

General strike in India: The Message of September 2: Secure Land & Labour Rights, Stop Sanghi Subversion

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On September 2 India witnessed a powerful general strike cutting across most sectors of the economy and civil administration. The strike had been called jointly by central trade unions and supported actively by almost all sections of the Indian Left. Initially, the RSS-led pro-BJP Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) was also a signatory to the strike call. But at the behest of the RSS, the BMS eventually withdrew from the strike. But undeterred by the BMS backout and empty announcements made by the Prime Minister in the recent session of the Indian Labour Conference, millions of workers joined the strike and made it clear that the Indian working class would resist the Modi government's proposed anti-worker labour reforms tooth and nail.

The impact of the strike was huge in sectors like road transport, banking and insurance, and various mining and manufacturing units. Offices and educational institutions too remained virtually closed in many areas. But what made the strike really a mass action of the working class was the massive participation of contract and casual workers and honorarium- and incentive-based employees, and workers in the unorganized sector. The solidarity of students, peasants, small traders and shopkeepers transformed the workers' strike into a complete shutdown in several states. The Modi government's sinister attempt to justify its labour reform plan in the name of solving the unemployment problem and bringing benefits to the unorganised sector thus met with a resounding rebuff.

The strike came close on the heels of the Modi government's admission of defeat on the issue of the pro-corporate landgrab ordinance. Despite repeated re-promulgation of the ordinance, the government failed to convert it into law and eventually had to allow the ordinance to lapse or die. The fact that the government had to beat a retreat on an ordinance which was so central to Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' campaign must have inspired the working class with renewed confidence and courage in its battle with the Modi regime against the proposed labour reforms, the other core plank of Modi's economic agenda. Anger against the relentless rise in prices of essential commodities and services, the continuing spate of scams and various dictatorial moves of the BJP turned the strike into an emphatic expression of growing popular opposition to the Modi government.

In view of the popular support for the strike, even BJP-led state governments did not dare to crush it with a heavy hand. But it was the TMC government of West Bengal which unleashed severe repression on the strikers, with the police and TMC goons often working in tandem. There are reports of trade union leaders having been attacked on the eve of the strike, while on the day of the strike, TMC goons and the police visibly went berserk, brutally beating up and injuring strikers and leaders of various Left parties in several districts. Those who remember West Bengal of the mid-1970s during the reign of semi-fascist terror under Siddharth Shankar Ray, the TMC-police terror of September 2 rekindled memories of those days of unmitigated police repression and state-sponsored Youth Congress hooliganism and violence.

While the strike epitomised the bold resolve, courage and capacity of the working class to resist the anti-people offensive of the Modi government, what happened in Delhi immediately after the strike can only be described as a wake-up call for every citizen who cares for democracy in India. In one of his recent rallies in Bihar, Modi said people who are insisting on his accountability for his government's performance must wait till 2019. Only a few days later, the Prime Minister and key ministers of his cabinet deposed before the RSS in the national capital, subjecting the government's performance to scrutiny by the RSS top brass. So, the RSS, which was banned after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the ban was lifted only after it gave a written undertaking declaring its loyalty to the Constitution and National Flag of India, has now come out of the shadows to impose itself as a super-government and super-cabinet openly calling the shots.

Just as we cannot allow the corporate brigade to plunder the precious resources of the country, we cannot allow the Sangh-BJP combine to play with the intellectual resources of the country and undermine the basic tenets of Indian Constitution. The supremacy of the people and the principles and institutions of democracy must prevail and the RSS campaign of institutional takeover and subversion must be stopped.

All India Workers' Strike against Modi Raj and Its Anti-Worker, Anti-People Policies

Workers across the country responded to the call of 10 central trade unions including AICCTU, as well as several workers' welfare associations and organized the first All India strike in the Modi regime for a 12 point charter of demands and against the current anti-people policies of the Central government. During the strike, the anger of the working class against the attempts of the government to amend labour laws in favour of corporates was particularly visible. These are amendments which would remove 70% of the workers from the ambit of the labour laws for which the workers have fought since British times and secured after great sacrifices. In addition, anger against spiraling prices, rising unemployment and retrenchment, and job insecurity made this countrywide strike a unique success.

