

India: Sanmina workers strike for higher wages and union recognition

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22 February 2011

Over a thousand workers at the Sanmina SCI India plant in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu have been on strike since February 15. They are fighting for a wage hike, health insurance, an 8-hour workday, the regularization of contract employees, and recognition of their newly formed union.

Sanmina SCI India is a subsidiary of the US-based transnational Sanmina SCI, a global electronic manufacturing services company with over 40,000 employees worldwide and an annual turnover of \$US 6.3 billion. Sanmina SCI serves as a subcontractor for numerous equipment manufacturers in the computer, telecommunications, medical, aerospace and automotive sectors.

According to Hari Pillai, the Chief Operating Officer of its Indian subsidiary, the Tamil Nadu plant produces \$400-500 million worth of products annually, mainly for the Indian domestic market. The plant is located in a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Oragadam that lies 50 kilometers from Tamil Nadu's capital, Chennai.

About a quarter of the nearly 1,200 workers employed at Sanmina's Oragadam plant are contract employees. Making them permanent workers is one of the strikers' principal demands.

Workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that they had been compelled to go on strike due to galloping inflation, including soaring food prices, and management's refusal to grant them any wage increase for the past three years.

Last September, Sanmina management promised to address the wage issue and the workers' other demands, so as to end an earlier brief walkout. But in more than a dozen meetings since then between representatives of management and the workers' newly formed union, which is affiliated with the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Sanmina refused to accede to any of the workers' main demands.

In pursuing this hard line, management has been boosted by the DMK state government, which has responded to a growing wave of strikes at transnational companies in Tamil Nadu, with police repression and by promoting its trade

union, the Labour Progressive Front, as a mechanism through which employers can suppress dissent and police their workforces.

According to Muthu Kumar, the CITU secretary for Kancheepuram district, where Oragadam is located, the deputy chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M.K. Stalin, told the workers, "We would bring to Tamil Nadu one company after another and you will strike and pack them off!" A prominent leader of the Congress Party, which is allied with the DMK in India's national coalition government, recently likened the industrial unrest in the state to subversion.

SCI worker Duraimurugan told the WSWS: "We have been working in this company for three years. Our wages here are ranging from 5,000 rupees (US \$111) to 6,000 rupees (\$133). My father hasn't got a regular job. He had to raise three children. Since I have started working we could somehow manage. However as a result of increasing inflation, we find it very difficult to manage the expenses of our family. The management tells us whatever struggle you may carry out we won't give you any wage hike. Many workers are reluctant to get married with these low wages."

Sasikumar, a factory level union leader, said: "Although we have been working in this company for three years, our wages still remain the same as any new workers' wages. Our many demands include union recognition, a canteen facility for workers and bus transport to nearest workers' residences. Many workers have to walk 5 to 10 kilometers to catch the company buses transporting them to the plant."

Another worker who wanted to remain anonymous because of possible management retaliation told the WSWS, "Many of us are bachelors coming from various faraway places. After deducting our own expenses to live near the plant, we can manage to send to our families only 2,500 rupees (\$55) per month. They are finding it difficult to manage with rapidly rising inflation. We are demanding at least 10,000 rupees (\$222) per month. The company runs three shifts. The night shift is 10 hours and the other two shifts are seven hours each. We want an 8-hour working day for all."

The union affiliate of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the CITU is isolating the Sanmina workers' struggle, while promoting illusions in both of the state's major big-business parties, the DMK and its archrival, the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam).

The CITU and CPM are refusing to mobilize support for the Sanmina workers from workers at the many other factories in the Oragadam SEZ and the nearby Sriperumbudur SEZ—which has emerged as a hotbed of worker militancy—and to prepare them for an all-out industrial and political confrontation with the employers and the government.

CITU leaders have suggested that if the Sanmina struggle becomes prolonged they may call on workers at nearby plants like Foxconn, BYD and Hyundai to take action in their support.

No credence should be given to these claims. The CITU and CPM have consistently kept the struggles of the various workers in the SEZs separated from one another and from the wider urban and rural workforce, leaving each group of workers to fight their government-backed transnational employer alone.

There are scores of workers who have been fired from their jobs at Foxconn, BYD and Hyundai for their role in last year's strikes, but the Stalinists have mounted no campaign in their defence. Instead, the victimized workers have been told to put their faith in the Labour Commissioner, the capitalist courts and a change of government in the next elections.

But even if the Stalinists were compelled to call for some action in support of the Sanmina strike, it would be with the aim of better tying the struggle to their reactionary and widely discredited maneuvers with various rightwing capitalist parties. Thus the CITU leaders have told the Sanmina workers that “since the state elections are nearing, the government”—the same government that has repeatedly used mass arrests and violence against striking workers—can be pressured to “pay heed to the demands of the striking workers”!

Earlier the CITU sought to justify its calling off of militant strikes at Foxconn and BYD without the workers winning any of their key demands on the grounds that the situation for workers will improve after the elections.

In a statement summarizing the lessons of the CITU's betrayals of these struggles, the WSWs explained, “The CITU leaders...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 archrival, the AIADMK, with

whom the CPM 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.”

Since this was written, the CPM has consummated its electoral alliance with the AIADMK for this spring's Tamil Nadu state election. The Stalinists make the absurd claim that the election of an AIADMK state government will advance the working class's struggle against the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government. But the AIADMK has no substantive differences with the neoliberal policies of the Congress Party. Indeed only last November, the AIADMK's mercurial leader, Jayalalitha, announced that she and her party were prepared to join the UPA the day the Congress severed its alliance with the DMK.

Having bound themselves to the rightwing AIADMK, the Stalinist CPM and CITU will invariably intensify their efforts to contain, defuse and neuter the growing rebellion of workers in Tamil Nadu's SEZs and subordinate it to their parliamentary politicking.

To win their just demands, the Sanmina workers must break out of the straitjacket in which the Stalinists are trying to contain their struggle and place it on a new axis—the fight to mobilize the working class industrially and politically against the big-business drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of society.

The authors also recommend:

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

[10 December 2011]



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