

City throws weight behind new state

They have sacrificed a month's pay already — teachers, daily-wagers, lawyers, household helps, cooks, cab drivers. Many stand the risk of losing their jobs, have stopped buying vegetables because money is short, and are walking because there is no public transport.

Yet parents are telling children not to go to school, even when some have reopened, since it is for a greater cause. Daily, state transport drivers dutifully come to check their buses, but refuse to get behind the wheel.

It is nearly a month now since the general strike started in Telangana for a separate state. However, while life has been hit, the common man's resolve has only strengthened on the streets. "We are willing to suffer, go hungry if necessary, and my children will not go to school or wear new clothes on Diwali if this strike will achieve our goal, that is a separate Telangana state," says Mohan Shekhar, a part-time government teacher in Ranga Reddy district, who received only four days' pay last month, and is willing to forgo another month's salary.

It is the first time in the Telangana movement's history that people from all walks of life have become part of the agitation. "People of all sections, all castes, across all levels of society have joined the strike. Every person from Telangana is affected one way or the other, but they are not complaining. In a democratic country like ours, it is time for the Centre to sit up and take notice," says Prof M Kodandaram, convener of the Telangana Joint Action Committee.

At Mahatma Gandhi Bus Station, the state's largest state transport bus station, in Hyderabad, drivers who are on strike make a painful decision every morning. "We know that most of the passengers who come here hoping to take the bus are Telangana people. They need to go home or visit a place for some work and it is very painful to tell them no... but I think they too understand this strike is for a reason," says Venkat Saraiah, a union leader at the bus station, who has refused to meet government representatives on calling off the strike.

Torn between the need to do business and the Telangana sentiment, shopkeepers open shutters, perform puja and leave. Priests at temples, too, have joined the strike and are refusing to perform special rituals.

Over 10,000 schools, colleges and institutes are closed while nearly 1.20 lakh teachers are on strike. Even IIT and IAS coaching institutes, which normally do not close even for a day, have shifted their brightest students to undisclosed locations so that their coaching can continue; the rest have been given an extended break. "We cannot afford to lose our credibility and reputation by closing down. Mischief-mongers come and pelt stones if we are open, so we have shifted some of our best students, who we feel will get all-India ranks, to safe locations," an official of Sri Chaitanya Institutes said. Managements of many schools in Hyderabad negotiated with the Telangana committee, but when schools opened on Monday, most parents chose not to send their children. "There should be no compromise. If one person starts yielding to pressure, others too will break. There should be unity among us and the strike should continue till Telangana is achieved," one parent said.

At the Andhra Pradesh Secretariat, Telangana employees have cocked a snook at the government and Chief Minister N Kiran Kumar Reddy and are holding demonstrations right under his office and abstaining from work. "The government has threatened to deduct our salaries and if necessary suspend us. We are ready for anything, let them take action," says union leader Swami Goud.

It's the longest strike that state-owned Singareni Collieries has seen. Around 1.20 lakh workers have stopped work, bringing coal production to a halt, affecting the five power plants in the state. The government has extended power cuts from two to four hours in urban, and from eight to 10 hours in rural areas.

There is some anger on the streets at the discomfort, but it is directed against those taking advantage of the situation — such as private transport operators who overcharge — and not on those behind the movement itself.