In a joint statement the workers' organizations which called for the strike said that the strike was pervasively successful in the transport, coal, electricity, banking, insurance, state government personnel, port, defence, communication and automobile sectors. Lakhs of workers came out on the streets and expressed their anger in all small and big towns as well as in that national capital Delhi. The unions strongly condemned the police oppression on trade union activists in West Bengal and the attacks by Trinamool and Congress goons and termed it state sponsored terrorism. Worker-activists have also been arrested in other parts of the country and there has been lathi charge in several places. Despite all this, the strike has been hugely successful in these places.

In most states, government road transport workers joined in the strike; even private transport was partially affected. Roadways buses did not run in Delhi, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and other states. Defence production came to a standstill; about 5 lakh workers from this sector took part in the strike. The strike was 100% successful in major finance sectors like banking and insurance. About 20 lakh workers from public and private finance sectors participated in the strike. The strike was successful in coal mines and even the BMS had to join the strike in these places. The hartal was fully effective in iron ore, bauxite, copper, aluminum and other mines. The strike affected the steel sector also and for the first time workers struck work on a large scale at the Bhilai Steel Plant. The strike was successful in the postal department. Postal workers organized dharnas and meetings in front of their offices. There was a near total strike in the oil sector across the country. The strike had a wide spread effect in tea gardens in eastern and southern India.

Along with AICCTU, the Khet aur Gramin Mazdoor Sabha (AIARLA) put in all efforts for the success of the strike and both these organizations mobilized urban and rural workers on the day of the strike

and brought them on to the streets. Activists of CPI(ML) and its student-youth organizations also came out on the streets to show support in solidarity with the workers.

Delhi: The strike was successful in all industrial areas of Delhi and NCR including Jhilmil, Wazirpur, Patparganj, Bhorgarh, Bawana and Noida. Protest rallies and processions were taken out in all places. A large section of auto-rickshaw drivers remained off the roads. Security workers affiliated to AICCTU organised a protest dharna at Jantar Mantar. Hundreds of construction workers took part in strike processions in various industrial areas. AICCTU held out a workers' march in Noida where many workers who were jailed for participating in All India General Strike of 2012 took part very enthusiastically.

The impact of the strike was so overwhelming that even non-unionized unorganised sector workers came onto streets. Trade unions also held a road block near ITO. More than a thousand contractual workers at JNU whose union is affiliated to AICCTU went on a total strike bringing work at the University canteen, library and sanitation office to a standstill. The protest was addressed by Comrades Urmila and Anju and supported by JNUTA, JNUSU and many student organizations on campus. All through the strike as well as during its preparations and propaganda, the issues of contract workers' regularisation and Minimum Wage implementation were raised emphatically besides other demands.

West Bengal: Workers and agricultural workers made the strike a success throughout the state despite threats and attacks from TMC goons, affecting work in jute, tea, engineering and other industries. Rallies and road blocks were held throughout the state. In Kolkata, central trade unions organized an impressive protest at Hazra crossing, and 17 Left parties held a huge joint rally at Moulali. AICCTU leaders addressed these programmes. CCW member Abhijeet Bhattacharya and 7 other comrades were arrested while protesting in Siliguri. On 1 September Congress goons had attacked AICCTU leader Pradeep Bhattacharya in Hooghly district while he was campaigning for the strike. CPI(ML) comrades were also arrested in Jalpaiguri.

