

India: Maruti Suzuki struggle escalates as company hires more strikebreakers

Arun Kumar
17 September 2011

Despite having won significant support from other workers in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt, the militant struggle being waged by more than 3,000 locked out Maruti Suzuki car assembly workers is in peril.

Big business, the Congress Party-led Haryana state government and the police are all supporting Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) in its drive to subjugate the workforce at its Manesar plant. Since August 29, Maruti Suzuki has locked out workers who refuse to sign a “good conduct bond” that enshrines a dictatorial work regime and upholds a company stooge union over the recently-formed Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU).

In the two-and-a half-weeks since imposing the lockout, MSI, India’s largest car maker, has stepped up its campaign of firing militant workers and begun hiring strikebreakers to replace those who won’t sign its “good conduct bond.”

Yet the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), with which the MSEU is affiliated, has failed to lift a finger to mobilize the working class in support of the locked-out workers. The union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India, the AITUC, is instead directing the MSI Manesar assembly plant workers to plead with the right-wing state government and its labour department to intervene on their behalf.

On Wednesday, nearly 7,000 workers from three factories owned by different Suzuki subsidiaries and located in the same Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—Suzuki Power Train India Ltd, Suzuki Castings, and Suzuki Motorcycle India Pvt. Ltd — went on strike to support their colleagues at MSI’s Manesar assembly plant and to press their own demands.

But on Friday, claiming that they had won concessions from management, the unions at the three plants instructed workers to end all job actions and return to work.

Wednesday’s walkout at the three plants was immediately interpreted by investors as a blow to the company’s plans—two of the plants provide parts to MSI’s Manesar assembly plant—resulting in a fall in its share price.

The walkouts underscored the potential for a broader movement against the transnational auto makers and their subsidiaries who have set up production facilities on the outskirts of Delhi, making Gurgaon-Manesar a major site of cheap-labor advanced-manufacturing production.

Conversely, the quick termination of the strike at MSI’s affiliates has encouraged the company to step up its anti-worker offensive. Already MSI has announced that workers at Suzuki Powertrain India and Suzuki Castings will be called back to work on Sunday, not Monday, so it can make up for lost production. The company admits that a parts shortage caused by the walkouts at the two auto parts plants forced it to scale back production at its Manesar assembly plant Friday.

Although the unions at the aforementioned Suzuki Powertrain, Suzuki Castings and Suzuki Motorcycle plants are not officially associated with any central labor federation, they are known to be under the influence of the AITUC and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. The CITU is the union federation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the other Stalinist parliamentary party and the CPI’s ally in the Left Front.

Given the record of the AITUC, CITU and the Left Front in suppressing the class struggle and subordinating the working class to the parties of the

bourgeoisie, there is every reason to believe that they intervened to support, if not openly press for, a quick end to the walkouts at MSI Manesar's sister plants.

On June 16, AITUC leaders ordered the MSI Manesar workers to end a 13-day sit-down strike, although the workers' demands had not been met, and at that very moment their struggle was winning widespread support from other workers in Gurgaon industrial belt, threatening to unleash a broader movement.

Significantly, on Friday, as the "non-affiliated" plant unions were winding up the walkouts at the three MSI-affiliated plants, the AITUC postponed a rally in support of the locked-out MSI workers, thus furthering their isolation.

The Stalinists' insistence that the MSI Manesar workers focus their energies on appeals to the right-wing government and labour department only serves to underscore that their principal concern is containing the workers' militant struggle so as not to jeopardize the AITUC's attempts to win recognition from management and the state as partners in maintaining "good labour relations."

The state Congress government has fully supported Maruti Suzuki in every step of its antiworker offensive. The labour department refused accreditation to the MSEU. The government mobilized hundreds of police to occupy the plant on the eve of management imposing its lockout, so as to thwart any attempt by the workers to resume last June's occupation. Congress leaders have told workers to sign the company's humiliating and repressive bond and echoed company threats that it could pull out of the state if the workers don't submit.

"Workers are not realising," declared Haryana Minister for Labour and Employment Shiv Charan Lal Sharma, "that the Japanese company [Suzuki], which is giving employment to a lot of state people, may move to another state if such kind of labour unrest continues to happen and it will be a big loss for the state. Therefore, they should come back and start working in the factory."

Citing similar concerns about a loss of investment, Gurgaon Chamber of Commerce and Industry President P.K. Jain has urged the government to take an even more active role in ending the "labour unrest"—unrest Jain conveniently forgets to mention was caused by the company imposing a lockout and denying its

employees their basic rights. Jain's greatest concern was that the workers' resistance could spread. "Unscrupulous people," he warned, "could exploit the situation by triggering strikes in other factories."

Confident of the support of the government, police and courts, MSI has baldly declared that it will "not take back those dismissed or suspended for indiscipline, sabotage and for deliberately causing quality problems in cars"—that is more than fifty of the most militant workers.

The AITUC's inaction has reportedly provoked growing unease and anger among rank-and-file workers and led to demands for a mass meeting to discuss the way forward.

In an attempt to contain the workers' anger, Gurudas Dasgupta, a top AITUC leader and CPI parliamentarian, gave a demagogic speech during a visit to Gurgaon on Tuesday. He declared, "We will go to jail and get beaten up by cops, but we will not forsake our right to form unions."

Dasgupta has called a convention of trade unions for Thursday September 22 to discuss their response to the state government's aggressive anti-worker stand, thus putting off any action for almost another full week. Moreover, Dasgupta has already made clear that the most the AITUC will propose is a stepped-up protest campaign, aimed at stymying any attempt to make the MSI workers' resistance the spearhead of a broader working class upsurge. "We will decide how to proceed after the convention," said Dasgupta. "If need be, I will be there to support you and we will collectively *gherao* [occupy] the labor office."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact