Metro workers end strike after govt steps in

Chennai: Metro rail employees, who have been on strike since Monday, agreed on Wednesday to return to work after the government told them to appeal to the CMRL top brass and instructed metro management not to take further punitive action.

Hours before the truce, CMRL suspended three workers — two traffic controllers and a depot controller — who were running the operation control centre for sabotaging the signal system that services out of gear on Monday. The workers had gone on strike demanding reinstatement of eight workers whose services were terminated three days after they began a sit-in protest demanding to reinstate eight terminated on different grounds including destruction of duty.

Workers called off the strike after a meeting with assistant labour commissioner O. Shankaran. The protesters said CMRL sacked the eight workers as they were of five members of a recently-formed union. CMRL placed them under suspension in December for questioning the contract system adopted by CMRL and handed a termination order in April.

Chennai Metro Rail Ltd received complaints from both the striking workers and CMRL. The striking CMRL workers complained to police that officials threatened them when they went to the metro rail operation command centre at Koyambedu to solicit the support of their colleagues. The Koyambedu police have asked for CCTV camera footage from the police. The workers were recruited in 2006, two years before the first line was commissioned. They are employed as station controllers, train operators, traffic controllers and other technicians. Monday's protest was a result of a long simmering discontent among workers which CMRL failed to address. Last year, workers had put forth several demands including increments according to the third pay revision committee and extra pay for overtime. The workers had offered CMRL for employing unskilled contract workers, causing technical glitches last year. They had protested twice last year, without disrupting train services. CMRL responded that their demands were unreasonable as they were being paid on a par with government and private company employees. They are ITI diploma holders, mostly freshers, who were trained. Now, after five years, they are drawing around Rs 6,000. But they want salaries on a par with highly skilled engineers and architects, said a senior metro rail official.

After the first strike in July last year, more than 200 employees went on a strike in December, after seven workers were suspended. The striking workers had said that the seven employees were suspended because they questioned the contract system of paying big amounts to middlemen to hire employees. CMRL said they communicated to the workers through their HR department that the demands are unreasonable and cannot be met. "Delhi and Bengaluru metro also face similar issues with workers. But they are not able to take action because they have been functioning for a long time. We are able to take a stand, as we started operations only recently," a metro rail official said.

Nearly 70% of workers in phases I and phases II are now outsourced. CMRL has decided to completely phase out contract workers for the third phase.