

India: Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle must spearhead working-class political offensive

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Workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant have waged a determined struggle since June against the sweatshop conditions—meager wages, widespread use of contract-labor, authoritarian workrules, and systematic victimization of militant workers—that prevail in factories and special economic zones across India.

They have mounted repeated strikes and workplace occupations, and done so in defiance of draconian threats from India's largest carmaker and the goon violence perpetrated by the labor contractors that furnish Maruti Suzuki with super-exploited "casual workers."

In the days immediately following the Manesar workers launching their latest plant occupation, 12,000 workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt joined sympathy walkouts. Almost two weeks on, thousands of workers at two Suzuki subsidiaries, Suzuki Powertrain and Suzuki Motorcycle, remain on strike in support of the Manesar workers.

Nevertheless, the Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers' strike is in grave danger. Under the threat of police violence, they were forced to end their weeklong occupation of the Manesar plant last Friday. Earlier that day, 1,500 heavily armed police had entered the factory and, in the name of enforcing a High Court order to end the occupation, were preparing to forcibly evict the striking workers.

Maruti Suzuki (MSIL), which has now partially resumed production at the Manesar plant, has vowed that it will crush the resistance of the Manesar workers. Although the Japanese-owned company concedes that the disruption of its operations in Haryana has cut its production by 50,000 vehicles and resulted in more than \$300 million in losses, MSIL Chairman R.C. Bhargava has repeatedly declared that the company prefers a protracted labour war to a "short-term solution."

Big business, the national and Haryana Congress Party-led governments, and the political establishment as a whole fully support Maruti Suzuki. Since the conflict erupted last June, Haryana's Congress Party government has acted as a veritable arm of management. It declared last June's strike illegal. It has refused to grant the newly formed Maruti Suzuki Employees Association (MSEU) legal recognition, echoed the company's claim that the MSEU is politically "subversive," and insisted that the company's stooge union is the workers' "representative."

The government fully supported the company locking out the

workers for 33 days until they agreed to sign a "good conduct bond." Had the workers not bowed before its threats and vacated the plant last Friday, the Congress Party government was ready to set the police upon them.

India's ruling elite hates and fears the Manesar workers' struggle because they recognize it to be part of a growing working class challenge to the sweatshop conditions that characterize the new domestic and foreign-owned manufacturing sector that has arisen through India's integration, over the past two decades, into the world capitalist economy as a cheap-labor producer. Over the past 18 months, there have been a series of militant strikes involving workers in the auto and electronics sector, including at Foxconn, BYD Electronics, Sanmina and Hyundai plants in south India.

While workers are resorting to job action in an attempt to win basic rights and secure pay rises that will blunt the impact of soaring food and energy prices, Indian big business is determined not only to maintain the oppressive conditions that have fueled the rise of "India Inc." In response to the greatest crisis of world capitalist since the Great Depression of the 1930s, it is seeking to intensify workers' exploitation.

MSIL is a case in point. Over the last three years, management has ratcheted up production at the Manesar plant by 40 percent. To do this, it has cut back rest breaks to the point that workers are obliged to drink tea while going to the toilet. And in a bid to squeeze still more profits, MSIL systematically slashes workers' pay through a punitive system of fines.

To further strengthen its hand, particularly in laying off workers and contracting out work, big business is demanding that India's government rewrite the country's labour laws. The Congress-led Union government's determination to defend the country's cheap-labor regime is exemplified by comments made by its chief economic adviser, Kaushik Basu, earlier this week. Basu blamed rising wages for the near double-digit inflation rate and claimed that India's "labour-cost advantage" has been seriously undermined.

To defeat the combined assault of big business, the government, police, and courts, the Maruti Suzuki workers must make their strike the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class against sweatshop conditions. The sympathy strikes in support of the Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers underscore the potential for mobilizing workers across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and throughout India in a struggle

for basic worker rights, including the immediate transformation of all contract workers into permanent staff.

The biggest obstacle that the Maruti Suzuki workers face in prosecuting such a struggle is the union federations functioning in the Gurgaon-Manesar area—including the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—and the two Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and their Left Front.

