

India: Comstar workers' strike in fourth week

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The strike by workers at the Comstar Automotive Technologies plant in Maraimalai Nagar—40 kilometres from Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu—is now in its fourth week.

Nearly 400 Comstar workers walked off the job August 11, demanding recognition of their union, the Comstar Automotive Technologies Employees' Union (CATEU), and negotiations on a new three-year wage accord to replace that which expired last March.

On September 2, nearly 300 Comstar workers observed a day long hunger-strike in Kanchipuram, the administrative headquarters of the district in which Maraimalai Nagar lies, to press for their demands.

Comstar Automotive manufactures auto components like starters and alternators for cars and light-commercial vehicles in India and worldwide. Established in 1998 and previously known as Visteon Power Train, the company supplies a veritable “Who’s Who” of global auto companies, including Ford, Volvo, Jaguar, Mazda, Aston Martin, Tata Motors, FIAT, Ashok Leyland, Nissan and General Motors.

Comstar gives workers just three days of casual leave per year, well below even the ten days of leave recommended by the labour department. The company employs around 410 permanent workers and around 350 temporary workers, trainees and apprentices at its Maraimalai Nagar plant.

Comstar management is seeking to break the strike through intimidation. It has victimized some of the more militant strikers and dragooned the apprentices, who are employed by the company only temporarily and as part of their schooling, into doing the strikers' work.

Four workers have been suspended for distributing leaflets to their fellow workers. Management has also made a false complaint to the police against some workers, claiming that they assaulted a company official while they were trying to put up a poster on a company notice board.

Rajasekar, a leading member of the CATEU, told WSW

correspondents: “The management has refused to recognize our union formed in 2004. Instead it has been exerting pressure on workers to join a committee formed by the management. At present all trainees have been regularized. Initially a worker has to go through a one-and-a-half-year training period and then six months' probation period to be eligible for permanent worker status. A trainee gets nearly 1,000 rupees [\$US22] per month less than a permanent worker. Permanent workers get a monthly salary of 13,000 to 15,000 rupees [\$US286-330].”

Another worker explained: “Production at the Comstar plant has not been completely stopped due to the non-participation in the strike of over 300 apprentices. Although we have asked them to join our strike, they didn't do so because they fear reprisals by the management. Apprentices routinely work in the company only for a year to obtain a diploma certificate.”

The CATEU is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union federation led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), and CATEU's president, A. Soundararajan, doubles as the party state secretary and a CPM legislator in the Tamil Nadu state assembly.

Over the course of the past 18 months, the CITU has repeatedly found itself propelled into the forefront of militant struggles launched by workers at plants in Tamil Nadu that are either owned by or supply the auto and electronics industry giants.

Invariably the Stalinists have limited these industrial struggles to the most narrow collective-bargaining perspective, confining the strikes to individual plants and, in the face of repeated state attacks on the workers, have systematically promoted the lie that the government, the big business parties, courts, and police can be pressured into assisting the workers.

The role of the CITU flows directly from the politics of the CPM, which in tandem with the Communist Party of India or CPI has for decades politically subjugated the working class to the parties and agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie. The CPM-led Left Front provided the current national Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government with its parliamentary majority for its first four years in office. CPM-led governments in West Bengal and Kerala were voted out of power this spring after

pursuing avowedly “pro-investor” policies. In West Bengal this included banning strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries and using police and goon violence to enforce the expropriation of peasant lands for big business projects.

In the Comstar strike, the Stalinists are continuing to preach reliance on the courts and police. Speaking at a rally on the evening of August 19, Soundararajan and CITU District Secretary Muthukumar advised the workers to respect Indian laws and the police, claiming that the law enshrines workers’ right to a union and that the government and the entire state apparatus are bound to uphold this right.

Capitalists who rob workers of their union rights, thundered Muthukumar, can be imprisoned for 6 months. However, he could point to no instance of this ever happening.

In fact, Muthukumar’s remarks in their own way gave the lie to his claims that the government and legal apparatus uphold workers’ rights or can be pressured to do so. Acutely aware of the anger among the workers over the police’s role in assisting management and harassing them, he felt compelled to urge the police to be “neutral.” He also had to make mention of the despicable role played by the police earlier in August when they intervened to support a company goon attack on workers at the Siva Sakthi Wood Works who were striking to win recognition of their newly-formed union. The Wood Works is located just three kilometers from the Comstar plant.

Soundararajan, for his part, said the workers could have confidence in the courts upholding their rights. “We have filed cases in the High Court against new companies’ refusal to allow workers to form a union and the High Court has already passed judgment in favour of forming unions.”

The CPM legislator and CATEU president went on to approvingly quote Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalithaa’s remark that the state will develop industrially only if it attracts more capital. By doing so, he underlined that the Stalinists fully accept and seek employer-recognition for their union on the basis that they will enforce the subordination of workers’ interests to corporate profitability. “We have never opposed industrial development,” affirmed Soundararajan. “But workers should be treated with dignity. The existing law should be implemented.”

The Stalinists’ program of straitjacketing workers’ struggles and subordinating them to their reactionary parliamentary manoeuvres has led to a series of betrayals and defeats, the power and militancy of the labor unrest in Tamil Nadu notwithstanding.

Late last year, the Stalinist CITU leaders ordered workers at Foxconn and BYD Electronics plants on the outskirts of Chennai to abandon their strikes for union recognition and improved wages and benefits and to surrender to managements’ punitive measures, including the sacking of several dozens of workers. In line with their opportunist electoral alliance with Jayalithaa’s AIADMK, the Stalinists told workers that their situation would improve after

this May’s state assembly elections. (See: “India: Lessons of the Stalinist CITU’s betrayal of the Foxconn and BYD strikes”)

The election of Jayalithaa, who when she was last in power used strikebreakers and mass firings to break a strike of 200,000 state employees, has of course done absolutely nothing for workers.

In an attempt to cover up their political responsibility for promoting this right-wing politician, the Stalinists are now proposing to mount a pressure campaign to push her government into implementing “pro-people” policies. “If the state government fails to recognize the unions,” vowed Soundararajan, “we are going to organize protest action coming September 6 in Chennai demanding union recognition, minimum wage of 10,000 rupees [\$US220] and abolition of contract system. Further, if there were to be no response to this struggle we would organize a one-day strike in all the companies where the CITU exists.”

The Stalinists have a very long history of organizing such protests. They are not aimed at developing an independent industrial and political offensive of the working class, but at containing, defusing and neutering workers’ struggles and subordinating them to their wretched maneuvers with the Congress, AIADMK and other big business parties.

To win their just demands, the workers at Comstar and the other plants that have sprung up in and around Chennai and Maraimalai Nagar must place their struggle on an entirely 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 entire working class. Above all, opposition to big business’ drive to make India a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism requires the building of a mass working class political party, which will rally all the toilers behind it, in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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