

India: Wildcat strike erupts anew at Maruti-Suzuki plant, thousands walk out in sympathy

Kranti Kumara
11 October 2011

On the heels of a 33-day-long struggle that ended with a union-imposed sellout October 1, the 3,500 workers at the sprawling Maruti-Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) complex in Manesar, Haryana recommenced their 6-month-long agitation last Friday afternoon by occupying the car assembly plant.

The strike/occupation erupted after MSIL management failed to honour a pledge to rehire about 1,000 contract workers after resuming full production Monday, Oct. 3.

The militant action of the Manesar workers has sparked sympathy walkouts by 8,000 workers at a dozen or more auto industry-related plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, which lies on the outskirts of the Indian capital, Delhi.

Since June, the Manesar MSIL workers have been waging a bitter struggle against India's largest car manufacturer and the Haryana state Congress Party government for improved terms of employment and recognition of the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), a new organization they recently created in opposition to a company stooge union.

During this campaign, the striking workers have not only faced the combined onslaught of the management and the state government, but also the duplicity of the existing HMS, AITUC and CITU trade-union federations that are active in this heavily industrialized area. All of them have either directly or indirectly smothered the workers' struggle by prevailing on them to surrender to management's demands and by opposing the spread of strike to workers at other plants. [See Unions, Stalinists force Maruti Suzuki India workers to accept company's demands]

The reaction to the latest factory occupation by MSIL management and the state government has been viscerally hostile. Indeed, there is with every indication that management in partnership with the state government is preparing to eject the workers by force, using the state police and/or company-hired bullies.

In a statement issued to the press, MSIL management has accused the workers of indulging in "random acts of violence including beating up company managers,

supervisors and their co-workers who are not supporting the strike." Management also claims to have "rescued" 450 workers from the plant with "the help of police."

The reality is that it is MSIL management that is practicing intimidation and which, along with the labour contractors it hires to supply "temporary" super-exploited contract workers, has a long history of using goon violence to suppress worker dissent.

On Sunday the company, according to its own statement, also "dismissed 10 employees, suspended 10 others and terminated the training of five trainees in connection with the strike and violence at the Manesar factory premises."

For his part, the Labour and Employment Minister of the Congress Party-ruled state government, Shiv Charan Lal Sharma, has denounced the striking workers for violating the Oct. 1 agreement. "Workers," exclaimed Sharma, "are moving away from the pact signed with Maruti Suzuki management as a result of which the standoff ended."

Since the first strike by the Manesar plant workers in June this year, the Congress Party Haryana government has not even bothered to feign neutrality, acting instead like a paid agent of MSIL and factory management. The government's labour ministry has refused to recognize the MSEU as the worker's representative. It mobilized several hundred police to occupy the Manesar plant and evict the workers when MSIL imposed its lockout on Aug. 29. Subsequently Labour Minister Sharma repeatedly echoed management's demand that the workers sign a "good conduct bond."

Some 8,000 other workers have struck in solidarity with the Manesar MSIL assembly plant workers.

Three of the affected plants belong to MSIL's Japanese parent, Suzuki Motors Corporation. They are Suzuki Powertrain India Ltd. (SPIL), which supplies diesel engines and transmissions to the Manesar assembly plant, Suzuki Motorcycle India Ltd., and Suzuki Castings Ltd. All are located in the vicinity of the Manesar plant.

Workers have also walked off the job at Satyam Auto Components Ltd., Endurance Auto Ltd. and HI-LEX India Ltd. According to some press reports, workers at 6 other

plants, for a total of 12 plants, have also gone out on strike.

On Sunday morning a private labour contractor who supplies workers to the Suzuki Motorcycle plant in Gurgaon opened fire at the striking workers, injuring three of them, in an attempt to terrorize them into returning to work. Whether he was acting at the behest of the management is not known, but by no means can it be ruled out. According to press reports, police have arrested the contractor.

The Oct. 1 sellout agreement was negotiated in front of Haryana labour department officials by MSIL management and the HMS-controlled company-stooge union, MUKU (Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union).

The Stalinist CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Unions) and AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), which control unions at several factories in the Gurgaon industrial belt and to whom the Manesar MSIL workers initially looked for support, have also been complicit in leading the workers to a dead end. They have not leveled any criticism of the HMS-sponsored agreement, let alone mobilized workers in opposition to the HMS-organized surrender.

As a condition for the company lifting the lockout, the workers were compelled to sign the company-authored “good conduct bond” and to accept the suspension of 44 striking workers, pending hearings by a drumhead factory tribunal—a process set up with the obvious intent of “legitimizing” their firing. The workers’ opposition to the “good conduct bond,” a mechanism designed to allow the company to purge all workers involved in any future job action, was what caused the company to lock out the workers for 33 days from August 29.

Now in addition to their demand that all the contract workers be rehired, the striking Manesar MSIL workers are demanding the full reinstatement of the 44 victimized workers.

Production has come to a complete stop both at the occupied Manesar plant and the Suzuki motorcycle plant. At the neighboring Gurgaon MSIL assembly plant, daily car output has gone down by 1,000 vehicles to 1,800 vehicles, because of shortages of diesel engines and powertrains.

The carmaker’s loss of production due to labor strife over the past six months has been estimated by corporate business publications at about \$250 million, with the 13-day June strike alone costing \$90 million.

The repeated eruption of resistance at the Manesar plant and the reaction of management and the state government clearly demonstrate the irreconcilable conflict between the working class and the transnational corporations. The brutal working conditions that are propelling the MSIL workers into struggle are but a microcosm of the conditions facing the Indian working class at large.

Recurring militant strikes of Indian workers in support of

their demands over the past decade have been led into a dead end by the repeated treachery of the Stalinist and other nationalist union apparatuses.

The two largest Stalinist parties, the CPM and the CPI, with whom the CITU and AITUC are affiliated, have supported and implemented the Indian bourgeoisie’s agenda of making India a cheap-labor haven for world capital. They have repeatedly propped up Union governments, including, from 2004 to 2008, the current Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government, committed to neoliberal “reform”; in those states where their Left Front has held office it has openly pursued “pro-investor” policies.

Ever-tighter integration of the Indian economy with the capitalist global division of labor has made the Indian workers’ struggle a key component of the global confrontation between the international working class and global capital.

In rebelling against the October 1 sellout agreement and urging other workers to recognize that they have a huge stake in the confrontation at MSIL 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 by organizing this struggle independently of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist trade union federation and parties, the Stalinists included.

Above all, the current struggle against MSIL is a political and international struggle, against the political agents of big business in the Haryana state government and the Indian government. Mounting such a struggle requires the development of a revolutionary party of the working class that uncompromisingly articulates their class interests and strives to unite their struggles with those of workers around the world who face the same conditions of brutal exploitation and are often employed by the same global corporations.

Indian workers who agree with this analysis should contact the WSWs so as to help build a new mass socialist party of the Indian working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact