

India: Unions scuttle Maruti Suzuki strike again

Our correspondents
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The unions at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant and other Suzuki plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt ordered 8,000 workers to end a militant two-week-long strike last Friday, after the newly formed independent union at the Manesar plant made a rotten deal with management and Haryana state Labour Department officials.

The Manesar assembly plant workers have been embroiled in a bitter dispute with India's largest carmaker for the past six months. On October 1, Maruti-Suzuki lifted a 33-day lockout at the Manesar plant after the workers—under pressure from various labour federations, including the Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU)—agreed to sign a company-dictated "good conduct bond." However, just six days later, the Manesar workers rebelled against the Oct. 1 agreement and occupied the plant, charging that the company had reneged on its commitment to rehire 1,200 casual workers and was trying to dock them two days' pay for each day of the lockout.

Soon after, workers at Suzuki Powertrain India Ltd. (SPIL), Suzuki Motorcycle India Pvt Ltd. (SMIPL), and Suzuki Castings, and at several other auto industry-related plants walked out in sympathy with the Manesar workers. Of these, thousands of workers employed by the Suzuki-affiliates located in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt remained off the job for the duration of the dispute at the Manesar plant.

The agreement reached Friday does not meet the workers' basic needs and abandons many of their key demands.

The company did agree that the 1,200 casual workers would be rehired when the Manesar plant reopened for full production on Saturday, but their continued employment is entirely at the company's discretion.

In an attempt to browbeat the workers into submission, Maruti Suzuki has victimized many of the most militant workers. Under Friday's settlement, the company reinstated 64 workers it had suspended or fired from their jobs at the Manesar plant. But another 30 workers, including Sonu Gujjar and Shiv Kumar, respectively the president and secretary of the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), remain suspended "pending inquiries" and subject to possible dismissal. Similarly, SPIL has reinstated 15 suspended workers, but has refused to drop disciplinary action against three office bearers in the Powertrain workers' union, including union leader Sube Singh.

In a bid to speed up production and terrorize its workforce into

submission, Maruti Suzuki has established a brutal work regime at its Manesar plant. This includes a punitive system of fines for lateness and absences, although workers are supposed to have the right to several weeks of leave per year. Friday's agreement does not bind management to making any substantive changes in this authoritarian work regime.

What it does call for is the establishment of a tripartite mechanism for suppressing worker discontent in the form of two new committees—a "grievances redressal committee" and a "labour welfare committee." The two committees will have an equal number of management and workers' representatives and their meetings will be attended by officials of the state Labour Department.

The Labour Department's implied role as arbitrator underscores that the new committees are stacked against the workers from the outset. Haryana's Congress Party state government and its Labour Department have functioned as a veritable arm of the company throughout the past six months. Last June the government declared the workers' first strike illegal. It has refused to recognize the MSEU as the workers' representative on the grounds that they already have a bargaining agent, the company stooge union. It mobilized hundreds of police to expel the workers from the factory when the company imposed its lockout August 29 and repeatedly pressed the workers to submit to the company's demand that they sign a "good conduct bond." In a clear demonstration of its readiness to unleash bloody violence on behalf of Maruti Suzuki, the Congress government deployed 1,500 police on Oct. 14 to break a week-long occupation of the Manesar plant.

Now the government, through its Labour Department, will extend its pro-company role into the day-to-day management of the plant.

Under the back-to-work agreement workers will not be paid for the period they were on strike and, as a punitive measure, an additional day's pay will be deducted from their wages. It also appears—although this cannot be confirmed prior to publication—that the union has relented to the company's insistence that the workers be penalized two days for each day of the Aug. 29 to October 1 lockout.

The company did agree to restore a bus service for the workers that was suspended when the lockout was imposed.

Although Friday's agreement was negotiated between representatives of the MSEU and Maruti Suzuki, the company, which has repeatedly charged that newly formed union is a front

for “political subversives,” continues to refuse to recognize it, upholding the prerogatives of its stooge union.

As occurred on October 1, when the stooge union, with the connivance of the major labour federations, “negotiated” an end to the lockout, Friday’s back-to-work agreement was not reviewed by the striking workers at a mass meeting, nor put to a rank-and-file vote. Rather it was simply imposed by fiat of the MSEU and the workers instructed to report to work the next day.

Workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* said they had not seen a copy of the agreement and that all they knew of its contents were what they had been told by the MSEU. Some of the workers took solace in the minor concessions the company has made, such as the restoration of the bus service, and expressed hope that the new committees will resolve some of their many longstanding grievances.

But there is a powerful undercurrent of dissatisfaction at the conditions they have faced and the hardships the company has imposed on them. Consequently, the situation remains explosive. One Manesar assembly plant worker told the WWS, “I am unhappy with what happened. Thirty workers at the Manesar plant have not been taken back. And also three workers at SPIL will be kept outside. Those inquiries will take 45 days at SPIL and 10 days at Manesar.”

The Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers’ struggle won widespread support in the working class. In addition to the sympathy walkouts, there was a mass support rally last week involving tens of thousands of workers.

Primary responsibility for the fact that the Manesar workers have now been corralled back to work effectively on the company’s terms lies with the principal union federations in the Gurgaon-Manesar area—the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and the AITUC and CITU. The latter two organizations are respectively the union fronts of the Communist Party of India, India’s oldest Stalinist party, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, the Stalinist party that leads the Left Front parliamentary bloc.

The union federations worked systematically to keep the Manesar workers’ struggle isolated, opposing any and all efforts to make it the spearhead of a broader mobilization of the working class against the sweatshop conditions that prevail throughout the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt and across India as a whole. In June, when the MSEU was looking to the AITUC for leadership, the Stalinists prevailed on it to call off its strike and accept a deal that addressed none of the workers’ principal demands at the very point when the strike was galvanizing support from across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt.

The Stalinist-led labour federations have continuously urged the workers to press the Congress Party state government to intervene on their behalf, no matter that at every point it has acted as Maruti Suzuki’s advocate and enforcer. They joined with the HMS in urging the workers to “negotiate” changes in wording to its anti-worker “good conduct bond” and endorsed the October 1 sellout agreement, which left the bond’s intent unchanged and accepted the victimization of many militant workers.

When the Haryana Congress government broke the occupation and Maruti Suzuki resumed production using management personnel and strikebreakers, the Stalinist union federations

responded by calling a protest rally whose purpose was not to summon the working class to take industrial action in support of the Manesar workers, but to contain and restrain the popular anger.

However, Friday’s back-to-work deal was not negotiated by the labour federations or the HMS-aligned company union, the MUKU, but rather by the MSEU, the new organization to which the workers rallied only a few short months ago as a means of developing a struggle against Maruti Suzuki.

While the MSEU became the vehicle of a militant workers’ struggle, the role it has played in scuttling the latest strike underscores the fatal limitations of a perspective that does not go beyond trade union militancy, that accepts the capital-labour relationship as permanent and inviolable and seeks merely to get the best terms for workers’ sale of their labor-power.

The MSEU claims to be “independent,” because it is not formally affiliated with any labour federation. But it had no strategy for mobilizing the working class as an independent political force to defeat the line-up of the state government, police and courts behind Maruti Suzuki and to counter the machinations of the labour federations, who feared that the Manesar workers’ struggle would disrupt their collaboration with the employers.

Like the labour federations, the MSEU leaders have repeatedly advocated a corporatist perspective based on the purported community of interests between workers and management. They have proclaimed that their aim is to work with Maruti Suzuki to make the Manesar plant the company’s most productive. No doubt a factor in management’s decision to reverse course and negotiate with the MSEU was that its president, Gujjar, had demonstrated his willing to cut a deal in a conference call organized by dissident Maruti Suzuki investors the week before.

Clearly the company’s aim is now to tie the fledgling union or at least its leadership into a corporatist framework, so as to make use of it in containing and suppressing worker discontent, alongside or in place of the stooge MUKU.

The needs and aspirations of the working class cannot be reconciled with the capitalist profit system—today under conditions of world capitalist crisis more so than ever. A struggle for decent wages and working conditions and basic democratic rights requires the development of a movement of the working class that combines militant industrial action with political struggle against big business, the government and the whole bourgeois order. Maruti Suzuki workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters not only in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, but throughout India and internationally in a common struggle for their rights against big business and the governments that ruthlessly uphold their profit interests. Such a struggle must be developed into a political movement of the international working class based upon the program and perspective of international socialism.



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