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India

The World's Largest General Strike

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150 million workers walked off the job, but the media continues to ignore it.

Trade unions leaders are reticent to say how many people struck work on September 2, 2016. They simply cannot offer a firm number. But they do say that the strike – the seventeenth general strike since India adopted its new economic policy in 1991 – has been the largest ever. The corporate news media – no fan of strikes – reported that the number of strikers exceeded the estimated 150 million workers. A number of newspapers suggested that 180 million Indian workers walked off the job. If that is the case, then this is the largest reported general strike in history.

And yet, it has not been given much consideration in the media. Few front page stories, fewer pictures of marching workers outside their silent factories and banks, tea gardens and bus stations. The sensibility of individual journalists can only rarely break through the wall of cynicism built by the owners of the press and the culture they would like to create. For them, workers' struggles are an inconvenience to daily life. It is far better for the corporate media to project a strike as a disturbance, as a nuisance to a citizenry that seems to live apart from the workers. It is middle-class outrage that defines the coverage of a strike, not the issues that move workers to take this heart-felt and difficult action. The strike is treated as archaic, as a holdover from another time. It is not seen as a necessary means for workers to voice their frustrations and hopes. The red flags, the slogans, and the speeches – these are painted with embarrassment. It is as if turning one's eyes from them would somehow make them disappear.

Deprivation

A leading international business consultancy firm reported – a few years ago – that 680 million Indians live in deprivation. These people – half the Indian population – are deprived of the basics of life such as food, energy, housing, drinking water, sanitation, health care, education and social security. Most of Indians workers and peasants count amongst the deprived. Ninety per cent of India's workers are in the informal sector, where protections at the workplace are minimal and their rights to form unions virtually non-existent. These workers are not marginal to India's growth agenda. In 2002, the National Commission on Labour found that "the primary source of future work for all Indians" would be in the informal sector, which already produced over half the Gross Domestic Product. The future of Indian labour, then, is informal with occasional rights delivered to prevent grotesque violations of human dignity. Hope for the Indian worker is simply not part of the agenda of the current dispensation in India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who once more zipped off as part of his endless world tour, did not pay heed to these workers. His goal is to increase India's growth rate, which – as judged by the example of when he was Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat – can be accomplished by a cannibal like attitude towards workers' rights and the livelihood of the poor. Selling off state assets, giving hugely lucrative deals to private business and opening the doors of India's economy to Foreign Direct Investment are the mechanisms to increase the growth rate. None of these strategies, as even the International Monetary Fund acknowledges, will lead to social equality. This growth trajectory leads to greater inequality, to less power for workers and more deprivation.

Class Struggle

Only four per cent of the Indian workforce is in unions. If these unions merely fought to defend their tenuous rights, their power would erode even further. Union power has suffered greatly since the Indian economy liberalised in 1991,

with Supreme Court judgments against union democracy and with the global commodity chain pitting Indian workers against workers elsewhere. It is to the great credit of the Indian trade unions that they have embraced – in different tempos – the labour conditions and living conditions of workers and peasants in the informal sector. What power remains with unions can only grow if they do what they have been doing – namely, to turn towards the immense mass of the informal workers and peasants and draw them into the culture of unions and class struggle.

The class struggle is not the invention of the unions or the workers. It is a fact of life for labour in the capitalist system. The capitalist, who buys the labour power of workers, seeks to make that labour power as efficient and productive as possible. The capitalist retains the gains from this productivity, sloughing off the worker to their slums at night to find a way to get the energy to come back the next day. It is this pressure to be more productive and to donate the gains of their productivity to the capitalist that is the essence of the class struggle. When the worker wants a better share of the output, the capitalist does not listen. It is the strike – an invention of the 19th century – that provides the workers with a voice to enter the class struggle in a conscious way.

In India, the first strike was in April-May 1862, when the railway workers of Howrah Railway Station struck over the right to an 8 Hour Day. What inconveniences the strike produces to the middle class has to be weighed against the daily ‘inconveniences’ that the workers endure as their extra productivity is seized by the capitalists. Those workers in 1862 did not want an interminable ten-hour shift that depleted them of their life. Their strike allowed them to say: we will not work more than eight hours. The critic of the strike will say, surely there are other ways to get your voice heard. No other way has been shown to the worker, who had neither the political power to ‘lobby’ nor the economic power to dominate the media. It is silent, but for these festivals of the working-class.

From Gujarat to Kerala

Workers in Narendra Modi’s home state of Gujarat joined the strike with great enthusiasm. This included over seventy thousand crèche and mid-day meal workers as well as port workers in Bhavnagar. Garment workers in Tamil Nadu and automobile factory workers in Karnataka closed their shops. Bank and insurance employees joined power loom operators and iron ore miners, while transport workers across the country decided to stand outside their bus and truck depots. Communist unions joined with other unions to ensure the widest mobilisation of workers.

Each local union in this strike had its own grievances, its own worries and frustrations. But the broad issues that united these millions of workers revolved around the demand for workplace democracy, the demand for a greater share of the social wealth and the demand for a less toxic social landscape. The workers – through their unions – took their twelve point demands to the government, which ignored them. At the last minute, when it seemed as if the strike would be robust, the government attempted to deliver small concessions. This was not sufficient. It was, as the labour unions put it, an insult. There is no expectation that the strike itself would lead to major concessions from the government. After all, last year, 150 million workers went on strike and the government did not shift from its anti-worker policies. Instead, the government of Narendra Modi deepened its commitment to ‘labour market reforms’ – namely to eviscerate unions and to enhance the right to fire workers at will.

What the strike says is that India’s workers remain alive to the class struggle. They have not surrendered to Reality. In 1991, when the government decided to open the economy to the turbulent interests of global capital, the workers rebelled. In August 1992, textile workers in Bombay took to the streets in their undergarments – they declared that the new order would leave them in abject poverty. Their symbolic gesture is the current reality.

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