

Police break-up occupation at Hyundai complex in southern India

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Police broke up a militant worker occupation of a Hyundai car assembly plant in Sriperumbudur, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, last Tuesday.

In breaking up the two day-old occupation, police arrested and jailed 196 workers. Later Tuesday, they arrested and jailed a further 86 striking workers for continuing to agitate outside the Hyundai complex for their demands—the reinstatement of 67 workers fired as the result of an earlier strike and recognition of their union, the Hyundai Motor India Employees Union (HMEIU).

Only on Friday the 282 workers were released from Vellore Jail. And notwithstanding claims in the corporate media that Hyundai would not press charges, the workers had to obtain bail. The threat of fines and incarceration thus continues to hang over them.

The occupation began early Monday morning, when between 250 and 400 workers sat down on a conveyor belt. Fearing the action would spread, the South Korean-based automaker quickly moved to shut down both of the assembly plants it operates in Sriperumbudur, a burgeoning auto industry centre 40 kilometres from the Tamil Nadu state capital, Chennai.

This shutdown, Hyundai reported, was costing it the production of 1,200 cars, valued at \$14 million, per day.

Declaring the workers' action illegal, Hyundai turned to the Tamil Nadu state government led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a coalition partner of India's Congress Party-led national government, for help.

With Tuesday's police assault, the DMK sought to reassure Hyundai, the state's largest foreign investor, that it can be counted on to police Hyundai's cheap-labor operations and suppress worker unrest.

Buoyed by the police repression, Hyundai resumed production Wednesday using apprentices and other non-permanent staff.

Shortly thereafter, the HMEIU, which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), ended the strike under a sell-out settlement that had been mediated by the state government's Labour Department.

Under this agreement, the fate of 35 of the 67 victimized workers will be decided by an ad hoc company-union-government arbitration committee. No assurances have been given that any of the 35 will be rehired. As for the remaining 32, they have been left out to dry. Nor has Hyundai—which has resorted to wholesale victimizations in an attempt to quash growing worker militancy that has resulted in four strikes at its Sriperumbudur complex since 2008—agreed to recognize the HMEIU.

R. Sethuraman, a senior vice president of Hyundai's Indian affiliate, told the press that under the agreement to end the strike “a six-member review committee with two representatives from the union, company management and labour commissioner office” will be established “to consider the reinstatement of 35 dismissed employees on a case by case basis. The remaining 32 dismissed workers have to seek legal recourse.”

Hyundai management was quick to personally thank the DMK state chief minister M. Karunanidhi and the deputy chief minister, his son, M.K. Stalin, for their role in quelling the worker rebellion.

The Sriperumbudur complex is central to Hyundai's world operations. Many if not most of the cars that the world's sixth largest automaker sells in Europe and southeast Asia are made in India.

One measure of the labor regime that prevails at Hyundai's Sriperumbudur operations is the small number of permanent workers the company employs. The workforce is comprised of 2,000 casual labourers, 1,500 apprentices, 1,000 trade apprentices, 1,200 technical trainees, and just 1,650 full-time, permanent workers.

Although brief, and ultimately derailed thanks to the perverse political influence of the Stalinist CITU, the Hyundai strike-occupation provoked much nervous commentary in the international press.

Many newspapers, including in South Korea, noted that the strike in Tamil Nadu followed walkouts at Hyundai plants in China and coincided with a series of strikes that have disrupted Honda's operations in China.

The Hyundai strike, many commentators also observed, is part of a mounting strike wave in India. Recent months have seen several militant strikes in the country's auto industry. These include a strike last October of some 3,000 workers at a Rico auto parts plant in the Gurgaon industrial belt in northern India that triggered a sympathy walkout of 100,000 workers and an ongoing dispute at Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd's Nasik auto plant triggered by management's victimizing of the union president.

A major spark for this unrest has been the automakers' drive to speed-up production and cut jobs in response to the world economic crisis.

There has also been a series of strikes and threatened strikes against the central government's plans to press forward with the partial or complete privatization of many public sector units, plans that invariably are tied to massive job cuts and other anti-worker measures.

"While government data for strikes this year is not available," said a June 9 Reuters' report, "there is evidence they are on the rise and more unrest may be in store as India looks to disinvest stakes in over-staffed state forms to bridge a yawning budget deficit."

India's central and state governments—as demonstrated by the police attack on this week's Hyundai occupation and the savage reprisals taken against Air India workers after they walked off the job last month—stand ready to use repression and violence to suppress any worker offensive.

But India's elite is even more reliant on the trade unions, particularly those affiliated with the Stalinist Communist

Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front to contain and politically emasculate the working class.

While there is growing worker anger over soaring food prices, job cuts, privatization and widening social inequality, the Stalinists systematically confine workers' resistance to trade union collective bargaining and protests that are directed at pressuring the Congress and other big business parties to adopt "pro-people" policies. These protests, moreover, are subordinated to the Stalinists' reactionary parliamentary manoeuvres. For four years, the Left Front propped up the current Congress-led UPA government. In Tamil Nadu, it swings back and forth between aligning with the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

The Stalinist CITU has urged the Hyundai workers to pressure the DMK government to intervene and force the company to recognize the union. Predictably, the DMK has now intervened: to suppress the workers on behalf of Hyundai.

Meanwhile, the Stalinists are in an electoral bloc with the AIADMK, which when it last formed the state government in Tamil Nadu came into violent conflict with the working class. In the summer of 2003, it used mass dismissals and blacklegs or scabs to smash a state government workers' strike.

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