

Wildcat strike continues at GM India plant in Gujarat

Kranti Kumara
15 April 2011

Auto workers at the GM Halol plant in the town of Vadadora located in the western India state of Gujarat, have continued a wildcat strike in defiance of repeated management threats to sack them. The walkout began on March 16.

The strikers are demanding safe working conditions and a reduction in their strenuous daily workload. Hundreds of workers suffer from severe back pain and spinal injuries, which they say are the result of repeatedly lifting and carrying heavy automobile parts during assembly.

The month-long strike has cost GM a production loss of at least 1,000 cars.

GM management has refused to negotiate with the strikers, insisting their action is illegal and claiming an agreement was reached with the workers last December following an earlier wildcat strike in October 2010.

Following that agreement, management unilaterally increased daily workloads by 20 percent. GM officials justified this by claiming the new quota had already been agreed to.

Far from having reached any agreement, however, management increased workloads by “negotiating” with the company union at the plant. Less than 10 percent of the workers belong to the organization and most of them were forced to join by management bullying and intimidation.

The workers routinely lift and carry heavy automobile parts such as door-assembly and steering columns during production operations. Such tasks in the US, Western Europe and Japan are normally performed with the aid of machinery. GM and other transnational corporations in India deliberately exploit the absence of any serious occupational health and safety standards.

For the daily exploitation the workers endure, GM pays \$0.92 cents per hour for regular workers and \$0.47

cents for their temporary counterparts. Half of the 1,600 workers at the plant are given the arbitrary classification of “temporary” even though they perform the same work as regular employs, but for half the pay.

This situation is akin to what GM workers in the US where the United Auto Workers union agreed to have newer employees paid a “tier-two” of \$14 dollars per hour while working alongside their fellow workers who are paid around \$28 per hour.

A working day at this plant lasts nine hours with a working week comprising of six working days. Thus, India workers labor for a total of 54 hours a week. According to India Factory Act, a full-working day at regular wage rate is not to exceed 8.5 hours. Even by this miserable standard GM withholds paying overtime wages for the three extra hours per week.

GM India and other transnational corporations fully exploit loopholes in existing regulations that are designed to assure they make maximum profits. The Factory Act stipulates that workers should not lift more than 44 pounds at one time. It does not, however, limit the number of times workers can lift such a load within any one hour or even during the 9-hour workday. Workers perform this backbreaking labor with infrequent or non-existent breaks.

The GM strike is reportedly the first time in India that workers have walked out for occupational health reasons. If workers employed by one of the largest corporations in the world face such unbearable working conditions this bespeaks to the horror the masses of Indian workers face each day. Most are only a step away from hunger.

GM Vice President Balendran, whose threats against the workers have been dutifully amplified by the Indian corporate media, has sought the assistance of Gujarat’s Hindu-communist Chief Minister Narendra Modi to

break the strike. Modi gained notoriety for his role as the main instigator and organizer of a brutal anti-Muslim pogrom in March 2002 during which at least 1,200 innocent Muslims were murdered with an additional hundreds of thousands driven from their homes.

Modi takes great pride in having transformed Gujarat into a most business-friendly state where the government, the police and the courts are at the beck and call of giant corporations. Although India's right-wing daily *The Indian Express*, notorious for its rabid anti-working class diatribes, speculated that Modi might intervene as a strikebreaker, he appears to have handed over the task to the court system.

Despite the bravery and tenacious determination exhibited by the workers, the union representing them, Gujarat Kamdar Mandal (GKM), has adopted the dead-end strategy of appealing to state courts and other institutions, which are patently hostile to the working class.

GKM, affiliated with the Congress Party's trade union arm, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), approached the Gujarat High Court last week, appealing for the court to affirm the workers' right to strike. Far from showing any sympathy for their plight, the presiding judge expressed his hostility by refusing to entertain the petition and insisted that "law and order" considerations trump workers' right to strike.

The judge then directed the union to avail itself of the court's "Mediation Center". Negotiations are scheduled to commence April 19.

India's pro-business daily the *Indian Express* reported that the state Director of Industrial Safety and Health (DISH) aims to examine the veracity of the claims of injury made the workers. The workers have charged that the previously produced medical report attesting to their injury is not being returned by DISH. It appears likely that the DISH is out to sabotage the workers' injury claim. The *Indian Express* report quoted an official making the following comments:

"We have received reports from private practitioner Dr. Mrugank Merchant, in which it is mentioned that the workers were suffering from spine-related problems. *But it cannot be said that it is due to the work at the factory.*" [Emphasis added].

It is likely that the reactionary Gujarat High Court

will utilize DISH's testimony to deny any relief to workers and maintain the brutal exploitation that guarantees large profits to GM and other trans-nationals.

All of the institutions of the political establishment in India, from the courts to the political parties and the trade unions, are committed to maintain such conditions in order to attract foreign investment. GM Halol workers can only take forward their fight by organizing independently of these institutions, and by appealing to GM workers in the US and throughout the world to wage a common struggle in defense of decent living standards and working conditions for all auto-workers.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact