

Indian auto dispute sparks mass protest, shuts Ford Canada plant

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More than 3,000 workers at a Rico Auto Industries plant in Gurgaon, India are waging a militant union recognition struggle in the face of state repression, corporate strikebreaking and goon violence.

According to a *Times of India* report, police and management have transformed the Rico plant, into a veritable armed camp. Scores of police, flanked by security guards, are occupying the facility, while management attempts to maintain some production using poorly-paid workers, many of them contract employees, who have been bullied and bribed into serving as scabs.

The Rico workers continue to mount a *dharna* or mass sit-down outside the strike-bound plant.

Their struggle has become a flashpoint for worker anger throughout the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and has even had an international impact. Due to a shortage of Rico-made transmission parts, Ford of Canada was forced to close its Oakville, Ontario assembly plant this week, idling 3,000 production workers.

On Tuesday, Oct. 20, more than 100,000 workers from some 70 plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar area walked off the job to show support for the Rico workers' struggle and protest the murder of a 26-year-old Rico worker, Ajit Yadav, by company thugs the previous Sunday evening.

Beginning less than 25 kilometers from India's capital, New Delhi, the Gurgaon-Manesar corridor is a center of India's auto and auto-parts industries.

Yadav reportedly suffered several bullet wounds to the head during the melee that ensued when 1000 company goons, armed with iron rods and in some cases guns, attacked a crowd of strikers gathered outside the plant. The strikers have charged that police colluded in the murderous attack, which left as many as 60 other Rico workers injured.

Fearing further violence either from the company or police, many of the workers who participated in the Oct. 20th walkout and mass rally armed themselves with wooden clubs or *lathis*.

The mobilization was in defiance of the Congress Party-led Haryana state government. On October 1 it declared the Rico workers to be engaged in an illegal strike, then used Yadav's death as the pretext to place Gurgaon under section 144: a provision of India's criminal code dating from British colonial rule under which all public gatherings of three or more people are illegal.

In a further attempt to intimidate the workers, the government mobilized large numbers of para-military forces as the size of the Oct. 20 protest began to become evident. "We have called for 10 companies from Haryana Armed Forces and India Reserved Battalion to tackle the situation," said Gurgaon Police Commissioner S.S. Deswal.

Workers pelted security forces with stones, but there does not appear to have been a major clash. Clearly the government and police were taken aback by the scope of the walkout, which was supported by several major union federations, including the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Center of Indian Trade

Unions, which are aligned respectively with the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The walkout crippled production at many factories, most of them auto-related, including plants owned by Lumax Industries, Sona Koyo Steering Systems, Sunbeam, Anand Motor Products, and Bajaj Motors.

Particularly hard hit was Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI), the world's largest motorcycle manufacturer. Workers there have been mounting a work go-slow campaign since their contract expired at the end of July. Recently the company threatened to pull out of India if the job action continues.

HMSI gained notoriety across India in 2005, when it dismissed over fifty workers for indiscipline, then egged on the police to launch a brutal assault on its employees after they responded by walking out on strike. More than 150 HMSI workers were injured in the police attack, several of them severely.

The sympathy walkout in support of the Rico workers has shaken India's auto bosses.

An unnamed "chief executive of a leading auto company in the area" told *Business Standard*, "Many companies in order to reduce their wage bill have resorted to go for contract labour using loopholes in the labour laws. They have looked at a short-term benefit, but long-term you alienate both contract labour and full-time employees. Only a spark is needed to rekindle it."

Livemint.com, a corporate web site that partners with the *Wall Street Journal* and is noted for its hostility to workers, said of the October 20 walkout: "The large turnout, the first time that there has been this level of coordination among unions in four years, underlined the dissatisfaction among workers who say they've been shortchanged by managements' unwilling to share the benefits that a recovery in auto sales have brought their companies, threatening to hamper the nascent economic recovery that this heralds if the turmoil spreads."

The AITUC and other unions are directing the

workers to put pressure on the big business Haryana state government.

In addition to a wage increase and the recognition of the AITUC as their representative, the Rico workers are seeking the reinstatement of sixteen victimized workers, and compensation for Ajit Yadav's widow.

Tripartite talks involving the state government, the company and worker representatives were held Oct. 25. Rico management now says it is willing to reinstate some of the fired workers and recognize a union, but it continues to refuse to meet directly with representatives of the AITUC.

A further round of talks has been scheduled for next week.

With the support of government authorities, the auto companies in the Gurgaon area have long bitterly resisted the attempts of workers to organize unions, ignored labor regulations, and, in a further attempt to undermine worker resistance and reduce wages and impose speed-up have increasingly resorted to the use of contract employees.

While the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt is not officially a Special Economic Zone, it has been treated as such by the various levels of government. Cheap land and other benefits have been lavished on companies and a massive police presence maintained so as to suppress worker militancy.

The Rico workers' struggle had given an inkling of the social power of the working class. It has also underlined the common character of the struggle facing auto workers all over the world. The Ford of Canada workers laid off this week are currently facing demands for wage and benefit concessions amounting to \$19 per hour, per worker.



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