

India: Maruti Suzuki union leaders given huge payouts after ending strike

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When the leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU) ordered workers at Maruti Suzuki India's Manesar, Haryana car assembly to end their militant strike last month, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the back-to-work agreement was a sham. (See: "India: Unions scuttle Maruti Suzuki strike again".)

So eager were the leaders of the MSEU to corral their members back on the job and end a six-month struggle that had seen workers twice stage prolonged occupations of the Manesar plant and endure a month-long lockout, they did not convene a mass meeting to explain the details of the settlement. Nor did they let the workers vote on it.

In condemning the back-to-work agreement and the MSEU leaders who negotiated it, the WSWS insisted that those principally responsible for strangling the Manesar Maruti-Suzuki workers' militant struggle were the trade union federations active in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—especially the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI-M.

The AITUC and CITU joined with the other union federations to contain and suppress support for the Manesar MSI workers' struggle, while pressuring the MSEU, an independent union formed in rebellion against a company stooge union aligned with the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), to reach a "compromise" with the company.

Now new information has come to light that underscores the perfidious character of last month's "settlement": within days of the October 21 deal between the MSEU leadership and the company, the two main leaders of the MSEU, its president, Sonu Gujjar, and secretary, Shiv Kumar, received large cash payments from Maruti Suzuki for resigning from their jobs.

Some press reports claim Gujjur received 4 million rupees or more than \$US81,000. He himself has admitted to receiving 1.6 million rupees (about \$32,500).

Gujjar and Kumar were among 30 MSEU officeholders and other workers whom the company refused to take back at the end of the strike. Under the terms of the settlement, they were to be subjected to a kangaroo-court company disciplinary

procedure that seemed certain to result in their dismissal.

After Gujjar and Kumar resigned from their jobs, the other 28 suspended workers also resigned from Maruti Suzuki in exchange for the company providing them severance payments, reportedly in the order of 1.6 million rupees or about \$32,500. For Maruti Suzuki, India's largest automaker, 1.6 million rupees is a minuscule amount. But so low are workers' wages in India, that it is unheard of for young industrial workers to receive such "large" severance payments.

Both the company and the top MSEU leaders initially responded to the press reports of the severance deal with silence. But Rish Pal, one of the 28, explained that he and the others had agreed to resign their jobs and accept the company's severance offer only after Gujjar and Kumar had cut their own deal with the company, leaving them to face the rigged disciplinary proceedings and under conditions where the Manesar workers had been weakened first by the scuttling of their strike and then by the desertion of the top MSEU leaders. Said Pal, "At the time of the (strike) settlement, the 30 of us had decided we would stick together whatever the consequences. When Sonu [Gujjur] and Shiv [Kumar] resigned despite our reservations, we also followed suit."

Subsequently, the company admitted that payments had been made, adding that the backroom deal had been fully supported by the Congress Party Haryana state government. Undoubtedly Maruti Suzuki management is speaking the truth when it claims the payments were endorsed by the government. Over the past six months, Haryana's Congress government has acted as a veritable arm of management, repeatedly declaring the workers' actions illegal, publicly backing the company's demands, denying the MSEU legal recognition, and threatening a massive police assault if the workers didn't end last month's plant occupation.

Ex-MSEU President Gujjar, for his part, broke his silence by giving an interview to the *Business Standard*. Through the interview, which was published at the beginning of this week, Gujjur sought to defend his actions.

"I was sure," said Gujjar, "there was no way we could be reinstated. I am just a tenth pass [have a tenth grade education]. Do you think I would have stood a chance against the lawyers Maruti would have fielded when the inquiry against us began?"

All 30 of us had a choice of either accepting the company's offer or facing inquiry, which we were sure of losing. We were hoping the trade unions would support us in our demand for reinstatement, but that did not happen. So, we took the money the company gave us, and exited."

Gujjar's explanation doesn't pass muster. He and Kumar cut a deal with the company not only against the wishes of the other 28 victimized workers, but more importantly behind the backs of the workers. And they did so only days after they negotiated a deal with the company that abandoned the workers' principal demands and instructed the workers to return to work without even the benefit of a vote.

It is patently obvious that if the company gave what in Indian terms are sizeable sums to the 30 union militants to resign, it is because it calculated that this would help it consolidate the victory it had won as a result of the back-to-work agreement and this in two ways. It has now ridded itself of many of the workers who led the struggle over the past six months, while simultaneously discrediting and undermining the MSEU and, it hopes, the very idea of worker solidarity and struggle.

This action of Gujjar and the MSEU leadership is a clear betrayal of their fellow workers who have made huge sacrifices—including the loss of 74 days of wages—to fight resolutely for their basic rights against the company's sweatshop regime.

That said, when Gujjar asserts that the unions were not prepared to support a struggle against the victimizations, he knows of what he speaks.

The AITUC, CITU, and HMS worked systematically to isolate the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle. They told the workers to place their faith in the intervention of the Congress state government and its Labour Department, while working feverishly to prevent their struggle from becoming the spearhead of a broader strike movement.

The AITUC prevailed on the MSEU to call off the Manesar assembly workers' first strike in June without winning their main demands and at the very point when the workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt were preparing to walkout in their support.

When the HMS forced the workers to sign the company-dictated "good conduct bond" through an October 1 agreement ending a 33-day lockout, both the AITUC and the CITU praised the settlement. When Maruti Suzuki obtained a court order to end the occupation the workers launched in rebellion against that settlement and the Congress government deployed police to violently evict the workers, the HMS, AITUC, and CITU urged the workers to leave the plant on their own volition in the name of ensuring their safety.

The Stalinist unions' role flows from the politics of the parties with which they are aligned. For decades the CPI and CPM have worked to politically subordinate the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie. Their Left Front provided

parliamentary support for the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government from May 2004 through June 2008, even as it pressed forward with the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies. In those states where the Left Front has held office, such as West Bengal and Kerala, it has unabashedly pursued "pro-investor" policies.

Having done everything to suppress the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle, the Stalinists leaders are now professing concern over the Manesar workers' plight. AITUC general secretary D.L. Sachdeva said, "These 30 workers were the most active in the formation of a union. Their loss means a new leadership needs to be developed. But, it will take workers time to put their faith in the new leaders." Attempting to cover up real dangers faced by workers following the betrayal of the MSEU leaders, CITU secretary Dipankar Mukherjee said, "What has happened at Maruti is nothing new. Many companies have tried such measures in the past. The workers would become more mature after this incident."

The struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers did win a powerful response within the working class. The October strike provoked sympathy strikes involving as many as 12,000 workers.

If the movement did not spread further, it was because the Maruti Suzuki workers were not armed with a program for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class in struggle against the sweatshop conditions that prevail in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and across India, and against the state institutions and establishment parties, from the BJP and Congers to the CPI and CPM, that uphold them.

Based on the perspective of trade union militancy, of pressing the bosses for concessions within the confines of the existing social and political order, the "independent" MSEU proved utterly unable to uphold the independent interests of its members. It repeatedly capitulated to pressure from the company, the government, and the pro-capitalist union federations, including the AITUC and CITU. Ultimately, many of its foremost leaders cut a secret deal to lessen the immediate consequences of the strike's defeat for themselves at the expense of their fellow workers.

A truly "independent" workers' movement, that is, one capable of prosecuting the struggle for the interests of the working class in opposition to big business, its governments and parties, requires the development of new organizations of struggle—above all a revolutionary workers party—on a socialist and internationalist program.



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