The union federations have worked systematically to isolate the Manesar MSIL workers' struggle, while urging them to appeal for the intervention of the Congress state government and its Labor Department—the very forces that are working hand in glove with Maruti Suzuki management to suppress the workers.

The AITUC, which is the trade union arm of the CPI, used its influence over the MSEU to prevail on it to call off its strike last June, at the very point when the strike was galvanizing support from workers across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, and to accept a deal that failed to incorporate the workers' main demands.

Both the AITUC and the CITU, the labor federation aligned with the CPM, supported the HMS, with which the stooge union at the Menasar plant is affiliated, in pressing the workers to agree to sign the company's "good conduct bond" under a second back-to-work agreement reached October 1. Predictably, the company violated this agreement no sooner had the workers returned to work, announcing new victimizations, refusing to pay the workers for double the time that they were locked out, and renegeing on its commitment to rehire 1,000 contract workers.

The aim of the labor federations, including the AITUC and CITU, is to convince Maruti Suzuki and the Haryana government that they can be "partners" in upholding "labor peace," i.e., in policing the employers' cheap-labor work regime. That is why at every point they have sought to isolate, contain, and suppress the strike movement.

The role of the AITUC and CITU flows inexorably from the pro-capitalist politics of the CPI and CPM. While they claim to be working class parties, the twin Stalinist parties have worked together with India's ruling elite in its drive to make India a magnet for foreign capital and a cheap labour producer.

From 2004 through 2008, the CPM-led Left Front sustained the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in office in New Delhi, even while conceding that it was carrying out pro-big business economic policies and a pro-US foreign policy little different from that of the previous BJP-led government. And in those states where the CPM-led Left Front formed the state government until recently, West Bengal and Kerala, it pursued pro-investor policies, including banning strikes in the IT sector and shooting down peasants who resisted the expropriation of their lands for Special Economic Zones.

Like the Congress Party, the traditional governing party of Indian big business, the Stalinist CPM and CPI peddle the lie that it is possible to have pro-market "reforms with a human face," that it is possible to reconcile the predatory ambitions of the Indian bourgeoisie with the needs of the workers and toilers. But the past two decades of India's "new economic policy" have demonstrated

the exact opposite: India's "rise" had been based on the savage exploitation of the workers and has been accompanied by an agrarian crisis precipitated by the cutting of price supports and subsidies and the diversion of state funds from agriculture to the mega-projects business needs to exploit India's human and natural resources.

To secure their basic rights Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers and workers throughout India must organize themselves independently of, and in opposition to, the Stalinist union federations and parties, and build new organizations of struggle, above all a revolutionary working class party based on the following principles:

- The working class must constitute itself as an independent force. Any challenge to Indian big business's cheap labor regime immediately pits the workers against not just their employer, but against the entire political establishment and the state. Only through the establishment of a workers and farmers government that places the banks and basic industry under public ownership can economic life be reorganized according to a rational socialist plan, drawn up by those who produce society's wealth, in order to satisfy human needs, not private profit.

- In opposing the Indian bourgeoisie's attempt to place the burden of the capitalist world crisis on them, Indian workers are making common cause with workers all over the world. Recent months have seen a resurgence of working class struggle from the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, and the mass protests against draconian austerity measures in Greece and Spain, to the incipient anti-capitalist international Occupy Wall Street movement.

This objective unity must become a conscious strategy, through the coordination of the struggles of the international working class against the transnational corporations, in opposition to imperialist war, and ultimately for the socialist transformation of society.

- In underdeveloped countries like India, the struggle of the working class to advance its social position is organically bound up with the fight of the rural masses against poverty and oppression.

Indian workers must champion the interests of the rural poor, forge an alliance with them in opposing the oppression of the landlords, moneylenders and big business, and demonstrate to them that only through a working class-led struggle against capitalism can the social and democratic aspirations of the toilers be met.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all workers and socialist minded youth and intellectuals who agree with this program to join the ranks of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world revolutionary party of the working class founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 in opposition to the Stalinist betrayal of the 1917 Russian Revolution.



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