**Headline:** Workers in India Are on the March

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**[Article Body:]**

Ninety percent of Indian workers are in the unorganised sector. This does not mean that they are outside trade union structures, but only that most workers must fight very hard to form unions. There are unions in the formal sector, of course, but there are also unions in occupations that are designed in such a way as to make unionisation difficult.

For instance, rural health care workers do not work in a factory or in a shop, but across vast distances with very little contact with each other. And yet, rural health workers – or Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, as they are called – have fought to set aside every barrier and build trade unions. The ASHA workers are hired by the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as part of the National Rural Health Mission. Rather than treat them as workers, the Government of India pretends that they are ‘volunteers’. Therefore, according to the Indian government, there are over 1 million ASHA volunteers in India, making just this section the largest volunteer workforce in the world. As volunteers, they are not entitled to collective bargaining or any union rights.

However, over the past five years, the ASHA workers have organised themselves against all odds into the ASHA Workers and Facilitators Federation of India (AWFFI), affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union body of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The [National Rural Health Mission](https://nhm.gov.in/) shows that ever since ASHA workers went into the field in 2013, the maternal mortality rate has fallen by 83%, while the infant mortality rate has decreased by 69%. All the studies of rural health in the past decade show that the reason for these dramatic improvements is the labour of ASHA workers. And yet, treated as volunteers, these workers do not get paid the minimum wage and do not get any necessary benefits (such as maternity leave). Their labour is recognised by the government’s own studies, but they are not rewarded with decent working conditions and a living wage. On 20 April 2025, the ASHA workers held a [convention](https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2025/0420_pd/asha-workers-launch-nationwide-strike-august) at which they pledged to go on a multiple-day nationwide strike in August.

But even before then, the joint platform of trade unions that brings together most of the confederations of unions met in Delhi to announce a nationwide general strike on 20 May 2025 for higher minimum wages and fixed working hours as well as for a rollback of the government’s anti-worker policies. Since 1991, Indian trade unions have held a general strike at least twenty-four times. In recent years, over 250 million Indian workers have joined these strikes. The demands are varied, but are largely around the defence of labour laws and for higher remuneration. This year’s general strike is no different.

Strikes are an important instrument to send a message to the capitalist class that the workers have not vanished, despite the low numbers in the formal sector. Workers continue to assert themselves, strike action after strike action, across India on basic issues for decency of work and wages. A recent fifty-day strike at a Samsung factory in Tamil Nadu saw the managers [accept](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/samsung-union-withdraws-strike-company-agrees-to-reinstate-protesting-workers/article69301782.ece) the unionisation of 1,350 of the plant’s 1,850 workers; this is only the second time that Samsung has allowed for a union in one of its factories in the world. It was a very determined strike, which was supported by a range of urban and rural unions. At the conclusion of the strike, *The Hindu*, the main newspaper in the state of Tamil Nadu, [found](https://www.thehindu.com/data/tamil-nadu-leads-in-both-worker-strikes-and-number-of-factories/article68786850.ece) that this state has had the largest number of recorded factories in the country (26%), with only 16% of India’s factories. Because of these strikes, the state’s capitalists lost 15% of working days. Nonetheless, the state is one of the most industrialised in the country and has one of the highest Gross Fixed Capital Formation in India. Strikes do not force capital owners to flee if they find that the productivity of labour in the area is high and if they decide not to go elsewhere, given the uncertainties of being able to build a reliable workforce. That means that workers, despite the precariousness of working conditions, continue to have the ability to strike and win.

Workers are on the march in India. Hundreds of millions are ready to strike on 20 May, many of them having been on the streets on 1 May to celebrate their day. They know that if they do not fight, they will be destroyed. They fight to win.