After the Labour Codes: the political meaning of India’s February 12 strike

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February 12, 2026, witnessed millions of workers across India participating in a nationwide general strike called by the joint platform of central trade unions. Measured purely by participation, the strike formed part of a familiar repertoire of mass industrial protest in contemporary India. Politically, however, its significance lies elsewhere. It unfolded at a moment when the institutional terrain governing labour relations had undergone a decisive shift, with legal, economic and ideological pressures converging to narrow the space available for collective working-class action.

Over the past three decades, capital accumulation in India has advanced through privatisation, financial expansion, and deeper integration into global production networks. This has been accompanied by a gradual reorientation

of state policies toward competitiveness and investor confidence. The consolidation of labour flexibility has increasingly coincided with a narrowing of democratic space. This suggests that economic restructuring and authoritarian governance are not parallel developments but mutually reinforcing processes. Against this background, the February 12 strike assumed a significance that exceeded the immediate stoppage of work: it represented an attempt by workers to assert collective agency under increasingly adverse political and legal conditions.

In several recent labour cases, judicial observations have increasingly echoed concerns about the investment climate and economic efficiency, implicitly portraying organised workers as obstacles to growth. This often conflicts with earlier jurisprudence that focused on the dignity of labour and social justice. At the same time, large sections of the media habitually frame labour protections and collective bargaining as regulatory burdens, casting flexibility as synonymous with progress. This has created grounds that influence the justification of labour flexibility.

In this light, the announcement that the four labour codes would come into operation at the end of November last year seems less like an abrupt policy shift and more like the consolidation of an emerging capitalist direction. Over time, labour protections were weakened not through a single rupture but through successive executive notifications, judicial reinterpretations and regulatory dilution. The codes bring these dispersed transformations into a unified statutory architecture. They provide formal legal sanction to an orientation that has been evolving gradually across policy and practice.

Provisions that collectively recalibrate the balance of power at the workplace

include:

1. Making strikes procedurally more difficult
2. Raising thresholds for prior approval of retrenchment
3. Legitimising fixed-term employment across sectors
4. Altering union recognition norms.

These changes arrive at a time when unemployment remains high, and informalisation is widespread, thereby tightening managerial discretion precisely when workers' bargaining power is already under strain.

Hence, this general strike ceased to be merely a conventional instrument of industrial negotiation and assumed the character of a political act carried out in defiance of an increasingly restrictive legal environment. With ever-increasing legal barriers and the growing threat of penal consequences attached to collective action, workers who went on strike did so not simply to press economic demands but to assert democratic rights that are themselves being narrowed.

This strike might be less spectacular than others in India's long working-class history, but it was timely, necessary and politically revealing. It signalled that even with adverse legal frameworks and institutional hostility, sections of the working class retained the capacity to act collectively.

The joint platform put forward four principal demands : (a) scrapping the four labour codes and their rules; (b) reversing policies affecting rural employment guarantees and demands for restoration and expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA); (c) withdrawing the Electricity Amendment Bill and the Draft Seeds Bill and (d) addressing minimum wages and pensions and rolling back casualisation and privatisation.

The strike received support from the farmers' union coalition, Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), agricultural workers' unions, women's organisations, student bodies and youth groups, marking a visible worker–peasant convergence.

The strike also took place shortly after oral observations made by Chief Justice Surya Kant during a hearing on January 29, in which trade unions were reportedly described as factors contributing to industrial slowdown and reduced investor confidence. These remarks quickly became a point of contention for the political opposition regarding the strike. Trade unions responded by invoking Article 19(1)(c) of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to form associations, and by reiterating the long-established legal position that payment of minimum wages is a statutory and constitutional obligation, not an impediment to employment generation.

Participation encompassed a broad spectrum of the economy. Workers in coal, steel, engineering, and automotive manufacturing reported stoppages and demonstrations, while certain sectors of the banking and insurance workforce responded to the strike call. Employees in electricity generation and distribution, along with other energy utilities, experienced varying degrees of work stoppage. Postal workers and segments of government

services also participated. A notable presence was observed among scheme workers (workers engaged in government welfare or development schemes who are not recognised as regular government employees), along with beedi workers, construction labourers, and numerous individuals from the informal sector. This highlights the extensive mobilisation that extended beyond the organised industrial workforce.

