

Maruti Suzuki India workers challenge cheap-labor regime

“We are determined this time to fight to the end”

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The following report, which is based on discussions with workers locked out from Maruti Suzuki’s car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana, was submitted by a WSWs supporter in Delhi. It has been slightly edited for publication.

After locking out the struggling workers, the management of Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) has focused all its efforts at keeping production alive by recruiting new workers and by drawing on the help of a handful among the existing workforce affiliated with the Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union, a stooge Union in the hands of the management. This was done to demoralise the workers, to subdue them into abandoning their demand for registration and recognition of their union, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU). The Manesar MSI workers have been fighting for this demand for a long time.

Since being locked out on August 29 for refusing to sign a “good conduct bond,” the workers are staging a protest *dharna* (sit-down) outside the No.2 Gate of the factory situated in Sector 8, Phase-III of Manesar, Gurgaon. Needless to say, coercing the workers into signing such a bond, which finds no place in any statute or rule in industrial law, is not only illegal, but an unlawful trade practice for which penal action is provided against the erring managers. But the government of Haryana, instead of taking action against management, is complicit in its nefarious designs.

In step with Maruti Suzuki management, the Haryana state Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda has vowed that he will not permit the workers’ union to be registered. Immediately after this apparently unlawful proclamation, the office of Labour Commissioner rejected the application of the workers for registration of the MSEU.

350 loading workers at MSI’s Manesar factory, with whose help the management was able to keep the supply and delivery of production going during the first two weeks of the lockout, have also struck work from 14 September to strengthen the hands of the locked out production workers. The loading workers have also come out with their own demand that instead of bare minimum wages, they be paid according to the regular pay scale of drivers. With the loading workers’ strike, the activities of the Maruti Suzuki plant at Manesar have come to almost a standstill. Nominal production which management has kept going to demoralise workers is of sub-standard quality and has failed to pass quality

control mechanisms and thus has not been delivered.

Immense pressure was also brought upon the management of Maruti Suzuki by the solidarity strike of 7,000 workers launched on the 14th of this month at three Suzuki subsidiaries—Suzuki Power-Train, Suzuki Castings and Suzuki Motor-Cycle India. This solidarity action was to culminate in a mass workers’ protest rally on Friday the 16th, the day that the President of India was to visit Gurgaon.

However, at this crucial juncture, the Stalinist trade union leadership of the AITUC (All India Trades Union Congress) and the CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) intervened. They called upon the workers to have faith in the false promises and deceit of the employers, unilaterally cancelled the rally planned for the 16th, and declared an end to the ongoing strike at the three Suzuki subsidiaries.

After workers at the three Suzuki subsidiaries refused to listen to the Stalinist union leaders, saying that they would continue their strike as no settlement had yet been reached for the Manesar Maruti-Suzuki workers, the Stalinist leaders pressured the MSEU workers to call for an end to the solidarity action. It only ended when workers’ leaders at Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar plant, under pressure from the Stalinist union officials, appealed for an end to the sympathy strike action.

Emboldened by and jubilant at this outright betrayal by the Stalinists, the employers and the government backed out from various promises made to the workers at the Suzuki subsidiaries and MSI again reiterated its demand that the locked out workers sign the “good conduct bond” as a condition for being allowed to resume work.

Then, under a pre-arranged plan of the employer and the government, three negotiators from the workers’ side were arrested on trumped-up charges on the evening of the 18th at the conclusion of a meeting at the local Gymkhana Club. The police were waiting outside to make the arrests.

Workers tried to inform a top AITUC official of this development, but numerous attempts to reach him by phone were unsuccessful. The next morning, the AITUC leader’s wife called back at least one worker to rebuke him for the disturbance he caused in the early morning hours. The next day, instead of protesting against the arrest and calling upon other sections of working class to demonstrate in solidarity, the AITUC focused

exclusively on applying for bail for the arrested union leaders.

Last June, the Stalinist leadership scuttled a militant strike by the Manesar MSI workers after 13 days. The strike was at its peak and the leadership ended the strike based on meaningless assurances from the government that it would look into the workers' grievances and get the MSEU registered as the workers' representative.

