

# India: Hyundai Motors victimizes workers

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India's second-largest car maker, Hyundai Motors India Ltd., is bitterly resisting the attempt of workers at its plant in Sriperumbudur, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, to organize a union.

Hyundai has reneged on a deal that put an end to an 18-day strike last month and has threatened to transfer production from the Sriperumbudur factory to another of its plants in Eastern Europe if workers continue to challenge management's arbitrary actions.

Earlier, Hyundai dismissed 65 workers, suspended 34, and transferred others, including two union officials, to out-of-state facilities for their involvement in the Hyundai Motors India Employees Union (HMIEU). Formed in 2007, HMIEU is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation allied with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM.

Lying some 40 kilometers from Chennai, Tamil Nadu's metropolis and capital city, the Sriperumbudur plant currently produces 900 to 1,000 cars per day, including the i20 model, which is exported to European markets.

The Hyundai plant employs close to 6,000 workers, but less than 1,700 have "permanent employee" status. Of the remainder, 2,500 are casual labourers and 1,000 are apprentices. There are also 350 technician trainees and a smattering of contract workers.

To protest against the victimization of union supporters and win management recognition of the HMIEU as their representative, the permanent Hyundai workers resorted to strike action beginning April 20. The company responded by proclaiming the strike illegal.

The CITU leadership then directed the workers to urge the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Tamil Nadu state government to intervene in the dispute and force Hyundai to recognize the union.

Beginning May 4, the union organized an indefinite

hunger strike of Hyundai workers in front of the Labor Commissioner's office on busy Mount Road in Chennai, so as to promote its demand for government intervention.

The DMK government had already shown its hostility towards the Hyundai workers by directing its police to arrest over 800 striking workers in an attempt to intimidate them and force them back to work. However, fearing that its blatant anti-worker stance could damage its prospects in the national elections which were to be held in Tamil Nadu on May 13, the DMK instructed the Labour Commissioner to mediate a settlement between the company and the union.

On May 7, CITU state General Secretary A. Soundararajan, emerged from the Labour Commissioner's office to tell the assembled Hyundai workers that a "half-way agreement" had been reached with the automaker. Soundararajan said that under the deal, a trade union that is "mutually acceptable" to the Hyundai management and the workforce would be established, all the victimized HMIEU workers would be reinstated, and further discussions on how this would be done would be held in the coming days.

In fact the company had steadfastly refused to negotiate with the union. It had merely agreed, as had the CITU, to abide by the "consent advice" ruling issued by the Labour Commissioner. This ruling included a stipulation that the company should formally respond to each of the demands the strikers had made in their charter of demands.

Soundararajan dismissed concerns about how the company would interpret "mutually acceptable," claiming that the outcome of the strike had disproven the popular belief that it is impossible to establish a trade union at a plant owned by a multinational company. "We are going to establish a trade union at the Sriperumbudur plant of the Hyundai Company," he vowed. Soundararajan also made much of the fact that

the company had purportedly given an undertaking that there would be no reprisals against any of the strikers.

“The trade union leaders of other sectors who assembled here,” said Soundararjan, “knew very well that usually the management will not reinstate workers without taking revenge on a few leading workers. In our case no such thing has happened.”

On this basis, the CITU called off the fast and the strike.

However, it did not take long for the Hyundai workers to learn that management had no intention of honouring the May 7 agreement, such as it was. On May 11, two days after the workers had returned to their jobs, Hyundai Motors’ Managing Director K.S. Kim, arrogantly told the workers that “no outsiders” (referring to HMIEU) would be admitted into the factory to represent the Hyundai workers. The existing “Workers Committee”—a seven-member group that was handpicked by management to thwart the workers’ attempts to organize their own union—would be “strengthened,” Kim said.

Only a fraction of the victimized workers—and none of those dismissed—have since been allowed to return to their jobs.

The CITU, nevertheless, continues to urge the workers to focus their energies on pressuring the Labour Commissioner and the DMK government, which is a partner in India’s big business Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government.

Despite Hyundai’s repeated provocations, the CITU has not re-launched the strike, let alone fought to mobilize other sections of the working class in the Chennai area and Tamil Nadu behind the Hyundai workers.

CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, on his way to address an April 30th election meeting in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, addressed the striking Hyundai workers. Karat said that it is “shameful that in the 21st century” companies should seek to deny workers their “fundamental democratic right” to organize a union.

“We must give pressure to the Tamil Nadu government,” continued Karat. “This will break out as an all-India movement. In South Korea also workers of Hyundai are on struggle-path. We must unite world-wide.”

This is so much bluster. The Stalinists have no

program for developing an “all India” offensive of the working class, let alone for uniting workers worldwide against the transnationals and imperialism.

The CPM is an integral part of the Indian political establishment. The CPM-led Left Front government in West Bengal has implemented pro-investor reforms, including expropriating peasants for Special Economic Zones and banning strikes in IT (Information Technology) and IT-enabled industries. (See “Stalinist Left Front suffers debacle in its West Bengal bastion”)

In the recently concluded Indian elections, the CPM and its chief Left Front ally, the Communist Party of India, were in an electoral pact with the rightwing AIADMK. A frequent ally of the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, the AIADMK used strikebreakers, dragnet arrests, and mass firings to break a strike by state government workers during its last term in office in Tamil Nadu.

The Stalinists’ unprincipled alliance with the AIADMK and similar right-wing, “regional parties” for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections ended in a debacle. Notwithstanding the attempts of the two Stalinist parties to promote the AIADMK-led alliance as “pro-people,” it was rebuffed by the electorate, with the CPM itself losing one of its two Tamil Nadu seats.

The Stalinists’ rightwing policies are promoting confusion, even demoralization, among some Hyundai workers.

Ganesh, a Hyundai worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The DMK have won in this election. CPM has been heavily defeated by other parties. Under this situation the management will not listen to anything. It will be very difficult to get the recognition for the trade union here.”

Another worker expressed determination to oppose Hyundai’s union busting and victimization of militant workers. “Wherever management is cheating us,” said Rukmangathan, “workers will simply not allow this. They will fight more vigorously to establish the union.”



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