Women workers from the informal sectors were prominent in road and rail blockades. Students and youth organisations joined in actions demanding employment generation and the defence of public education.

Low union density limited IT sector shutdowns, but emergent formations, such as IT/ITeS employee unions, mobilised visible contingents in major cities.

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In major industrial states — including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Kerala, Telangana, and parts of North India — unions reported varying degrees of production stoppage.

The tactical methods of the February 12 strike across industrial regions were a defining feature. In several states, workers assembled before dawn to set up early-morning pickets, intercepting factory-bound transport and persuading workers being transported in company buses to join the stoppage. At many industrial gates, union members assembled in large numbers, standing at entrances and exits and pressing management to halt operations for the day. In several regions, workers also gathered at key junctions — highways, major roundabouts and feeder roads that connect industrial estates — slowing or

blocking the movement of goods and company transportation. Such interventions were not confined to single factories but were undertaken across entire industrial belts. This shows prior planning and communication among unions to ensure that the strike call translated into real disruption of production and distribution.

In several regions, permanent workers participated in large numbers, while contractual workers often faced pressures that limited full participation. This shows the deep structural fragmentation of India’s labour force.

Automobile, engineering, electronics and pharmaceuticals were among the most affected manufacturing sectors. Partially disrupted were insurance and banking services. In mining regions, road blockades were reported.

Unions demonstrated their capacity to significantly disrupt production flows in supply-chain-dependent industries, even when they did not achieve a complete shutdown. Therefore, the significance of February 12 can’t be limited to the scale of participation or temporary disruption of production but rather to what it reveals about the present conjuncture of Indian capitalism. At a time when accumulation increasingly depends upon labour flexibility, fragmented employment relations, and weakened collective bargaining, even limited forms of coordinated work stoppages acquire heightened political meaning. The strike exposed a contradiction central to the current phase: while capital requires a disciplined, atomised workforce integrated into global production networks, collective organisation continues to disrupt that project through the reappearance of collective organisation.

Since the passage of the four Labour Codes in 2019–2020 and their implementation in late 2025, there have been six nationwide general strikes. Trade unions contend that the four labour codes collectively restructure the balance of power at work to favour employers. The codes effectively restrict the right to strike as well, by imposing mandatory notice requirements that automatically trigger conciliation proceedings, rendering strikes procedurally difficult.

By raising the threshold for prior government approval for lay-offs, retrenchments and closures from 100 to 300 workers, the codes exclude a vast majority of factories from regulatory scrutiny. The formal recognition of fixed-term employment, without meaningful safeguards, is seen as institutionalising precariousness, while the narrowing and redefinition of who qualifies as a “worker” excludes large segments of supervisory and technical staff from industrial dispute protections. Simultaneously, the government has made several serious labour law violations compound — this reduces criminal accountability to monetary penalties. Unions also point to tighter controls on trade union registration, recognition, and financial functioning, which they believe constrain independent organising. Finally, despite rhetorical references to inclusion, gig and platform workers remain outside formal employment recognition, confined to welfare schemes rather than rights-based labour protections.

The Draft National Labour & Employment Policy (Shram Shakti Niti 2025) has further intensified concerns by recasting the state as an “employment facilitator” rather than a regulatory guarantor of labour rights.

The protest over judicial remarks blaming unions for industrial closures became central to the strike. In fact, data from the Labour Bureau refutes the assertion that trade union militancy has been responsible for industrial decline. The average annual number of industrial disputes decreased from 354 between 2006 and 2014 to just 76 from 2015 to 2023. Furthermore, the number of person-days lost due to strikes and lockouts has significantly decreased, plummeting from 20.3 million in 2006 to just 0.34 million in 2023.

In addition, parliamentary data from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs indicates that over 204,000 private companies closed between 2020–21 and 2024–25; a trend linked to restructuring, insolvency and market stress rather than labour unrest.

