India: Lessons of the Stalinist CITU's betrayal of the Foxconn and BYD strikes

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The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) shut down militant strikes against Foxconn and BYD—part of a growing wave of industrial unrest in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu—late last month.

The trade union affiliate of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), the CITU, instructed the Foxconn and BYD workers to surrender to the companies' punitive demands, including the firing of more than 40 rank-and-file strike leaders.

The seven thousand workers at Foxconn's complex in the Sriperumbudur Special Economic Zone struck their employer, the world's largest electronic components producer, for 58 days, beginning September 21.

The three thousand workers, mainly young women, at BYD, a Nokia supplier and China-based transnational, mounted a three-week struggle. For two days starting on Oct. 28, the BYD workers occupied the plant, which lies on the outskirts of Chennai. They ended the occupation when police threatened to storm the plant and violently expel them; then resorted to more conventional strike action.

Workers at the two companies fought for similar demands, including improved wages and working conditions, the "regularization" of contract workers and union recognition. Both strikes faced brutal police repression organized by Tamil Nadu's DMK state government.

But there was never any question of the Stalinist CITU uniting the two struggles, let alone making them the spearhead of an industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make the country a sweatshop producer for global capitalism.

On November 17, CITU leaders told the Foxconn strikers to return to work, although the company had agreed to none of their major demands and had fired 24 strike leaders. Moreover, as a condition of returning to work, the CITU instructed the workers to sign a humiliating management-authored letter that included pledges not to argue with management, wear union badges on company premises, or "involve in any form of struggle within the company." The first of the letter's five conditions effectively endorsed the victimization of the 24, since the returning Foxconn workers had to agree that they had struck work at their "instigation."

850 of the Foxconn workers, more than one-tenth of the total workforce, initially defied the company and the CITU leadership and sought to continue job action so as to force the reinstatement of the 24 victimized workers. For two days they refused to work and instead sat in the company canteen. On November 20 they relented, after the state deputy labour commissioner persuaded them that he had convinced the company to meet with him in the coming week to discuss the dismissals.

The CITU leaders for their part, sought to prevail on the Foxconn workers to resume work by telling them that their situation will improve after next year's state election. In other words, the Foxconn workers, argue the Stalinists, should place their hopes in the return to power of the DMK's arch-rival, the AIADMK, with whom the CPM (Communist party of India (Marxist)) is currently trying to negotiate an electoral bloc. No matter that the AIADMK is a right-wing bourgeois party, which, when it was last in office passed a draconian anti-worker "essential services" law and in 2003 used mass firings, mass arrests, and strikebreakers to crush a strike by 200,000 government workers.

Emboldened by the Stalinists' actions, Foxconn management is now working hand in glove with the DMK government to impose the Labour Progressive Front as the workers' "union." The DMK-union federation, the LPF functions overtly as a police force for the employers and, as a result, many transnational companies have unilaterally declared it their employees' bargaining agents. Shortly after the strike ended, the Foxconn workers were told that they may receive a wage increase, but only if they join LPF.

The CITU's surrender at BYD was no less complete. The union told the workers to return to work, even though 17 strike leaders have been fired, and to sign a letter similar to the one forced upon the Foxconn workers. The BYD workers balked at signing the letter, but, following a promise from the deputy state labour commissioner to talk with management about the fate of the victimized workers,

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returned to work November 22.

Some three weeks later none of the victimized workers at either Foxconn or BYD has got their job back. Indeed, as far as the *World Socialist Web Site* has been able to ascertain, management representatives from neither company even bothered to show up for the promised talks with the deputy labour commissioner.

When the *WSWS* contacted Malathi Chittibabu, the CITU state secretary, to discuss the reasons for the CITU's abandonment of the Foxconn and BYD workers, she bleated that there was no alternative. By ending the strikes, claimed Chittibabu, the CITU at least ensured that the workers got their jobs back. "All the workers are new and young," said the CITU official, "and we have to defend their future."

The claim that there was no alternative to surrender is a lie.

Had the Foxconn and BYD workers been oriented to making their struggles the spearhead of a wider working class mobilization bylinking the struggle for decent wages and working conditions to the development of a political offensive of the working class against capitalism—not misdirected into putting their faith in right-wing capitalist politicians from parties like the AIADMK and the pro-employer state labor commission—they would have evoked a well of support.

Various ruling class representatives have themselves expressed alarm over the wave of strikes and occupations that has convulsed Tamil Nadu in recent months. Peter Alphonse, the head of the state unit of the Congress Party, the dominant party in India's national coalition government, has charged that there is a "conspiracy" to foment labour unrest and undermine investment in the state. And Tamil Nadu Police Chief Letika Saran recently vowed to step up police spying on workers, claiming that there is a threat of "left-wing extremism" finding support in the state's growing industrial sector.

If the Foxconn and BYD workers were isolated it is because the CITU and the CPM and its Left Front chose to isolate their struggles, confining them to the most narrow collective bargaining perspective.

The Stalinists feared the radicalizing consequences of a genuine working class mobilization against the gang-up of the state government, the police, courts and transnationals to enforce low wages, 12-hour workdays, and brutal working conditions.

While the CPM postures as a party of the working class, it has in practice worked hand-in-glove with India's ruling elite in its drive to make India a magnet for foreign capital and a cheap-labour producer. In those states where the CPM-led Left Front forms the government, West Bengal and Kerala, it has pursued pro-investor policies, including banning strikes in the IT sector and shooting down peasants who resist the expropriation of their lands for Special Economic Zones. From 2004 through 2008, it sustained the Congress-led UPA government in office in New Delhi, even while conceding that it was carrying out pro-big business economic policies and a pro-US foreign policy little different from that of the previous BJP-led government.

Foxconn's and BYD's success in using labour contractors to supply poor villagers to keep their factories at least in partial operation during the recent strikes underscores the utter inadequacy of even a militant trade unionist perspective.

In underdeveloped countries like India, the struggle of the working class to advance its social position is organically bound up with the fight of the rural masses against poverty and oppression.

Indian workers must champion the interests of the rural poor, forge an alliance with them in opposing the oppression of the landlords, money-lenders and big business, and demonstrate to them that only through a working-class led struggle against capitalism can the social and democratic aspirations of the toilers be met.

The experience of the Foxconn and BYD workers is common to workers all over the world. Recent struggles in France, Greece and elsewhere have demonstrated the determination of workers to resist big business' drive to make them pay for the capitalist crisis and, at the same time, they have shown the trade unions and the social-democratic and Stalinist parties to be instruments for disorganizing the working class and imposing the diktats of capital.

Workers need a new perspective, new organizations of struggle and a new party to fuse militant action in defence of the immediate interests of the working class with the struggle for a workers and peasants government that would place the banks and basic industry under public ownership so that the economy can be radically reorganized to meet social needs, not benefit the few.

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