

# Hyundai workers in India speak out against reprisals and poor working conditions

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A team of reporters visited the Hyundai car assembly plant in Sriperumbudur two days after a militant occupation by some 300 Hyundai workers was broken up by police on the orders of Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led state government. Sriperumbudu lies about 40 kilometers from Chennai, Tamil Nadu's state capital.

In breaking up the two-day-long occupation, the police arrested and jailed 282 workers. The workers, who had been supported by thousands of other Hyundai workers, were demanding the reinstatement of 67 workers dismissed by management for their role in a strike last year and recognition of their union, the Hyundai Motor India Employees Union (HMEIU).

The day after the occupation was broken up, the HMEIU—an affiliate of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)—ordered its members, who had resorted to strike action after the company had locked them out for fear the occupation would grow, to return to work. The union sought to justify this capitulation, by pointing to an agreement it reached with the company under government mediation to establish a tripartite process to review some of the firings. No guarantees were given that any of the workers will be reinstated and the company continues to refuse to recognize the HMEIU.

On June 11, two days after this sell-out agreement was reached, the 282 workers the police had arrested while breaking up the occupation were bailed out. But the cases against them have not been withdrawn, although the company did at one point suggest that it will not press charges. Those who led the occupation could thus still face fines or even imprisonment. (See "Police break-up occupation at Hyundai complex in southern India")

When we visited the Hyundai plant, there was a massive police presence, with police in plain clothes watching the movements of workers around the gate into the Hyundai complex.

Given the police presence and the police action just two days before, many workers were understandably reluctant to talk with us. Prior to entering the complex to end the occupation, police had demonstrably dismantled a makeshift hut that the workers had set up outside the plant gates to support their

agitations.

Some workers near a canteen located outside Hyundai's premises were willing to talk to us, but they asked that we not publish their names for fear of victimization by management.

28 year-old SK described how the occupation and strike began. "It was the suspension of 4 workers that triggered the occupation. From May 23 to June 3 Hyundai management organised a 'training programme' involving Yoga, lectures and games in an attempt to change the minds of workers who increasingly resort to agitations and strike actions in its production plants."

Management, explained SK, suspended the four workers on the pretext that they were late in reporting back to the production line after the games and/or took a day-leave during the training-indoctrination programme. Angered by this disciplinary action, several hundred workers sat down on an assembly line shortly after turning up for the night shift on June 6.

Their action was enthusiastically supported by the rest of the workforce, with workers staying away from or quitting work elsewhere in the plant, thereby stopping all production at the plant.

"In order to prevent the workers who turned up for the morning shift from joining the occupation, management declared 'leave' for workers from Monday and prevented them from entering the plant.

"Management organised the deliberate smashing up of two cars parked inside the Hyundai complex and blamed the agitating workers for it. Then a police complaint was filed against the workers. Subsequently, on the morning of June 8, the police moved in, evicted the workers engaged in the occupation and arrested them."

A permanent worker at the Hyundai plant receives a basic monthly salary of 7760 Rupees (\$165 US). With various allowances including for rent, education and health care a permanent worker can receive a monthly salary of some 29,000 rupees (\$620). But permanent workers account for less than one fourth of the total work force at Hyundai's Sriperumbudur complex. More than three-quarters of the workforce is comprised of non-permanent workers—casual laborers, apprentices and other trainees—who make only a fraction of this

amount. Moreover, the permanent workers fear that Hyundai plans to invoke the world economic crisis or some other pretext to reduce the allowances.

With a view to dividing the workers, Hyundai insists that the permanent workers oversee the work of the apprentices, trainee technicians, casual and contract workers. And with threats of immediate firing, it compels the non-permanent workers to do the work of the permanent workers whenever they take job action.

RK, who is 25, described how management systematically violates the rights of all workers, permanent and non-permanent: “The permanent workers are entitled to 8 days casual leave, 3 days personal leave and 7 days sick leave per year. But management refuses to pay for any of these paid leaves. For instance if a permanent worker goes on a sick leave for a day, his pay will be cut by the equivalent of one day.

“A worker at a Hyundai plant can become permanent only after going through a 4-year period of strenuous training—apprenticeship training in the first year, technical apprentice for two years and finally technical training for a year. But recent experience shows that many workers who have gone through this training have not been made permanent. And many other workers have been dismissed on one or another pretext.”

In practice there is no job security. If a worker is found to be involved in any sort of opposition to the management’s directives he is fired under some pretext or is sent to a more physically demanding job in another section of the plant.

During their “training” period workers have to toil for very low wages and under harsh conditions. RK said, “Apprentice workers get Rs.3, 500 (\$75) per month. They get only two days holiday for the whole year. They have no other rights. Technical Trainees are paid Rs.5, 000 (less than \$110) per month. They get 10 days holidays annually. Since 2001 not one of them was made permanent.

“Casual and contract workers get Rs.100 (\$2) to Rs. 120 (less than \$2.15) per day. They have no holidays and are not even provided with the cup of tea that other workers get. They have to wait till other workers finish drinking their cup of tea, so as to make use of the same cup, pay and get a cup of tea. They don’t get canteen meals either. They have to buy their lunch from outside.

“In the company canteen, no decent meals are served. Hard to chew *chapatti* [northern Indian meal made from wheat flour] and rubber-like cooked rice are provided.”

A decade ago, in an address to the workers, the Hyundai Managing Director said that if the company could produce 100,000 cars the company’s initial investment would be recovered. Since then the Hyundai complex has produced 1.5 million vehicles. Whereas the now closed Standard Motors plant in the Chennai used to make 22 cars per hour with a permanent workforce of 2000, the Hyundai plant pumps out 56 cars per hour. However there hasn’t been any meaningful

improvement in the living standards of the workers.

We explained to the Hyundai workers that to fight multinational companies like Hyundai— companies that have governments in their pockets and seek to pit workers in different countries and different plants against each other—it is necessary to forge the international unity of the working class. To this, another worker, SV, responded: “There is no one here to unite us. When we hold our meetings and agitations, union leaders from other industries come and speak and then leave it at that. That is all. When we asked Soundarajan [the head of the CITU in the state] about this, he said a time will come for us to unite. From what you are saying it is clear we need an organisation to unite us.”

RJ, a 25 year-old HMIU union official, said in response to a question about the role of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM in the struggle of the Hyundai workers, “When we asked Soundarajan about the possibility of CPM taking responsibility for mobilising workers in support of our struggle he said that the party is different from union. Both cannot be merged and that party will not intervene in trade union struggles.”

When we explained how the CPM-led state governments in West Bengal and Kerala are courting big business investment with tax breaks, special economic zones, and antiunion measures, he said, “They [CPM-led State governments] work in the interests of different regional states. However from what you explain I understand they are working not in the interests of workers but the capitalist class.”

When asked their opinion about the DMK-led state government, which until two years ago enjoyed the support of the CPM and its Left Front, NK, said, “We know very well that [DMK chief minister] Karunanidhi will not do anything. At the Nokia plant, recognition for his LPF [Labor Progressive Front, a DMK-affiliated union] was possible, but here we can’t get recognition for our union.”

When we explained the need for the international mobilization of workers on a common socialist program, several of the Hyundai workers expressed support, Said one, “The governments are inviting them [transnational corporations] here. We will have to act like you say. Workers have to be united regardless of caste, religion and language.”



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