

India: Strikes and Self-organization

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Since 2014, a coalition led by the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP, Party of the Indian People, has ruled under Narendra Modi. India competes as a location for manufacturing companies. To attract international private capital, layoffs and crackdowns on unions have been made easier, and state-owned enterprises (including railroads, telecommunications companies and airlines) are to be privatized. In this complex situation, not only traditional unions and federations are organizing, but informal and migrant workers are also becoming part of a movement facing a major socio-political challenge.



Trade union federations (CTUs) mobilized against Modi's neoliberal policies. 12 of the 13 CTUs are directly affiliated to political parties. In addition, there is the National Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), which is independent of political parties. The CTUs primarily organize formally employed workers, who make up less than 10 % of the labor force. The NTUI recruits primarily in the informal sector. Recently, the MASA (Campaign for Workers' Rights and Labor Struggle) was also formed by 14 unions and organizations. It also fights for precarious workers and, unlike the CTUs, advocates spontaneous and militant struggles. Another national organization is the Automotive Workers Union (AWU), founded in 2015. It does not belong to any CTU and has organized various struggles in automotive clusters.



In the textile and clothing sector and in the metal and automotive sector, the self-organization of precarious workers in new radical organizations is growing massively.

In January 2020, 250 million people adhered a general strike

Almost all public transport, trains, trucks, minibuses and cabs were at a standstill. Agricultural workers set up roadblocks. Students and employees of 60 universities went on strike.

A second general strike followed in December 2020. Small farmers have been protesting since September 2020 against new agricultural laws that push India's agriculture into the arms of private investors and corporations. Agriculture is the main source of income for 50% of the population. After hundreds of thousands protested without consequence in their regions, they stormed Delhi and clashed with police.



In January 2021, the government suspended the laws for 18 months. The protest alliance of 175 farmers' associations announced further protests until the revocation of all laws.

Spontaneous movements of ordinary workers also emerged. In 2016, more than 100,000 textile workers, mostly women, took to the streets in Bangalore, Mysuru, and Chennai to protest the cuts to their workers' pension fund contributions.



Precarious garment workers in Gurgaon-Manesar used the general strikes to wage their class struggle with stones, chants and the destruction of vehicles, and then withdrew.



However, the radical independent organizations and spontaneous movements have not been more successful than the CTUs. The weakness of the Indian trade union movement became evident in the wake of the nationwide lockdown, which the government announced on March 25, 2020, just four hours before it was to begin. The lockdown dealt a severe blow to India's economy and triggered a humanitarian crisis.



It is particularly brutal for migrant workers, most of whom work in the informal sector. Millions of them have been forced to leave the cities and industrial areas and move to their villages, where they have little prospect of employment. Spontaneous protests by migrant workers forced the government to put special worker trains into operation.