC, a state government-owned agency run on for-profit principles, be fused with the state government, so as to provide increased job protection and better benefits.

"If they don't return to work by 5 November midnight, we will privatise the remaining 5,000 routes," declared Telangana's chief minister.

For years, the TRS government has deliberately run the state-owned bus company into the ground, starving it of funds, so as to provide a pretext for its privatization.

Yet, in a statement that points to the price hikes and services cut that will accompany privatization, KCR said it was necessary to hand over almost half of the company's routes to private bus companies so as to provide them a "level-playing field." Of course, he didn't explain why it is the duty of an elected state government to create conditions for private bus operators to profiteer off the public.

Currently, the TSRTC plies some 10,400 routes in Telangana and neighboring states. Out of these, 5,100 routes are to be handed over to private companies in lieu of upgrading the dilapidated TSRTC bus fleet.

The TSRTC workers have shown great courage in defying the government's threats and attempt to starve them into submission. The strike is further testament to the growing radicalization of the working class in India and internationally. Only a few years ago, many of the TSRTC workers were misled by the unions and the Stalinist parties into supporting the agitation for a separate Telangana state. Led by KCR and his TRS, the Telangana separatist movement exploited popular anger over unemployment and other social issues to advance the reactionary and divisive demand of the Telangana elite for its own regional state apparatus.

According to the *Hindu Business Line*, the JAC held a further meeting Sunday with the purported purpose of gauging the current mood of the workers. There have been some reports that a few of the workers have trickled back to work. In so far as this is true, it is because they have been worn down by the trade unions and Stalinist parties refusal to fight to mobilize the wider working class in an uncompromising industrial and political offensive against the right-wing KCR government and against the BJP regime in New Delhi that stands behind it.

5 November 2019