Strike action had begun on June 4 and continued till the 16th. On June 10th the government declared the strike illegal after thousands of workers in the Manesar industrial belt had demonstrated in favour of the strikers at the gate of Maruti Suzuki's assembly plant. A further massive strike action by two *lakh* (hundred thousand) workers in the Manesar industrial belt was scheduled for the 20th. However, the AITUC-CITU leaders pleaded to the workers to accept verbal assurances from the government. Workers were forced to sign a settlement which shamefully empowered the management to conduct disciplinary proceedings against 11 striking workers. The Stalinist leaders suggested to the workers that the proceedings would only be a formality and that management had assured them that no real action would be taken against any workman.

As the fighting mood of workers subsided, not only the government fell back upon its promises of registering the union, the MSEU, but on July 28, management suspended 6 regular workers, who had been instrumental in the June strike, on the pretext of a scuffle with a supervisor. While suspension of two was revoked, four were issued police charge-sheets. Later on, police also issued charge-sheets against the other two. On 23 August another three workers were suspended and on the 24th one worker was suspended.

On the night of the 28th, a 500 strong police force clad in riot gear was deployed inside the Manesar plant and on the 29th a lockout was declared by the management. As workers started to swing into action, 150 bouncers were pressed into service by the management to manhandle the workers and expel them from the company grounds. Since the lockout was imposed, 23 workers have been terminated and 34 more suspended on false charges.

In the meantime, the Suzuki bosses have let it be known that they are considering the option of pulling out from Manesar in Haryana and setting up operations in Gujarat, where the ultra-rightwing Hindu-supremacist government of Narendra Modi is already assuring a safe-haven for the auto makers. After Tata shifted its Nano car manufacturing plant from Singur, West Bengal, to Gujarat, the west Indian state emerged as the most rapidly expanding hub for auto manufacture in India.

To convince MSI to stay in Haryana, the state's Congress Party government is assisting the carmaker in all possible ways. Satwanti Ahlawat, the Labour Commissioner of Haryana has repeatedly said that the workers will have to sign the "good conduct" bond and forget their demand for the union registration.

Around 60 percent of the MSI workers hail from surrounding villages in Manesar and Gurgaon and their struggle has drawn some support from the villages, making direct police repression more difficult for the government.

The sentiment of the workers we spoke with was summarized by one worker, Sunil. He told us, "we are determined this time not to

retreat and to fight to the end for the right to form a union."

With the grass-root workers determined to win their rights, MSI and the government are looking to diffuse the crisis through the mediation of the Stalinist union leaders. For their part, the AITUC-CITU officials are making all possible efforts, including intimidating the workers to follow their command, to restrict the sweep of the struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers, preventing its spread to other factories and worksites.

In the name of sponsoring an "action committee" and with the purpose of excluding more radical elements, the Stalinist unions have formed a cartel of labour federations that includes the Indian Nation Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). The INTUC is the trade union front of the Congress Party, the party ruling at the Centre and in Haryana and which has been working hand-in-glove with MSI. HMS was once the trade union front of the social-democrats, who long ago splintered into various casteist and regionalist bourgeois parties.

The Stalinists have a decades' long record of suppressing the class struggle in favour of the capitalist bosses, their parties and governments. They supported the big business government of the Congress Party-led UPA coalition at the centre from May 2004 to June 2008, till they were kicked out by the Congress. In Kerala and West Bengal, where Stalinists have formed the state government, they have pursued the same pro-investor and anti-worker policies. The Maoists, like the Stalinist parliamentary parties, promote the claim that there are national-progressive sections of capitalists who can be allies of the working class in the "democratic revolution."

As the struggle of the Manesar worker clearly demonstrates, the Stalinists will not permit the workers' struggles that unfold under their leadership to become the spearhead for a broader political struggle of the working class against its enemies. Rather, so as to prevent those struggles from becoming a conscious class struggle, they will betray and smother them.

The way forward for the striking workers at Manesar is to appeal to their brethren workers in surrounding plants for support and solidarity and to mount a class offensive against the rich bosses and their political parties and governments. And for this it is imperative to get rid of the capitulationist and opportunist Stalinist leadership of the movement.



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