Bihar: Over 50 unions including AIARLA and Bihar State Construction Workers' Union affiliated to AICCTU took out rallies in all districts. Agri and rural workers, government school and midday meal workers in rural areas held block level protests. In Patna, protests, meetings, road and rail blocks were organized at Gandhi maidan, Deedarganj, Bankaghat station, Phulwarisharif (by workers of Sudha dairy), and Nalanda biscuit factory. Workers under the joint banners of AICCTU, CITU, INTUC, AIUTUC, AITUC and other central trade unions took out a successful march from Gandhi maidan despite autocratic efforts by the police to prevent it. A large number of women workers also joined the march and meeting. Hundreds of ASHA workers led by AIPWA leaders Shashi Yadav and Saroj Choube protested before the CM and expressed anger that the agreement reached after their state wide strike had not yet been fulfilled. By evening the officials assured the workers that the terms of the agreement would be implemented.

Khet workers, construction workers, midday meal workers, beedi workers, contractual workers and women workers, government and non-government workers, unorganized workers, came out on the streets in Fatuha, Jamui, Bhagalpur, Bihpur, Jagdishpur, Kahalgaon, Darbhanga, Jehanabad, Bhojpur, Vaishali, Chhapra, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur, Nalanda, Gaya, Aurangabad, Purnea, Supoul, Motihari, Betiya, and other districts. Large numbers of organized and unorganized workers in these places under AICCTU, CITU and other unions joined the strike and brought work to a standstill, conducting rallies, marches, meetings, and blocking roads and rail as well in some places. Government workers including bank and insurance workers also joined the strike.

Jharkhand: The strike was 100% successful in the coal-belt (koylanchal) of Jharkhand and coal production came to a complete standstill. Left unions took out a joint rally in Dhanbad. Midday meal

workers and rasoiya associations also took out rallies. Coal outsourcing was also fully stopped. The Suvarnarekha express was stopped for 3 hours.

90% contract workers and 10% regular workers went on strike at the Bokaro Steel Plant. All three areas of Bermo colliery remained closed. Joint trade union marches, meetings, and effigy burnings of PM Modi were held at various places in Bokaro district. Production and transportation in CCCL areas including Ramgarh, New Karnapura, and Peeparvar and small industries in Ramgarh remained closed. At Ranchi there was a strike after a long gap at HEC in which even the BMS was forced to join. Strikes, protests, rail blocks and arrests also took place at Jamshedpur, Pakur-Malpahadi, Ranchi, Tata Petroleum depot, Sahibganj, Godda, Dumka, Gomiya, Latehar, Tori and Bundu. Medical representative unions throughout the state joined the strike.

Hundreds of construction workers in Ranchi and Gumla district joined the strike led by Com. Shubhendu Sen and Bhuneshwar Kewat. A march and meeting at Albert Ekka chowk was also joined by CPI student organization AISF. Kodarma thermal power workers and transmission line workers also went on strike. The strike was supported by non-gazetted workers' associations, and health workers' unions in CIP (Kanke). A rally was taken out in Giridih under the banners of CPI(ML), AICCTU, Jharkhand General Mazdoor Union and CMW. Motor transport workers in Bagodar joined the strike.

Uttar Pradesh: In Lucknow construction workers' unions affiliated to AICCTU took out a rally and meeting at Hazratganj chowk addressed by CPI(ML), AICCTU and JASAM leaders. In Kanpur joint trade union picketing, rasta roko, and hartal was held at Dadanagar Industrial area, Panki, Fasalganj, and Jajmau area tanneries. Marches, meetings, protests and effigy burnings were held at Faizabad, Moradabad, Allahabad, Varanasi, Ghazipur, Mughalserai (Chandauli district), Phulpur, Devariya (by ASHA workers) and other districts. Speakers addressing the meetings said that the country wide strike signifies the beginning of the end for the Modi government. They also pointed out the complicity of the SP government in UP in large scale corruption, nepotism, and anti-worker activities. They stressed the need for a united fight against the pro-corporate and anti-people policies of the central and state governments. CPI(ML), AICCTU, AIARLA, and AISA activists came out in large numbers to make the strike a big success.

Uttarakhand: Hundreds of banking, insurance, ASHA, anganwadi workers and workers from other sectors staged a dharna in Budhh Park at Haldwani (Nainital) under the initiative of AICCTU. Earlier, rallies were taken out by Uttarakhand ASHA health workers' union at Roadways bus station, ASHA unions and teachers' unions in Naiital town, Ramnagar, Betlaghat, and Lalkuan. Several trade unions jointly organized a huge meeting at Ambedkar Park in Udham Singh Nagar district. ASHA union organized a rally in Bajpur. Protests by bus service workers and ASHA workers were also held at Ranikhet in Almora district, Bhikiyasain, Sult, Pithoragarh, Dharchula (by NHPC and ASHA workers), Garhwal zone, and Shrinagar. Protests could not be held in hill areas due to the strike by bus unions.

Chhattisgarh: For the first time in its history, there was such an effective strike by workers at the Bhilai Steel Plant, participated in by about 30% regular workers and 70% contract workers under the joint trade union banners including Centre for Steel Workers affiliated to AICCTU. Contractual workers of the Bhilai municipality also joined the strike. The strike was fully successful in Balco at Korba led by the newly formed Aluminium Kamgar Sangh affiliated to AICCTU. The strike was also successful in Rajnandgaon, Bilaspur, Balod, Kawardha, Raipur, Durg and other districts.

Odisha: In Odisha, life slowed down considerably and the people gave good support to the bandh. Contractual railway workers obstructed rail traffic at Puri, Bhubaneswar and Cuttack stations. Safai Karmachari Sangh held a rally up to Bhubneswar railway station. The Dibrugarh-Bangalore express

was stopped at Cuttack by sanitation workers. In Khurda industrial area workers led by AICCTU played a big role in the campaign against the Modi government's anti-people policies. Steel workers and construction workers joined the strike at the Rourkela Steel Plant.

Karnataka: AICCTU unit of Karnataka actively participated in all India strike on 2nd Sep. 2015 in various centres including Bangalore, Koppal, Mangalore, Mysore and Harapanahalli. BMTC and KSRTC transport services were completely off the road which made the strike total. The transport strike acted as a morale booster for the strikers. Auto and taxi drivers also participated in significant numbers. Public sector participation was also complete. All public sector units in Bangalore came to a grinding halt. Participation of bank and insurance employees was also significant. Many independent trade unions operating at various factory levels like Toyota also came out on the streets on the day of strike and joined the rally. Participation of contract workers and other unorganized workers like garments, construction, rice mill, brick kilns, etc., was also significant. Schools and colleges were also forced to close down because of non availability of bus services.

In Bangalore, in addition to issuing formal strike calls in factories where AICCTU has trade unions, AICCTU also organized Strike Enforcement Rallies in areas surrounding the two major international centres of capital in Bangalore like International Technology park Ltd (ITPL) and Electronic City. AICCTU Workers marched through the streets of industrial estates, forced down the shutters in companies that did not give a heed to the strike call and thousands of workers were sent home back. Anticipating untoward incidents, many IT companies - corporate and MNCs - also declared leave for their employees. The strike enforcement rally around ITPL led by Com. Appanna was an independent rally by AICCTU while a similar independent rally led by Com. Mohan around Electronic City joined the culmination meeting held by all trade unions in the area. Readymix industry workers, street vendors and BOSCH contract workers of AICCTU played a significant role in enforcement of strike call in these two major centres in Bangalore.

Thousands of workers participated in the Joint central rally in Bangalore called by all trade unions in spite of absence of public transport services. In addition to sanitation workers, contract workers of Bangalore water supply, NIMHANS hospital, race course, construction, etc., joined the strike rally representing AICCTU. The participation of workers of the Federation of Bangalore Street Vendors, recently affiliated to AICCTU, was also significant. The rally from Bangalore Town Hall culminated in a public meeting near Freedom Park which was addressed by leaders of all central trade unions.

