

# PEOPLE'S UNION FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES

## Maharashtra State Unit

Ad Hoc Committee

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### PUCL Maharashtra Statement in Solidarity with protesting BEST Workers

PUCL Maharashtra expresses shock and dismay at reports that the BMC and BEST administration have chosen to invoke draconian provisions of the Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act (MESMA) against striking BEST employees, instead of taking steps to respond to their demands and alleviate their grievances at the earliest.

PUCL Maharashtra learns that the BEST administration has issued eviction notices to striking BEST employees and is already trying to remove them and their families from their homes, on the second day of the indefinite strike called by BEST workers' unions to press for their demands.

Workers and their families cannot be penalised in this inhuman manner for exercising their right to protest and to strike, to press for their legitimate demands. **PUCL Maharashtra urges the civic administration to withdraw the notices forthwith.**

The strike has been called to demand the merger of the BEST budget with the principal budget of the BMC, in addition to pressing for negotiations with the management on wages, resumption of appointments on compassionate grounds and bonus parity with BMS employees. The BEST Kruti Samiti, which is the umbrella body of all the BEST employees' unions spearheading the strike, has also expressed fears that the administration is bringing in privatization through the back door and making a vital public transport service unaffordable and unsustainable.

PUCL Maharashtra is concerned at the systematic dismantling of public transport in Mumbai and the destruction of the BEST, which was once Mumbai's pride. Alongside, several mega projects have been initiated throughout Maharashtra without any regard for the environmental damage, the loss of livelihood of the fishing community of Mumbai and the high cost of the multi-crore projects, which will ultimately be borne by all citizens. The state government has invested heavily in car oriented infrastructure, but has systematically starved BEST and refused to invest in bus based public transport (modernization of buses, integration between modes, dedicated bus lanes, bus depot and bus stops improvement, etc.) which has led to the decline of the service and its ridership. By reducing BEST services and scrapping routes the administration is causing harassment to commuters and residents of Mumbai.

It is a criminal shame that the demands of the protesting BEST workers have been met with this kind of penalization and repression from the administration on the one hand and indifference from the state government on the other. The BEST management has no right to declare the workers' strike "illegal" when it has done nothing to resolve the situation. The situation today is a combined result of the failure of the BEST management to effectively address the grievances of the workers which relies on their labour and further failure of the state government to push policies to examine ways to strengthen the public transport system for all citizens, instead of adopting multi crore projects at the cost of addressing the real needs and urgent concerns of the citizens.

**In light of this, PUCL Maharashtra urges the BEST management to immediately initiate talks with the striking workers to redress their grievances and the state government to strengthen public transport in Mumbai, instead of contributing to its destruction.**

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