

THE STRAITS TIMES

Millions of workers protest across India over economic reforms



Indian supporters of the 'Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti' occupying police vehicles as they listen to unseen convenor Hardik Patel speak during the Patel Patidar community's Kranti Rally in Ahmedabad. PHOTO: AFP

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NEW DELHI (AFP) - Millions of workers across India held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday in protest at right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's economic policies, which they say will put jobs at risk and hurt ordinary people.

Ten major unions went ahead with the day-long strike over the government's pro-business initiatives after talks with Finance Minister Arun Jaitley broke down.

Unions are demanding the government dump plans to sell off stakes in state-run companies to boost the public purse and to shut down unproductive factories.

Some 150 million workers, including those in the banking, manufacturing, construction and coal mining sectors, were expected to walk off the job on Wednesday.

The strike also affected transport. Long lines of commuters and school children could be seen at bus stops early Wednesday, while passengers were stranded at airports as taxis and rickshaws stayed off the streets.

Financial services were expected to be hit by the strike, with many banks shutting their doors for the day.

Hawkers, domestic workers and daily wage labourers were also expected to join the strike to demand an increase in the minimum wage.

Television footage showed the strike's impact in the eastern state of West Bengal, where unions enjoy significant clout, with the capital city of Kolkata mostly deserted with bank branches, shops and other businesses closed early Wednesday.

Modi won a landslide election victory last May, promising a string of business-friendly reforms to attract foreign investment and revive Asia's third-largest economy.

But the opposition has blocked flagship tax and land reforms, aggravating investor concerns, while the unions are increasingly angry over the reforms.

India's economy grew by a slower than expected 7.0 per cent in the first quarter of the financial year and experts say reforms are needed to create jobs for millions of young people.

Previous strikes have shut down cities and cost the Indian economy millions of dollars in lost production.

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