Recently, industrial stress has instead been widely linked to structural economic disruptions rather than working-class actions. The twin shocks of demonetisation and the hurried implementation of GST severely destabilised supply chains and working capital cycles, particularly for small and medium enterprises. The fragility of the SMME sector, which operates on thin margins, has been further exposed by tightening credit conditions and delayed payments. The prevalence of large-scale corporate indebtedness and insolvency proceedings under the bankruptcy regime has highlighted significant issues of financial overextension and inadequate recovery, indicating weaknesses in capital rather than labour unrest. Furthermore, the increasing influence of speculative and financialised capital has diverted resources away from productive investments. These factors are underpinned by persistently weak domestic demand, which is driven by stagnant wages and high unemployment. These constrain industrial expansion far more decisively than trade union activity.

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The strike occurred against a backdrop of escalating economic inequality. According to the World Inequality Lab (2024), the top 1% of Indians have 22.6% of the national income and 40.1% of the nation's wealth, the highest levels recorded in decades. In stark contrast, the bottom half of the population claims only 15% of the total income.

Youth unemployment remains acute. Permanent employment continues to shrink, while precarious and contractual jobs expand. In such conditions, labour protections do not function as distortions. They act as counterweights to the concentration of economic power produced by contemporary accumulation patterns in an economy marked by extreme wealth concentration and declining job security.

In several states, police imposed restrictions on demonstrations and detained protesters. Reports of preventive arrests, barricades and denial of public assembly permissions surfaced in multiple cities. In some regions, opposition-ruled state governments publicly criticised the labour codes while simultaneously moving forward with draft rules to implement them, exposing political contradictions. The handling of protests has sharpened debate over civic space, democratic rights and the institutional climate facing organised labour.

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The strike demonstrated that the Indian working class still retains the capacity to coordinate action on a national scale, despite years of fragmentation and

legal constraint. In several key sectors, the strike produced tangible industrial impact, underscoring that the strategic power of workers at critical nodes of production has not disappeared. The visible convergence of trade unions with farmer organisations signalled a renewed articulation of worker–peasant unity, expanding the strike beyond an urban industrial frame. Women workers and those from informal and scheme-based employment were prominently present, reflecting the changing social composition of the working class. At the same time, the uneven participation of contractual and precarious workers revealed the structural fragmentation produced by decades of casualisation.

The strike should therefore be understood not as an isolated episode but as an early expression of a wider phase of confrontation likely to deepen as economic crisis and labour restructuring advance. It is part of a longer and unfinished confrontation between workers and a state increasingly aligned with corporate power. The economic crisis deepens; inequality widens, youth unemployment persists, precarious work expands, and yet labour protections continue to erode. The contradiction is structural.

At the same time, the strike exposes the strategic limits of the present trade union movement. For decades, bureaucratised union structures have too often treated general strikes as ritualised demonstrations of protest, rather than as moments in a sustained strategy of class consolidation. Repetition without escalation risks symbolic containment, whereas mobilisation without organisational deepening risks dissipation.

If the labour codes represent the culmination of a long neoliberal offensive, then resistance cannot remain episodic. We must consciously overcome the fragmentation between permanent and contractual workers, formal and informal sectors, and urban and rural labour. The worker–peasant convergence visible in this strike must be institutionalised, not merely celebrated. New sectors — gig and platform workers and IT employees — must be integrated into a unified class strategy rather than treated as peripheral.

The rise of the far-right is inseparable from the restructuring of the workforce. Authoritarian governance thrives where the working class is divided, demoralised or organisationally hollow. Trade unions face a historic responsibility to move beyond defensive protest and reassert themselves as instruments of democratic class struggle.

Whether February 12 becomes a footnote or a turning point will depend not on the number of buses halted or factories closed, but on what follows. Whether such possibilities can be realised will depend less on episodic mobilisation than on the capacity of the workers' movement to reconstruct durable forms of organisation under conditions increasingly hostile to collective politics.

The article was earlier published in *Amandla*

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