

India: Stalinist union works to impose company demands on locked-out Maruti Suzuki workers

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The Stalinist leadership of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) is urging locked-out workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana to surrender to the company's demand that they sign a "good conduct bond" that reinforces an oppressive, dictatorial work regime and denies workers any genuine representation.

Maruti Suzuki India (MSI), the country's largest carmaker, has locked out some 3,000 workers at its Manesar plant since August 29. The Congress Party-led state government, the police and courts have fully supported the company in its bid to break the workers' resistance and deny recognition to the Maruti Suzuki Employees Association (MSEU), the organization they recently formed in opposition to a company stooge union.

The AITUC, the labour federation aligned with the Communist Party of India or CPI and to which the MSEU is affiliated, has mounted no serious opposition to this company-state attack. Rather it has isolated the locked-out workers, thwarting sympathy strikes that broke out at other Suzuki plants and subsidiaries in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and urging the locked-out workers to put their faith in the intervention of the rightwing state government.

This has only encouraged the company and government. After talks broke off on September 18, police arrested three of the MSEU leaders on trumped-up charges.

Now, under conditions where there is growing apprehension in the government and among other employers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt that the confrontation at MSI could provoke widespread labour unrest, the Stalinist AITUC leaders are urging

the locked-out workers to surrender to MSI. They are pressuring them to sign a slightly modified version of the "good conduct bond," effectively abandon their fight for recognition of the MSEU, and accept, through firings, the purging of more than thirty of the most militant workers.

In recent days, the AITUC has been conducting back-channel negotiations with MSI on redrafting the "bond" to make it slightly less oppressive and provocative and have prevailed on the MSEU leaders to go along. "The company and the workers," says MSEU General Secretary Shiv Kumar, "reached a consensus on a proposed new good conduct bond and the company has assured us it will not act with vengeance."

The new bond, like previous versions, reportedly forces the workers to pledge not "to resort to go slow, intermittent stoppage of work, stay-in-strike, work-to-rule, sabotage or otherwise indulge in any activity, which would hamper the normal production in the factory."

But the lockout continues, because of discontent and opposition among rank-and-file workers and the company's determination to fire many of the most militant workers.

The AITUC has indicated it will press for an immediate return to work if the company agrees to place about half of 62 workers it has fired for "indiscipline and insubordination" on suspension instead. But the company is adamant that it will take back no more than 18 of the victimized workers and this stand has been fully backed by Haryana's Congress Party government.

Declared Haryana Labour Minister Shiv Charan Lal Sharma, "Workers who are involved in criminal

activities or have FIRs (criminal charges) slapped against them, cannot be taken back. The management has agreed to take back 18-20 workers.” Since the lockout began, Sharma has been parroting the company’s propaganda, demanding the workers sign the “good conduct bond,” denouncing the MSEU as “politically motivated outsiders” and repeating the company’s lies about worker sabotage and violence.

In recent days MSI Chairman R.C. Bhargava has repeatedly vowed that the company will not back down and will instead step up its hiring of so-called replacement workers, that is strike breakers. “I would rather lose production now,” declared Bhargava, “than to become impossibly constrained in working in the future.”

Bhargava indicated that MSI is prepared to endure substantial production losses so as to uphold a work regime that allows it to wrench super-profits from its workforce: “We can afford this strike as long as we want. We have the staying power... We have to take a long-term view. We are not in this game for a few months or years.”

In an interview published Monday, Bhargava claimed the company has thus far hired 1,200 replacement workers, equal to about 40 percent of the locked-out workforce, and is prepared to continue increasing the number in the coming days and weeks.

According to reports, MSI has lost nearly 16,000 units of production worth about 7 billion rupees or more than US\$140 million since imposing the lockout late last month. In June, a 13-day sit-down strike that was ended on the orders of the Stalinist AITUC at the very point that it was galvanizing mass support from other workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, cost the company about 5.5 billion rupees (US\$111 million).

If the courageous struggle of the MSI workers is not to be broken, it must be made the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class, beginning with workers throughout the giant Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt who almost uniformly face similar conditions of brutal exploitation.

In Ludhiana, the major industrial city in the neighbouring state of Punjab, workers from over a hundred textile factories have struck work from September 21 over their demands for a wage hike and better working conditions. The striking textile workers

have passed a resolution voicing solidarity with workers at the Maruti Suzuki plant in Manesar. This underscores the potential for a common struggle of workers who confront similar conditions of cheap labour, job insecurity, and lack of basic democratic rights.

The biggest obstacle workers face in mounting such a struggle is the unions like the AITUC and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation aligned with the other major Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM. The role these unions play in suppressing the class struggle flows from the perspective, orientation and function of the parties that lead them. The CPI and CPM are an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment. They have a decades-long history of politically subordinating the working class to alliances with the Congress Party and other parties of the Indian bourgeoisie and when in office in states like West Bengal have pursued self-avowedly “pro-investor” policies.



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