

Indian town under police occupation after killing of union leader

Arun Kumar
2 February 2012

With the assistance of the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, Puducherry has placed the tiny enclave of Yanam under police occupation after a bloody clash between police and locked out Regency Ceramics workers on Friday, January 27. The clash, which the workers insist was entirely unprovoked, saw police inflict fatal wounds on a union leader and injure 16 workers, including 13 critically. The police assault also led to the death of a senior company official when workers angered by the police assault stormed the executive's home.

The trade unions in Puducherry, a Union territory comprised of dis-contiguous enclaves that were once French colonial possessions, have called a Puducherry-wide “bandh” (total shutdown of industrial, educational and commercial establishments) for today, Thursday, February 2, to demand a High Court probe into the death of local union leader M.S. Murali Mohan. They are also urging the authorities to provide Mohan's family a 250,000 Rupees (US \$5,000) solatium.

Regency Ceramics, which employs 1,200 people in Yanam and dominates the enclave's economy, has told the territory's government that it intends to cease tile manufacturing in Yanam. Regency Ceramics' Chairman and Managing Director G.N. Naidu has alleged that in the riot provoked by the Jan. 27 police attack, protesting workers and their supporters ransacked the tile manufacturer's facilities and a company-owned college “destroy[ing] everything.”

Seeking to portray the company as a public benefactor, in what is a transparent attempt to pressure the government to give it aid money and to mete out still harsher reprisals against its rebellious workforce, Naidu said he is “worried about the future of 600 odd students, who were studying in our institutions.”

On the morning of January 27 several hundred

workers led by M. Murali Mohan went to the company's administrative office to demand negotiations on long-pending grievances, including a wage hike, bonuses, the regularization of contract jobs, and the reinstatement of Mohan and other victimized workers.

Management, which had already obtained court orders making it illegal for the striking workers to come within 200 metres of the factory, responded by summoning police to drive away the protesting workers.

Wielding batons, the police promptly set upon the workers, wounding several seriously. When some of the workers sought to defend themselves by throwing stones, the police resorted to bullets, opening fire on the workers. According to a January 28 statement by a government official, “As many as 16 civilians were injured in yesterday's police firing and other incidents.”

The sacked union leader M. Murali Mohan suffered chest injuries—whether from baton-blows or gun shots is at this point unclear—and died as he was being transported to hospital.

The authorities responded to the riot that broke out in response to the police violence by issuing prohibitory orders, banning all meetings, gatherings and processions. The territorial government, which is formed by the All-India N. Rangasamy Congress Party (a local split-off from the dominant party in India's national coalition government), asked the Congress Party government in Andhra Pradesh for help in suppressing the workers protests and it promptly dispatched two battalions of police to Yanam.

Worker anger over poor pay and mistreatment by Regency Ceramics, a joint venture with an Italian firm and one of India's largest tile producers, had long been percolating.

Last year the workers founded a new union, the Regency Ceramics Officers and Workers Union. Management responded by transferring 11 workers who had played a key role in the formation of the union to its unit in Karaikal, another Puducherry town hundreds of kilometers to the south. Not long after this it sacked M.Murali Mohan, for “instigating workers” to go on a strike from 25 November to 4 December.

Borrowing a draconian tactic employed by the automaker Maruti Suzuki, management began 2012 by locking out all workers who refused to sign a “good conduct bond” that gave it carte blanche to intimidate and victimize militant workers. Nearly 800 workers refused to sign the bond.

From January 2 on, the workers mounted daily protests to demand their reinstatement and press for their other demands.

S. Rajkumar a worker at the Yanam factory, told the press “We are paid a paltry Rs. 6,000 (US \$ 120) a month even after 15 years of experience. How can one live off such meagre salaries? They have been exploiting us and it is the management's responsibility to ensure that we do not lose our livelihood.”

The Regency Ceramics workers’ struggle is 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-labour producer. Over the past two years there have been numerous militant strikes involving workers in the auto and electronics sector, including at Foxconn, BYD Electronics, Sanmina and Hyundai plants in south India and at Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar car assembly plant in Gurgaon, north India. Invariably the employers and state have responded to these struggles with victimizations and repression.



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