

Unions, Stalinists force Maruti Suzuki India workers to accept company's demands

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The following report on the month-long struggle of the workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, India was submitted by a WSWs supporter in Delhi. It was edited for publication.

The month-long struggle of the workers at the Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) automobile plant located in Manesar in the northwestern state of Haryana has been ended by the unions, working in conjunction with state government officials.

Union leaders from the HMS (Hind Mazdoor Sabha) who control the MUKU (Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union) at the factory, accepted a deal, brokered by the state Labour Minister and other labour officials of the Haryana government, which abandons the workers' central demands.

Auto workers had been in a standoff with MSI since August 29, when management locked them out until they agreed to sign a "good conduct bond" meant to give the company the power to effectively terminate them at will. (See, "Maruti Suzuki India lockout: After talks fail, union leaders arrested")

The settlement was reached in the middle of the night, around 3 AM on October 1. From the beginning Deputy Labour Commissioner J P Mann, Assistant Labour Commissioner Nitin Yadav and Gurgaon District Commissioner P C Meena were involved in negotiations. They were later joined by the Minister for Labour and Employment in Haryana's Congress Party state government, Shiv Charan Lal Sharma.

The deal signed by MUKU on behalf of the striking workers—whose main demand was to form a separate union from the company-controlled MUKU—stipulates, among other things, that workers must sign the "good conduct" bond. This requires that workers pledge not to take any protest action, direct or indirect, that may adversely impact industrial production. If workers do engage in slowdowns, intermittent stoppages of work, stay-in-strikes, work-to-rule, sabotage, or any activity, which could hamper normal production in the factory, they are subject to immediate dismissal.

This agreement delivers workers, bound hand and foot, to the management. It strips away their right to strike and illegalizes any form of collective action. This is sure to further embolden MSI management, which has displayed a single-minded ruthlessness in seeking to subjugate the workers to their whims and impose sweatshop working conditions inside the plant.

In a further injustice, the company has conditionally agreed to take back only 18 trainees out of the 62 workers whom it has fired. The remaining 44 victimized workers—all regular employees—are being subjected to a disciplinary hearing, which will all but certainly result in the loss of their jobs. "Against all those under suspension, the law will take its course," a company official declared.

Another company official who took part in the talks exclaimed, "This (settlement), reinforces management's position that indiscipline is not acceptable. The agreement will create a conducive environment for the company's growth and the workers' prosperity."

As a punitive measure the settlement stipulates that a "no work, no pay" policy will be implemented for the period during the lockout, meaning workers will lose a month's wages. This not only helps the company recoup some of its financial losses; it is aimed at deterring workers from resorting to any job action in the future.

The negotiations were a fraud because management refused to talk directly to the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), the organization the workers recently formed in opposition to the company union.

The groundwork for this betrayal was laid a long time ago by the Stalinist leaders of the AITUC and CITU (respectively, the All India Trade Union Congress and the Center of Indian Trade Unions) and the social-democratic-oriented HMS. They told workers repeatedly that they would have to sign the "good conduct bond" and that not all suspended workers would be taken back.

Prior to this betrayal, the locked-out MSI workers had adamantly refused management's demand to sign the bond. The striking workers received a tremendous boost when colleagues from three other factories in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt struck in support of their fight last month. The three factories—the Suzuki Powertrain India Ltd, Suzuki Motorcycle India Pvt Ltd and Suzuki Castings Ltd—are subsidiaries of the Japanese transnational Suzuki Motor Corporation, which also owns MSI.

Despite the use of scabs and management personnel, the strike by Suzuki Powertrain workers successfully shut down production at the factory that supplied diesel engines and transmission parts to the Manesar car plant. This brought tremendous pressure on MSI management. The solidarity action, however, was scuttled by the AITUC-CITU-HMS unions after just two days, handing the initiative back to management.

After the settlement, the AITUC-CITU, which did not formally take part in negotiations, issued no call to MSI workers to oppose the deal. Instead, in a bid to conceal their own treachery, the Stalinist leaders have made a meek criticism of the sellout back-to-work agreement.

The working conditions inside the Manesar plant are far different from the rosy picture drawn by the management, the government and the corporate media.

Work is organized in two eight-hour shifts with workers forced to report to a "meeting" 15 minutes prior to shift time. If workers are even a minute late, their pay is reduced to a half-day wage. The total shift actually comes to nine hours with half-an-hour for lunch and two

tea breaks of seven minutes each. This is the only time workers can go to the lavatory. A minute's delay after a break results in a wage reduction.

