

Stalinist union ends occupation at Suzuki plant in India

Arun Kumar
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The nearly two-week-long occupation by 2,500 auto workers at the Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) plant in Manesar was called off by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI)-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) on June 16. The struggle at India's largest carmaker is part of a growing wave of resistance among auto workers in India that coincides with the explosive strikes by Chinese workers at Honda and other companies last year.

The AITUC leaders sabotaged the sit-down strike as support for the struggle was spreading to other industrial cities in the northern Indian state of Haryana. Hundreds of thousands of auto workers and others were planning to launch solidarity strikes to defend the occupation. In the face of this, management, union and labour department officials held frantic talks to suppress the struggle.

In the end, AITUC officials called off the action without meeting the workers' main demand for recognition of their newly formed union.

The MSIL is a subsidiary of Suzuki Motor Corporation of Japan. Both its plants—Manesar and Gurgaon—are located in a fast-growing automobile manufacturing district in Haryana, where workers make little as labour for the global auto industry. The two factories account for half of Suzuki's worldwide output.

The workers began the occupation of the Manesar plant June 4, demanding recognition of the AITUC-affiliated Maruti Suzuki Employees' Union (MSEU). Management responded on June 6 by sacking 11 workers who started the union. The workers demanded the reinstatement of the victimised workers and the retention of contract labourers at two new plants being built inside the Manesar complex.

Despite the union leaders' claims of victory, management refused to recognize the union. Although management agreed to reinstate the sacked workers, these workers face a disciplinary inquiry and the threat of victimisation.

Another supposed concession was management's agreement to modify penalties imposed in retaliation for the strike. Initially management said it would dock eight days'

salary for every day workers were engaged in the strike, in addition to not paying wages for the missed days. In the end, the union agreed to a deal, which takes away two days of salary for every day of the strike.

Management has also set a two-month-long "observation period," in which even stiffer penalties will be imposed if workers express opposition to the sell-out deal. The company's Human Resources head, S. Y. Siddiqui, said, "We lost more than 4 billion rupees (\$US89 million); some disciplinary action has to be taken."

Satwanti Ahlawat, the labour commissioner from Haryana's Congress Party state government, acknowledged that workers had the legal right to form a union, but added, "the strike by employees, which has crippled the manufacturing facility, to press for a new union is not a right step."

The Stalinist AITUC leaders prevailed on the MSEU to end the occupation as over 200,000 workers from auto companies throughout the Haryana-Gurgaon industrial region prepared to carry out a two-hour sympathy strike June 20. On June 10, thousands of workers from Honda Motorcycle, Scooter India (HMSI), Hero Honda's Dharuhera plant, Endurance Auto, Satyam Auto and Rico Auto demonstrated in front of the Maruti Suzuki plant. On that day the Congress Party state government imposed a ban on the Suzuki strike.

Because of the industrial action many auto parts suppliers were compelled to shut down. Randeep Singh Surjewala, Haryana industries minister of the Congress-led state government, told PTI, "Maruti is the backbone of our industry. The strike is unwarranted, even though the law gives the workers every right to form one more union."

MSIL chairman R.C. Bhargava branded the strike as "illegal" and accused "outside forces" for instigating "quite young" workers at the plant. He warned, "If the industry feels it is difficult to do business, then the losers will be the workers," pointing out that "the industry always has the option to move" somewhere else. Maruti Suzuki is looking at possible expansion in the western state of Gujarat, known

for its business-friendly regulations, although the area has been hit by a series of militant strikes, including a wildcat at a General Motors plant in the spring. (See, “Wildcat strike continues at GM India plant in Gujarat”)

As is the pattern throughout the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in India, the Maruti Suzuki workers are carved into many categories by management so as to frustrate any joint struggle against their super exploitation. Of the nearly 3,500 workers at the Manesar plant, 1,100 are designated contract workers and another 1,100 apprentices.

Only 900 or about a quarter of the workforce is considered regular workers. Contract workers are paid 6,000-7000 rupees (\$US133-155) per month, a third of wages paid to regular or permanent workers. The company claims it pays 11,000-12,000 rupees per worker to labour contractors to supply workers.

Were Maruti Suzuki to close the Manesar facility it would have a devastating impact on state revenues. The company reportedly paid over 14 billion rupees (US\$216 million) in taxes to the Haryana government last year. It also got a tax credit of 2.55 billion rupees (US\$39 million) in the same period. The Haryana government also fears the company’s withdrawal would damage its campaign to attract foreign and local investments.

While conspiring with the Stalinist union officials behind the backs of the workers, management and state authorities were preparing measures to physically crush the strike. According to senior Haryana government officials, the state government considered mounting a late night police operation to forcibly evict the workers. However, fearing a possible eruption of opposition from other workers, the government decided against the plan, relying instead on the union bureaucracy to crush the struggle.

The deepening world recession, unbearable inflation and increasing workloads are driving a growing number of workers into struggle. The governments at both the national and state level in India—with the full assistance of the unions—are dedicated to assuring that global and Indian investors get maximum returns by intensifying the driving down of wages and increasing work loads. The \$73 billion auto industry in India, which employs close to 13 million people, is seeking to double revenues by 2016 by maintaining wages even lower than China.

Declaring the commitment of the unions to enforce these conditions, MSEU General Secretary Shiv Kumar said, “We will start work from tomorrow and also work on Sunday, which is our regular weekly holiday.”

The AITUC and Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU), which is affiliated to the other Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, wave red flags and organize very limited strike actions only to deceive

workers and contain their growing anger. Last year and earlier this year there were scores of workers fired from their jobs at Foxconn, BYD, Sanmina and Hyundai for their roles in strikes in the Oragadam SEZ and the nearby Sriperumbudur SEZ in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Stalinist CPM and CITU mounted no campaign in their defence. Instead, the victimized workers were told to put their faith in the labour commissioner, the capitalist courts and a change of government in the next elections.

The role of the Stalinist unions flows directly from the politics of their parties, which politically subjugate the working class to this or that section of the bourgeoisie. CPM-led governments in West Bengal and Kerala—which implemented austerity and other pro-business policies—have been voted out of power and the Stalinists are now limited to running the state government of Tripura in the northeast. On a national scale, the CPM-led Left Front provided parliamentary backing for the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for four years during its first term since 2004.

To win their just demands, the Maruti Suzuki and other sections of workers must break out of the straitjacket in which the Stalinists seek to contain their struggle and place it on a new axis. New organizations of struggle, outside of the control of the official unions and capitalist parties and controlled by the rank and file, must be built to organise collective resistance by the working class. India auto workers must reach out to their international brothers and sisters in Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US against the coming shakeout in the global auto industry, and the attack on jobs and living standards of all workers.

The fight to mobilize the working class against the big-business drive to make India the cheap-labour producer for world capitalism is above all a political struggle, which requires the building of a mass political party of the working class to fight for workers’ power and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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