

India: Maruti Suzuki fires workers en masse, reopens plant under police gauntlet

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Maruti Suzuki of India (MSI) and the Congress Party-led Haryana state government are jointly mounting a ferocious campaign to smash all worker resistance to the brutal work regime at the carmaker's Manesar assembly plant. This involves purging the plant's permanent and contract-labor workforces, deploying hundreds of police and security guards, and jailing on frame-up charges many of the most militant workers.

On Tuesday, MSI purportedly ended a month-long lockout at the Manesar car assembly plant, but only a few hundred workers were allowed to enter the plant. In the days preceding the "lifting" of its lockout, India's largest car maker arbitrarily sacked 546 workers, more than a third of the plant's 1,500 permanent employees. MSI has further announced that it will screen the almost 1,900 contract workers starting September 2 and expects to purge the majority of them.

At the company's instigation, the government has jailed 134 workers and hundreds more have fled to their home villages for fear of arrest. The jailed include the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the independent union the workers formed last year in opposition to a company stooge union.

The Congress Party-led state government deployed 1,200 police Tuesday, including several hundred at the plant's main gate, to ensure MSI's reopening proceeded unimpeded. For its part, the company has formed a new 100-strong security force that includes former commandos of the elite National Security Guards. It has also hired 50 armed guards from a local security firm.

Government and business leaders have repeatedly expressed concern that the labour strife at the Manesar plant could scare away investors. The state-corporate witch-hunt of the most militant workers and the massive police deployment to protect MSI are meant to

send a message both to the working class—the plant is situated in one of India's largest industrial belts—and to investors. The Congress Party, which leads India's national government, and the Indian state apparatus are determined to forcibly uphold sweatshop conditions and will act as the employers' enforcers in stamping out worker resistance.

As the pretext for their assault on the Manesar MSI workers, the company and government are citing a violent altercation between workers and management on July 18 that ended in a fire, the death of a senior manager, and the injuring of scores of workers.

The company has alleged that union leaders planned the altercation and is seeking to have them charged with serious criminal offenses. It has also vowed to be rid of any worker who it says was involved in the July 18 incident.

In fact, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously reported, the July 18 altercation was a deliberate management provocation. Company officials suspended a worker after he protested against the abusive casteist remarks of a supervisor. Workers angered by the suspension began to protest, demanding that the supervisor be disciplined instead. While MSWU leaders were discussing the dispute with management representatives, hundreds of armed company-organized goons brutally attacked the workers, provoking a major clash. (See: "India: Maruti Suzuki launches witch-hunt against workers")

Arrogantly justifying the company's purging of its workforce, MSI Chairman R.C. Bhargava said, "We have lost confidence in them ...It is possible that once more people are identified, more (dismissal) notices will be sent out."

According to press reports, the company had decided to cease using contract workers in the manner that it has

done for years—that is, as non-recognized permanent production workers, but ones paid far less. Henceforth, MSI will employ a fifth of the plant’s workforce on short-term contract, but only for “non-core” activities.

Meantime, it will create a new permanent workforce comprised of the most subservient workers from the current permanent and contract workforces and specially screened new-hires. MSI officials have reportedly said that they expect to cease employing more than 1,200 of the current 1,869 contract workers.

In an attempt to give its arbitrary firing of the 546 permanent workers a cover of legality, the company has deposited sums varying from 50,000 to 70,000 Rupees (about \$900 to \$1,275 US) in each of their bank accounts. MSI says these payments represent the workers’ wages for July plus three months’ salary and an additional 15 days of salary for each year of service. That this amounts to a paltry sum of around \$1,000 only underscores the sweatshop conditions that prevail at MSI and in India’s auto industry as a whole.

There is a growing opposition among workers in the entire Manesar–Gurgaon industrial belt to MSI’s attempt to arbitrarily purge its workforce.

On August 17, nearly 7,000 workers from such companies as Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India, Sona Steering, Satyam Auto, Munjal Showa, Rico and Hero MotoCorp rallied outside a government office in Gurgaon to demand the reinstatement of the sacked Manesar workers.

Significantly, MSI, which has mounted an 18-month war against the independent MSWU, is now suggesting that it may ask an established trade union federation, i.e., a bureaucratic apparatus affiliated with one of India’s political parties, to “represent” the Manesar workers.

Declared S.Y. Siddiqui, MSI chief operating officer (administration), “In the light of what happened on July 18, maybe we can look at whether a growth-oriented, pro-business external union can help workers of the company ... This is something we need to introspect. A mature right-thinking union can be very constructive and I do not think they would have resorted to violence.”

MSI has clearly taken note of how the official unions, including those affiliated to the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—have

systematically isolated the Manesar workers and repeatedly pressed them to accept sell-out agreements. Even now the AITUC and CITU are advocating that the sacked MSI workers direct their energies at pressuring the very Congress Party-led Haryana government that has been working hand-in-glove with the company to intervene on their behalf.



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