While apprentices get paid Rs. 7000-8000 per month (about US\$140-160), regular workers are paid around Rs.16,000 (\$320). Regular workers are also paid a housing rent allowance (HRA) of Rs. 8000 and an "Appreciation Allowance" of Rs. 8000. Deduction of wages for one day's leave is Rs.1500, for two days, Rs. 2200, and for four days, Rs. 7000.

Since the startup of the plant, not a single worker has received full wages because of the deductions made by management using one or another pretext.

Workers are designated as "junior workman," "associate workman," etc. It takes at least six years for a junior workman to become an associate workman. The first category can be extended without limit at the discretion of the company. At the Manesar plant, none of the workers have been elevated to associate workman so far. A trainee/apprentice remains in that status for at least three years but even after that period many are stuck in that position. Contract workers face even worse conditions. They earn between Rs 4500-6000 (US\$90-\$120) and can't refuse to work overtime.

Workers at the Manesar plant organized their own union (MSEU) in place of the stooge MUKU union. This was also done at MSI's other car plant in Haryana's second largest city, Gurgaon, located a short distance away from Manesar.

Since 2000, there have been no elections held in the MUKU. However, as soon as workers organized their own, union management hurriedly arranged for elections in MUKU. The workers boycotted the sham election but management insisted that workers sign affidavits that they were members of the MUKU and were satisfied with it. Some workers signed the affidavit under duress, while many others refused.

Workers later demanded the affidavits be given back since they were obtained under duress. After management refused, a strike began June 4. One of their demands was that in the new plant being erected on the plant's grounds, workers who are currently apprentice/ trainees or on contract should be given jobs as regular workers instead of management staffing the new plant with new workers.

From the very beginning, both the social democrats who lead the HMS and the Stalinist AITUC and CITU erected a ring-fence around the Manesar MSI workers' struggle to prevent it from gaining support from and spreading to the industrial belt in and around Gurgaon. This region contains more than 2.5 million workers in auto, auto-related and other ancillary industries.

By deliberately confining the sweep of the struggle to one plant of MSI at Manesar the opportunist trade union leaders isolated it, which predictably resulted in the workers' defeat. Not only did the union federations themselves not take any steps to mobilize workers in the area to support the locked-out Manesar MSI workers, they consciously opposed and prevented all attempts made to rally support for them.

When we visited the plant, we repeatedly pointed to the workers the dangers of the HMS-AITUC-CITU combine deliberately leading the workers' struggle into a blind alley. Various smaller Maoist formations also contributed to the isolation and defeat of the Manesar MSI workers' struggles by refusing to call on the workers to mount a struggle against the misnamed HMS-AITUC-CITU "joint action committee" and to fight to mobilize the working class in independent action against both the employers and the Congress Party state government. In a joint meeting of political groups held in New Delhi

on Sept. 20, they suggested that only the most elementary "support action" be taken.

The trade union cartel of AITUC-CITU-HMS working in the region under the banner of 'joint action committee' has in similar manner led the June strike of 13 days at the Manesar plant to a most rotten compromise, proclaiming "victory" although the company steadfastly refused the workers' key demand.

Emboldened by this betrayal, the Congress Party state government went on the offensive and refused to recognize the MSEU as the workers' representative in mid-August. Two weeks later, on August 29, the plant management locked out the workers, in the presence of hundreds of police.

In collusion with each other, both social democrats and Stalinists have prevented the working class from taking the path of independent class and political action against the corporations and the government and thereby assisted them in subjugating the workers. The workers have repeatedly shown their determination to fight and the spontaneous solidarity strikes by their brethren in other plants demonstrate the inherent revolutionary power possessed by the workers. However, the Stalinist and Social Democratic unions stepped in precisely when the MSI workers struggle appeared to present a clear threat of spreading and getting out of their control.

The Stalinists have long played a treacherous role in favor of the capitalist bosses, their parties and governments. They sustained in office the anti-worker, pro-capitalist Congress Party-led UPA government from May 2004 to June 2008, while in the states ruled by their Left Front they have openly pursued pro-investor policies. Like the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Maoists foster illusions in so-called progressive sections of the national bourgeoisie.

Only by breaking the stranglehold of the Stalinists and other petit-bourgeois radicals such as the Maoists can the workers advance their independent class interests. That means the workers need to consciously turn towards Trotskyism as a part of an internationalist struggle for socialism.



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