

GM India workers launch wildcat strike in Gujarat

Kranti Kumara
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About 900 workers at General Motor's India Ltd. (GM) Halol plant located in the western Indian state of Gujarat walked out of their jobs during the second production shift on Wednesday, March 16, to oppose speed up and other brutal working conditions in the factory.

The strike is now a weeklong and no negotiations have taken place. On Monday March 21, several hundred workers took part in a "dharna" (demonstration) just outside the factory gates. Normal operations at the plant have come to a halt despite some unverified reports in the press that around 350 workers had returned to work on Friday.

At the behest of the management police ejected several groups of workers sitting in a garden outside the factory on Monday. The threat of a violent attack on workers by police and hired thugs is ever-present since management at other multinational firms have used such tactics whenever a strike appeared to be gaining strength.

This is the second time in about four months that workers have struck this particular GM plant. The US-based auto giant has earned notoriety for the brutal treatment it metes out to its Indian workforce, particularly at this plant.

The workers are charging the company with subjecting them to severe overwork, speedup and long working hours, which have resulted in numerous cases of acute back pain and spinal injuries. They have also charged GM with medical negligence for ignoring their repeated complaints about the intense workload.

The workers are also demanding cancellation of all transfers the company used to victimize workers who complained about these conditions, restoration of the previous workload, and an elimination of wage

discrepancies.

Nihil Mitra, the president of the Gujarat unit of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the Congress Party' trade union federation, told the press the workload on an individual worker has increased by 30 percent and workers who complained of health issues were transferred to dealer and sub-dealer outlets in Delhi, Gurgaon, Chennai and Haryana. He also said four workers have been suspended in the last 15 days.

India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) ordered the district collector, a powerful government official part of whose duty is "human welfare", to submit a detailed report about the health condition of the GM workers within this week. NHRC took this step after receiving letters from strike leaders complaining about GM's callous attitude towards the workers.

The workers previously struck last October to demand higher wages and other benefits. The strike ended when Gujarat Kamdar Mandal, which is affiliated with the INTUC, imposed a rotten deal last December last year, which imposed additional production quotas upon the workers in exchange for modest wage improvements.

P. Balendran, director and vice-president, corporate of affairs for GM India, said, "The [previous] agreement was arrived at with the involvement, mediation and at the behest of the labor department officials. Subsequently, all permanent workers were given new salaries and benefits according to the agreement signed between the employees union and the management."

It now appears from the news reports that some of the workers have broken off to form a rival trade union, as yet "unregistered," in response to the INTUC betrayal of their strike late last year.

Balendran also claimed that "the government

authorities have intervened and after going into the details, declared the strike as illegal,” although there has been no public announcement by the authorities.

GM manufactures five different models stretching from the entry-level sedan to an SUV at the Halol plant, which is equipped to produce 85,000 units a year. The other GM manufacturing and assembly plant in Pune, located in the western state of Maharashtra, appears to be unaffected by the current strike. GM has big ambitions in India, as many of the global auto companies are betting on India and China to make up for a lot of the growth lost in the aftermath of the global economic crisis in 2008. GM plans to become one of the top five auto manufacturers within the next few years in the highly competitive Indian car market.

Over the last several years India has experienced explosive workers struggles as more and more transnational corporations set up production units to exploit India’s cheap labor rates. Indian auto workers are typically paid about a tenth of their counterparts in the US. Strikes against these transnational corporations are widespread.

According to the Indian Labor Bureau, over five million working days were lost in 2010 as a result of strikes and lockouts in the country. The most intense strikes occurred in the south-eastern state of Andhra Pradesh; in the eastern state of West Bengal; Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan located in the north; and in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the south.

Particularly noteworthy is the amount of strike activity in West Bengal, which is ruled by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM-led “Left-front” alliance. There were over a million man-days of production lost due to strikes last year. This was second only to Andhra Pradesh where 2.2 million man-days were lost.

Strikes in India are watched with particular trepidation by the business media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, since India has become an important source for auto parts for many US auto companies. A militant month-long strike by 2000 workers at Rico Auto Parts plant near New Delhi in late 2009 forced the closure of Oakville Assembly Plant in Ontario, Canada and the GM Lansing Township Plant in Michigan for a week.

Just as their western counterparts, the various Indian trade union federations such as the Stalinist Center for

Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which has a particularly large presence in manufacturing industries, have repeatedly betrayed strikes by dissipating determined struggles and accepting management-dictated compromises.

Nevertheless, several of the most militant strikes over the last several years, just like the current one, have occurred as a result of the independent and spontaneous actions of the workers themselves. It can be expected that such actions will only increase in the coming years given the brutal exploitation of the Indian workers by Chinese, US, Japanese and South Korean conglomerates that have now set up numerous manufacturing plants in India.



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