

India: Maruti Suzuki and Congress government prepare police attack on occupation

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Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) is plotting with the Congress Party-led Haryana state government to use police violence to smash the six day-old occupation of its Manesar car assembly plant.

The occupation, which involves some 2,000 workers, has prompted sympathy strikes involving more than 10,000 workers at auto-related companies in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt on the outskirts of Delhi, India's capital.

Yesterday, an official from the Haryana Labour Department said police have been given the legal authority to evict the striking workers from MSI's Manesar factory. The unnamed official made the remark in an interview with the Press Trust of India on the significance of a Labour Department ruling issued earlier yesterday that the strike at the MSI plant is illegal.

The government is also vowing to initiate court action against the workers for allegedly breaching an agreement—reached October 1 after concerted pressure from the Labour Department, company, and various unions—that ended a 33-day lockout at the Manesar plant on terms favourable to MSI. The government says it will also “de-register” unions at two Suzuki-affiliated companies where workers have walked out in support of the Manesar assembly plant strikers.

In a further attempt to provide a legal cover for the eviction of the strikers, whose only real “crime” is to have rebelled against sweatshop conditions and insisted upon their right to be represented by the union of their choice, the company filed suit in the Punjab and Haryana High Court (HC) on Wednesday. “We have moved the HC to get control of our factory at Manesar,” MSI Chairman R.C. Bhargava told the *Financial Chronicle*. “We hope to get an order from the high court on Thursday and based on that we will

proceed further.”

At the beginning of this week, MSI demanded immediate police action to break the occupation. “We need the police to evict” the striking workers, an MSI spokesman told the AFP news agency Monday. “We’re telling the state government to evict them. We can’t get into fist fights with the workers.”

Monday’s call from MSI management for police intervention came after repeated vituperative company statements accusing the strikers of indulging in “random acts of violence” and beating up company managers and “workers who are not supporting the strike.”

But on Tuesday, MSI Chairman Bhargava backtracked on the company’s public appeal for immediate police intervention. “We will try and avoid the use of force to evict the workers from the (Manesar) plant... We have not reached that stage yet,” Bhargava claimed. Contradicting previous company claims of imminent threats of damage to its property, Bhargava said, “We have the police presence for the security of our equipment inside the plant.”

The company’s withdrawal of its demand for the immediate suppression of the occupation was motivated by two calculations: First, the fear that a police assault on the occupied plant could result in a violent clash bringing further discredit to the company and potentially sparking a worker upheaval across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt.

Second, twice since June the company has been able to use the labor federations active in the area—particularly the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and the two federations allied with the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the AITUC (All India Trades Union Congress) and CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Unions)—to prevail on the Manesar workers to end their militant actions.

Whilst the current occupation erupted in opposition to the sell-out agreement negotiated by the HMS and endorsed by the AITUC and CITU to end the 33-day lockout, the company clearly calculated that before risking a bloody confrontation with the workers it would be worth exploring the possibility of once again using the unions to corral the militant Manesar workers back to work.

The actions taken by the Congress Party state government and MSI yesterday indicate that a violent police assault is again under active consideration and could be launched at any time.

The Haryana state government, it must be emphasized, has acted as a veritable arm of the company throughout the almost six-month labour conflict. It declared the two week-long strike the workers mounted last June illegal, has refused to recognize the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), ordered the arrest of MSEU leaders on trumped up charges, and repeatedly demanded that the workers sign the company's "good conduct bond."

Not only has MSI sought to enforce a draconian work regime at its Manesar assembly plant through firings and suspensions. The numerous labor contractors it uses to provide much of its workforce have shown no compunction at using goons to intimidate and assault militant workers.

While MSI has trumpeted claims of worker violence and criminality, it has studiously avoided discussion of the one incontrovertible act of violence that has occurred since the occupation began—last Sunday's shooting by a Suzuki-employed labor contractor of three workers at a nearby Suzuki facility who had walked out in sympathy with the Manesar MSI workers.

Over the past six months, the AITUC, CITU, and other union federations have repeatedly worked to isolate the Manesar MSI workers whilst urging them to submit to the company's demands. Now they are trying to win back influence among the strikers by professing support for the occupation and offering them food and other material assistance.

The real character of their intervention, however, is highlighted by the joint statement the unions issued last Friday and a comment made by the president of the AITUC, which is aligned with the Communist Party of India, the country's oldest Stalinist party.

Last June, the major labor federations active in the Gurgaon-Manesar area, including the HMS, CITU, AITUC, the Congress Party-aligned INTUC, and the BMS, the union federation of the Hindu supremacist BJP—formed a Joint Action Committee ostensibly to support the Manesar MSI

workers.

On Friday in response to the occupation, this Joint Committee issued a statement that appealed not the working class to take action in support of the MSI workers, but rather to the state government and the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) national government to "intervene in the struggle to resolve the contentious issues amicably and restore industrial peace."

The statement of AITUC National Secretary D.L. Sachdev was even more revealing. Referring to the strikers, he said "These are young men amenable to get misled. The Haryana government needed to play a more proactive role but has been a bystander though it knows that ultra-left elements have entered this strike."

Not only is the claim the state Congress Party government has been a bystander in the MSI dispute a flagrant lie. It has intervened time and again on the side of MSI, including deploying phalanxes of police against the workers. But in the Indian context, Sachdev's reference to "ultra-left elements" has a very definite reactionary significance.

This term is employed by the CPI and its sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, to refer to the Maoists (Naxalites), whom the Congress-led government, with Stalinist support, have declared the country's "greatest internal security" threat.

To issue a "warning" to the Congress state government and Indian political elite that "ultra-left elements" have "entered" the MSI strike, is to provide a political cover for a violent state assault on the workers—an assault the AITUC General Secretary Sachdev knows full well is under active preparation.

In rebelling against the October 1 sell-out agreement and urging other workers to recognize that they have a huge stake in the confrontation at MSI and to take action in their support, the Manesar workers have taken an important step forward. But they must make explicit what is implicit in their actions—by fighting to make their strike the spearhead of a broader industrial and political offensive of workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and across India against low-pay, sweatshop working conditions, and job insecurity and for a workers' and peasants' government. Such a struggle must be organized independently of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist trade union federations and parties, the Stalinists included.



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