The bandh call was also successful in major centres in districts like Koppal, Gangavati and Karatagi. Thousands of workers participated in rallies in each centre. Participation of rice mill workers, sanitation workers and other unorganized workers were quite significant in the implementation of strike call in the district. In Mangalore, AICCTU organized an independent rally enforcing strike in Baikampady Industrial Estate. The rally started from BPCL, LPG Plant, marched through the streets of the industrial estate and culminated in a public meeting at Baikampady town.

A joint central rally held in Mysore was joined by workers of Lafarge, Mysore race Course and also AIARLA. Unorganised workers and agricultural labourers of AIARLA also participated in the joint rally and public meeting organized by all trade unions in Harapanahalli.

Puducherry: A well planned joint action Committee of all central trade unions like AICCTU, AITUC, CITU, TUCC, AIUTUC, INTUC, BMS and other regional Trade Unions such as LPF and PLLF (affiliate of VCK) was formed way back in the first week of August '2015 to highlight 12 points charter as resolved in the Central convention held at New Delhi. It was also decided to incorporate state level demands of Puducherry Working Class and to attack the anti-labour policies of ruling AINRC government led by N.Rangasamy. On 13th August a state level workers convention was organized to gear up the workers for the September'2 general strike. On 17th August CPI(ML),

CPI(M) and CPI held an open convention on "Make September 2 General strike a grand success and oust the autocratic and anti labour Rangasamy AINRC government". A large section of working people and democratic forces attended the convention.

On 2 September, a total bandh was observed in Puducherry and Karaikal regions of Puducherry UT. All shops and establishments including private schools and Colleges declared holiday. Students' attendance in government schools and colleges were near zero. All affiliated unions of AICCTU and construction industry workers struck work. Agriculture and rural workers also did not turn to work. Road roko was held in 14 places of Puducherry and Karaikal. Thousands of workers actively participated in picketing and courted arrested.

AICCTU played a leading role in organizing total strike in Sederapet Industrial Estate which is the biggest industrial area of Puducherry UT. CPI(ML), AICCTU, AICWF, AIARLA held road roko in five places. In Puducherry town the contingent was led by Com. S. Balasubramanian, State Secretary CPI(ML) and Com. S. Purushothaman, State Secretary, AICCTU. Hundreds of workers took out a big rally on the strike day in Sederapet Industrial area. The biggest contingent of striking workers was led by Com. S. Motilal, State Committee Member, CPI(ML) and Com. R. Saravanan, State Secretary AICCTU.

Private transport was off road completely and there were skeleton services of State Transport Corporation. Banking, Insurance Postal services were totally hit. BSNL employees struck work. Puducherry state government employee's federations supported the bandh and strike. Confederation of state government employees gave a strike call and took out a rally and courted arrest near Head post office. Another Federation of state government employees staged a big demonstration in support of 12 points charter and Railway employees also held a demonstration in the evening.

Rest of the Country: The strike was also successful in Boisar (Mumbai), Chandigarh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Assam. In Tamilnadu, unions influenced by AICCTU joined in the strike at Chennai city and Ambattur industrial areas. A joint rally of 2,000 workers was taken out in Coimbatore in which AICCTU played a significant role. Sanitation workers and women workers joined the rally in large numbers. Rallies were also taken out in industrial areas of Salem, Tiruvallur, Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Tiruchi and Karur in which workers associated with AICCTU took part.

AICCTU Press Relelase

In a press statement AICCTU congratulated the working class of India for the unprecedented success of the general strike. It said- "This first one-day all-India workers' strike against Modi govt. was befitting response to the blatant anti-worker policies of this govt. particularly its anti-worker amendments in labour laws.

AICCTU strongly condemned the attacks and repression let loose on striking workers and their leaders by TMC goons and police administration in West Bengal. It also deplored the arrest of workers and leaders of various trade unions by police including lathi-charge in various states.

P.S.

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