

India: Police support Maruti Suzuki lockout, occupy plant

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Maruti Suzuki India Ltd, the country's largest car maker, has locked out more than three thousand workers at its Manesar plant since August 29 in an attempt to coerce them into signing a company-dictated "good conduct bond."

Maruti Suzuki imposed the lockout just two weeks after the Congress Party-led Haryana state government rejected the registration application of the newly formed workers union, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), on the grounds that there is already a union in place—the company-sponsored Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU).

The government's blatant pro-management stance is underscored by the fact that the workers have all but unanimously quit the company-stooge union, the MUKU.

The government's support for the lockout is equally demonstrative. It has echoed management's claims that the MSEU is not a legitimate representative of the workers because it is affiliated with the All-India Trade Congress (AITUC), the labor federation aligned with the Stalinist Communist Party of India or CPI.

With the government's sanction, five hundred police, including riot police, were brought into the plant the evening before the lockout was imposed and to this day hundreds of police are deployed inside Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant.

The company clearly feared that if the workers got wind of its plans to impose a lockout they would resume the militant sit-down strike they mounted for two weeks last June.

Since imposing the lockout, Maruti Suzuki has terminated 23 workers and suspended 34 on charges of misconduct, insubordination and instigating workers to stop production. Police complaints have also been lodged against many of the victimized workers.

These firings and suspensions are in addition to those meted out to some two dozen workers in the period between the end of the sit-down strike on June 16 and the imposition of the lockout.

The Manesar plant, which is located about 30 kilometers from India's national capital New Delhi, employs 3,500 workers. Of these 900, or barely more than a quarter, are "regular" or permanent employees. 1,500 of the workers are designated as trainees and apprentices and 1,100 are employed on a contract or short-term basis, meaning they have no job security and inferior terms of employment.

On the morning of Sept. 2, the company reportedly employed private contractors to round up about 150 contract workers from various lodges located in the vicinity of the plant in Manesar. Once assembled, the workers were threatened and even attacked by goons in an attempt to pressure them into entering the factory. When other workers learned of what was going on they rushed to intervene. They too were set upon by the goons, but predictably the only arrests that the police made were of locked out workers.

The company claims that it has succeeded in resuming production with managers and some contract workers. The union disputes these claims, saying that in the absence of the vast majority of the workforce and all the more skilled workers, no more than token production is possible.

The Congress Party-led Haryana government claims that the Maruti Suzuki strike is nothing more than a political conspiracy by the Left parties to incite industrial unrest in the state.

"There is a move to politicise labour unions in Haryana by political elements that have lost their bastion in Bengal and Kerala," declared Shiv Bhatia, an adviser to the state's chief minister. "Their politics of

creating confusion and unrest between labour and management will not be allowed here.”

Such statements point to the state government’s fear of the growing unrest among industrial workers and its readiness to resort to authoritarian methods to stamp it out.

In fact the Left Front has played a decisive role in suppressing the class struggle. For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, it propped up the Congress Party-led national coalition government, the United Progressive Alliance. And in those states where it has held office, like West Bengal and Kerala, the Stalinist parties and their Left Front have openly pursued “pro-investor” policies.

For their part, the union federations aligned with the CPI and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), respectively the AITUC and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions or CITU, have repeatedly brought strikes to a rapid end by concluding rotten deals with management. A case in point was the CITU’s scuttling of the militant union recognition struggles at Foxconn and BYD Electronics in Tamil Nadu last November. (See: “India: Lessons of the Stalinist CITU’s betrayal of the Foxconn and BYD strikes”).

In the case of Maruti Suzuki, it is the AITUC’s betrayal of last June’s 13-day strike that has emboldened the management to step up its anti-labor offensive. The AITUC leaders prevailed on the workers to end their sit-down strike (occupation of the plant) on June 16 as support for their struggle was spreading to other factories in Manesar and the surrounding Gurgaon industrial belt and threatening to unleash a broader movement.

On June 10 thousands of workers from other automobile and parts manufacturing companies had demonstrated in front of the Maruti Suzuki plant. This outpouring of support prompted the Congress Party state government to impose a ban on the Maruti Suzuki strike and the Stalinist union officials to enter into frantic talks with government labor department officials and management.

The strike was called off as more than 200,000 workers in the Gurgaon industrial belt were planning for a two-hour sympathy walkout on June 20.

Despite the union leaders’ claims of victory, management refused to recognize the MSEU as the workers’ bargaining representative, which was the

workers’ principal demand. Management did agree to reinstate several sacked workers but not unconditionally. The victimized workers still face a disciplinary inquiry.

Last year and earlier this year there were scores of workers fired from their jobs at Foxconn, BYD, Sanmina and Hyundai for their roles in strikes in the Oragadam Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the nearby Sriperumbudur SEZ in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Stalinist CPM and CITU mounted no campaign in their defense. Instead, the victimized workers were told to put their faith in the government labor commissioner, the capitalist courts and a change of government in the next state elections.

The role of the Stalinist unions flows directly from the politics of their parties, which politically subjugate the working class to this or that section of the bourgeoisie.

To win their just demands, workers at Maruti Suzuki, like those across India, must break out of the collective bargaining straitjacket in which the Stalinists seek to contain their struggles and place them on a 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 working class. Indian autoworkers must reach out to their international brothers and sisters in Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US against the coming shakeout in the global auto industry and the attack on the jobs and working conditions of all workers.

The fight to mobilize the working class against the big-business drive to make India a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism is above all a political struggle that requires the building of a mass political party of the working class to fight for workers’ power and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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