

Maruti Suzuki India lockout: After talks fail, union leaders arrested

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20 September 2011

Several leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU) were arrested Sunday evening as they emerged from negotiations with officials of Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) Ltd. and the Haryana state labour department.

Since August 29, MSI has locked out 3,000 workers at its Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant because they have refused to sign a “good conduct bond” that enshrines a dictatorial work regime and upholds a company stooge union over the recently formed MSEU. India’s largest carmaker, MSI has stepped up its campaign of firing militant workers during the past three weeks and begun hiring strikebreakers to replace those who won’t sign the bond.

Sunday’s talks broke down due to MSI management’s adamant opposition to reinstating any of the 62 victimized workers.

In a move clearly coordinated between the carmaker and the Congress Party-led state government, police arrested MSEU President Sonu Gujjar, General Secretary Shiv Kumar, and Executive Member Ravinder Kumar as they left the talks on the evening of September 18.

Police then filed a First Information Report (FIR) against Ravinder Kumar on trumped-up charges of scuffling with some MSI supervisors. Human rights organisations have condemned the arrests and demanded the immediate release of the union leaders.

On Monday, the three were denied bail and ordered held at Bhondsi jail for 14 days.

The Haryana Congress Party government has been acting in concert with MSI since well before the lockout began. In mid-August, its labour department refused to recognize the MSEU, insisting that the detested company union is the workers’ representative. On the eve of MSI locking out the Manesar assembly plant workers, it dispatched hundreds of police to occupy the plant so as to prevent the workers from resuming the militant sit-down strike that they mounted last June.

Blaming the workers for the dispute, Labour Minister Shiv Charan Lal Sharma has deplored the loss of revenue to the state resulting from the disruption of MSI’s output of the

“Swift,” one of India’s most popular cars.

Sharma has repeatedly supported MSI management’s demand that the Manesar workers sign its “good conduct bond: “If the company wants in writing the workers won’t sabotage again, what is the problem? The company has the right to demand that from workers.” The government has also parroted the MSI’s claims that the MSEU is illegitimate because it is affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). India’s oldest labour federation, the AITUC is a close ally of the Stalinist Communist Party of India or CPI.

MSI representatives refused to meet with the MSEU leaders Sunday. So officials from the pro-company Haryana labour department and the company-stooge union acted as intermediaries.

MSI has suffered significant losses due to the lockout, but has vowed that it is ready to incur much more to inflict a decisive defeat on the workers. “Indisciplined workers inside the plant can cause an even greater loss,” declared Maruti Suzuki chairman R.C. Bhargava. “They must sign the (good conduct) pledge.”

Under conditions where the Indian economy is beset by mounting problems—including near double-digit inflation, rising interest rates and falling foreign investment—MSI is determined to preserve and intensify the super-exploitation of its workforce.

The company, which saw its car sales decline by 23 percent in July and 13 percent in August from the same months in 2010, has both threatened to replace all those who refuse to sign the bond with strikebreakers and to move production to the west Indian state of Gujarat.

The website of the weekly magazine *Tehelka* carries a report based on interviews with workers at the Manesar plant that describes the appalling conditions they endure: “You catch a bus at 5 AM for the factory. Arriving a second late to punch in your card means a pay cut, but you can’t leave the premises once you’ve entered. At 6.30 AM, you exercise and supervisors give you feedback on your previous output. Start work at 7 sharp. Everyone does his one

task—assembling, welding, fixing—for a minimum of 8 continuous hours. A car rolls off the line every 38 seconds, which means you can't budge from your position, ever.

"You get two breathless breaks during the day. At 9 AM, a 7-minute break to drink tea or go to the loo, or both. After a while you might, like many of your friends here, end up taking your hot tea and kachori to the bathroom with you. Then a lunch break of 30 minutes, in which you walk about a half kilometre to the canteen, wait in line with everyone, eat and walk back. Returning even a minute late from any break, or leaving the assembly line for any reason even for a minute, means half a day's pay cut. Older systems used to include an overseer for every small group of workers who could step in if someone needed to take a breather. But, the cost logic of production is perennially at odds with workers' rights."

According to the *Tehelka* report, although most of the workers are guaranteed a salary of just 8,000 Rupess (\$US167) per month, they routinely face penalties and fines of Rs. 1,500 (\$31): "Take a day from your legally granted casual leave or sick leave, for any reason, and lose Rs. 1,500. Take two and lose Rs. 3,000, and so on up till half your salary disappears. When *Tehelka* emailed Maruti Suzuki asking about conditions like break durations and pay cuts, their official spokesperson responded: 'If attendance is below a certain level, performance incentive is less to that extent. The terms and conditions of all workers, including duration of breaks, are uniform for employees in Gurgaon and Manesar'."

Although MSI enjoys the full support of the Congress Party state government, the police and the courts in prosecuting its anti-worker offensive, the Stalinist-led AITUC is opposed to mobilizing the workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and beyond in support of the locked-out workers.

Rather it has directed the Manesar workers to appeal to the Congress government to uphold their rights.

The aim of the AITUC is to convince the Haryana authorities, MSI and other employers that the union can be their partner in maintaining "good labour relations." At the Stalinists' urging, MSEU President Sonu Gujjar has urged workers to identify their interests with those of the company. According to a report in the *Economic Times*, "His co-workers say...[he] constantly exhorts them to make better quality cars and help the Manesar plant stand out among all Suzuki facilities worldwide. 'He always tells us we can take Maruti to the next level if we can make the finest cars in Asia and stay ahead of the global competition. He always emphasises on putting our best,' says Pradeep Kumar, an apprentice in the company's stores department."

Last June, the AITUC ordered the MSI workers to end their occupation after 13 days and at the very point when their struggle was threatening to become a broader movement involving tens of thousands of workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt.

Similarly last week, the Stalinists connived in the ending of sympathy strikes by 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.

Statements from AITUC officials and others involved in the on-again, off-again bargaining with the company indicate that the Stalinists are ready to instruct the workers at the Manesar plan to sign the "good conduct" bond, if MSI withdraws just some of the dismissals and agrees to a few changes in the bond's wording.

The president of the Maruti Suzuki Kamgar Union, the company-recognised union, and an intermediary in Sunday's talks, told the press, "The company has suspended 29 workers, terminated 18 trainees and another 15 regular workers have been dismissed. We are asking the company to not terminate the trainees, as they are too young. Both sides have to climb down if a solution is to emerge."

Clearly setting the stage for a sellout of the MSI workers' militant struggle, AITUC National Secretary D. L. Sachdeva has said the dispute can be resolved if management revokes the suspensions—an outcome that would leave more than half of the victimized workers on the street. Said Sachdeva, "If Maruti takes the suspended workers back the issue will be resolved. The workers will sign the good conduct bond if certain conditions are removed from the bond."



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