

India: Maruti and Suzuki workers discuss their two-week strike

A WSWS reporting team
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A *World Socialist Web Site* team last week visited striking workers at the Maruti assembly and Suzuki Powertrain plants in Manesar, in the northern Indian state of Haryana. Eight thousand workers from three Suzuki plants in Haryana's Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt had been on strike for two weeks in support of their assembly plant colleagues.

Last Friday, the trade unions ordered strikers back to work after the newly formed Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU) at the assembly plant signed a rotten deal with the management that does not meet their basic needs and abandons many key demands. (See: "India: Unions scuttle Maruti Suzuki strike again")

The strike was an explosive development in a long-running dispute. On October 1, the company had lifted a 33-day lockout at the Manesar plant when unions prevailed upon workers to sign "good conduct bonds." However, the company reneged on its promise to take back 1,200 contract hands, sparking a rebellion by workers against the unions. They walked out on strike and occupied the factory.

The Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, about 50 kilometres from New Delhi, typifies the special economic zones that Indian state and central governments are creating for local and foreign investors. More than 100,000 workers are employed in sweatshop conditions in Gurgaon-Manesar.

Not far from the Manesar industrial complex one can see Manesar city, whose high-rise apartments, modern shopping complexes, supermarkets and banks exist exclusively for the affluent layers of society.

No ordinary buses run from the city to the Manesar Maruti plants. One of the demands of striking workers was for restoration of a bus service that was terminated as a punishment when the company lifted its lockout. From their meagre earnings, workers have to spend about 100 rupees (\$US2) a day to travel to work.

The workers that the WSWS interviewed at Suzuki's Manesar plant and Suzuki Powertrain India, just before their strike was called off, described appalling living and working conditions.

One Manesar plant worker commented on the collaboration between the company and the Congress Party state government in Haryana. The government's principal concern was that investors would flee to other states if workers continued their struggle. "The state government and the Maruti management together have been exerting a lot of pressure to force us back to work," he said.

Speaking at a strike tent, he declared: "But this time we are determined to force the company to accept our demands. Despite our severe economic difficulties we come to this makeshift tent every day to demonstrate our determination to fight for our rights."

A young worker, 29, who had been recruited to the assembly plant several years earlier, spoke about his initial enthusiasm when he joined the company. "I used to come very early in the morning and tidied up the plant premises," he said. "I voluntarily did it and then I went to my regular job because I thought, 'this is my company'." He soon realised that the company and its employees had conflicting interests. Speaking with some bitterness, he said: "Now I found myself in a struggle against the company management."

Describing the brutal and hostile environment at the plant, another worker said: "The company says workers are entitled to 42 days' leave annually. But in practice we are penalised for taking even a single day. If I inform management in advance that I want a day's leave, 1,500 rupees will be cut from my salary. If, for some unavoidable reason, I take leave without informing the management, double that amount is cut as a punitive measure."

"How could we visit our parents if they fall sick?" the

worker asked. “When we may need more money for medical expenses during these times, our salary is cut!” He added: “During the seven-minute tea break we have to rush to get a cup of tea and then rush to the bathroom with a cup of tea in hand. The limited number of toilets available makes the problem worse.”

If a worker arrives one minute late at the plant his salary is cut by half a day, he said, and if anyone complained about the company canteen’s food, they are “black marked.”

Another worker said: “This is more difficult during the lunchtime. We have to go to the canteen to have lunch. This takes about 10 minutes. With 20 minutes up and down, there is only 10 minutes left to eat and go to the toilet. If you don’t get a chance to go to the toilet, you have to bear it until the next break or the day’s work is over.

“We can’t speak boldly against these inhuman acts by management because we will immediately face disciplinary action. We wanted to establish our own union in order to fight for our rights. Unless our union is recognised we cannot take on the management legally. Everybody knows we are suppressed. Why is the government not doing something for us?”

“At the beginning of the strike about 50 people from nearby villages came here and told us, in a threatening manner, to get back to work. But seeing the determination of the strikers these people beat a retreat. Workers thought they were paid by management.”

Workers described how the unions had intervened to end their occupation. After the management obtained a court order and police threatened workers, the Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and Hindu Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) advised strikers to heed the police. The pretext was concern for workers’ safety. A worker said the unions claimed that “they wouldn’t like to see the workers get injured by police action.”

Powertrain workers expressed solidarity with their colleagues in the assembly plant, explaining that they had common problems. “The management has no concern for us. They don’t treat us as human beings. The supervisors threaten workers the way British colonialists used to treat the people. If a worker turns up a minute late from a tea break, the supervisor will take his timecard and threaten to dismiss him.”

Although some workers appeared older, many assured us they were between 25 and 30 years old. One commented tersely: “It’s because of the management that

we look much older. They are responsible for it.” Apart from two tea breaks and one lunch break, there was no other rest.

Workers told the WSWS that when they occupied the assembly plant, the company accused them of resorting to violence. AITUC national secretary D.L. Sachdev echoed this claim, saying “ultra-left elements” could infiltrate the Maruti struggle. Asked about this remark, one worker said: “There are no extremists in our strike movement, it’s only the workers and it is the workers who have formed the MSEU.”

Workers had illusions that by establishing the MSEU as an “independent” union, they could pressure the company for improved conditions. The continuing sweatshop conditions and the MSEU’s deal with management, however, will shatter these hopes.

Most Maruti Suzuki employees are from Haryana villages with others from peasant villages in other northern Indian states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The appalling poverty in the villages—the result of the rapid deterioration of the traditional agricultural economy—has pushed large numbers of rural youth into the Special Economic Zones seeking work. Over the years, farming land has been divided among family members, to the point where it cannot be further divided.

One worker explained: “We couldn’t depend on agriculture for our family income as we have just one acre for farming. Lack of water is also a major problem.” Another worker added: “I’m the only son in the family and only have a small plot of land. At present it’s cultivated by my father and there’s no room for me to join it. My only option is to find a job in a factory.”

Poverty stricken rural parents have attempted to educate their children so they had a better future. One worker explained that most Maruti Suzuki workers had reached Grade 10 level. Many had passed the GCE advanced level and secured Industrial Training Institute certificates.

Another worker added: “There are even people with university degrees among us. We thought the conditions of life for our families would improve when we joined the factory. But it has become just an illusion.”



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