

India: Jailed Maruti Suzuki workers subjected to torture

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Around 150 Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) workers jailed by the Haryana state Congress Party government at the behest of the automaker have been brutally tortured by police, a report by a prominent Indian NGO reveals.

Employed at the MSI plant in Manesar in the northern state of Haryana, the workers have been rounded up since mid-July using lists supplied by the company and remain in detention. Manesar is located in the giant Gurgaon industrial belt, home to a large number of industries and is close to India's capital New Delhi.

All of these workers either belong to or are aligned with the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed after workers mounted a bitter struggle to break free from a company-sponsored stooge union. All of the leadership of MSWU has been arrested. The arrests occurred in several rounds of police raids after a human resources manager, Awanish Dev, was killed at the plant on July 18. The altercation occurred after a management-instigated dispute broke out on the shop floor between workers, company goons and managers. (See "India: Maruti Suzuki launches witch-hunt against workers")

The systematic torture and humiliation of the workers was exposed by the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) in a report published on September 27. According to the report, police have subjected the arrested workers to horrific torture both for their militant trade union activities and to scapegoat them for the death of the manager.

The report states: "Workers have confirmed in the MLRs (Medico-Legal Reports) that they were stripped naked and beaten, and injured in the groin as their legs were stretched apart on both sides 'beyond capacity' for sustained periods of time. Some were submerged in dirty water for long duration, and rollers run over the thighs of others."

The report added that "2 of the 12 accused union leaders who were presented in Gurgaon court were seen to be limping due to injuries sustained during police interrogation."

The report also noted: "Workers who were tortured as well as a large number of arrested have been made to sign on blank sheets of paper." This is a clear attempt by the police to prepare false written confessions to frame workers for the murder. Many of the workers currently jailed were not even present at

the factory on the day the manager's death occurred.

Charge-sheets running to a total of 3,000 pages have now been filed against 145 workers for murder, attempted murder and destruction of private property. In addition, the company has proceeded to purge its workers by arbitrarily terminating over 500 workers as well as numerous contract workers.

The brutalization of MSI workers has occurred under the direct initiative of the Congress Party-led Haryana state government. In concert with MSI management, the government is acting to suppress the workers' militant struggle at this plant against brutal working conditions, low pay and pervasive management abuses over the past two years.

Since July, the state government has deployed thousands of police to "protect" the MSI plant and two other plants belonging to the giant Japanese Suzuki Corporation. Scores of armed police are now present inside the grounds of the MSI plant.

The WSWs was able to confirm the torture detailed in the report from the workers' defence attorney, Rajendra Pathak. In a telephone interview, Pathak told the WSWs that the PUDR had approached him while collecting material for the report. The attorney also said that some of the MSI management personnel were present to witness police stripping the workers and the subsequent beatings. According to Pathak, the police deliberately delayed medical examination of the workers in their custody so as to dilute evidence of torture.

Pathak also indicated that there is no evidence that the workers were responsible for the death of the manager. In fact, he indicated that this human resource manager was sympathetic to workers' grievances at the plant and because of this the workers were actually friendly towards him.

The attorney, one of a team of five defence lawyers, also informed the WSWs that it was a standard practice for MSI management to post company hired goons at the plant in workers' uniforms alongside workers during day-to-day production. It is known that a number of these goons were present during the dispute on July 18 when Awanish Dev was killed.

According to the PUDR report, a medical examination performed on the tortured workers on September 21 "reveals how workers are still suffering from the effects and pain trauma

due to physical torture meted out in police custody [for] over a month and half.” Even though the defence counsel “had applied for a proper medical examination much earlier, and the same was permitted by the court ... the police caused significant and deliberate delay even after court permission was granted, causing marks and evidence of torture to be reduced.”

The pattern of police arrests clearly reveals that the aim was to root out militant workers. As the PUDR report states, many of the arrested were not even present on the day in question: “The first 93 arrests for instance took place at random on July 18-19 and included workers not even present at the factory site.” It further revealed: “A large number of the over 145 arrests of workers that have been made in the case are unrelated to the crimes in the FIR [First Information Report or charge sheet].”

Police arrested workers based upon a list supplied by the company management. Police openly told family members of those arrested that this was the basis of the relatives’ arrests.

The police have also harassed, illegally detained and intimidated family members of workers so as to force the “surrender” of the union members. In an example cited in the report, “the father, brother and brother-in-law of one of the office-bearers of MSWU” were picked up for interrogation and illegally detained for days in a police lockup in Gurgaon. Many other relatives of other MSWU leaders were also illegally detained for over 24 hours. In another instance, the intervention of villagers prevented the police from taking away a worker’s wife and her two small children.

In a confirmation of the information revealed by attorney Pathak, the PUDR report also refers to the use of hired thugs by MSI management to attack workers during July 18 altercation: “Many [of those hired thugs] were in the Maruti uniform without the badge. An entire list of those involved in the crime is therefore yet to emerge clearly.”

The torture of MSI workers is the culmination of the progressive criminalization of their struggle by the Congress Party-led Haryana government over the past two years. The Gurgaon industrial belt is home to numerous industries owned by giant transnational corporations. The giant transnationals make their profits through severe exploitation of their workforces. In order to keep India attractive to foreign capital, both the Haryana government and the Indian government are determined to suppress the MSI workforce lest their actions become a catalyst for wider industrial agitation.

The massive witch-hunt carried out by the Haryana government in close collaboration with MSI management is facilitated by the rotten role played by the Stalinist unions active in this industrial belt. This includes the Communist Party of India (CPI)-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)-affiliated Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

During last year’s months-long militant struggles by the MSI workers both the AITUC and CITU worked to systematically

isolate their struggle and refused to call any sustained industrial action in their defence. Instead, Stalinist union leaders advised MSI workers to keep faith in the Congress Party-led state government and its labour officials, even as they began to openly hound the workers.

The CITU and AITUC, together with the Congress-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Centre (INTUC) and the “nonpolitical” Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), called a meeting of MSI workers on August 31. The union leaders promised to take up this issue at the September 4 All Indian Convention of Trade Unions they were holding along with the reactionary unions affiliated with the ruling Congress Party and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP).

However, the only reference made to the MSI workers was a toothless observation: “The recent unfortunate incident in Maruti Suzuki Plant in Manesar and its aftermath, including the arrest of 150 workers and dismissal of over 500 workers, is a glaring instance of the corporate government nexus.”

The reference to a management-provoked altercation as an “unfortunate incident” is a tacit implication by these unions that the workers may be to blame for what occurred on July 18.

As the current incident reveals, these militant and brutally exploited workers have been left defenceless in the face of ferocious repression by the government apparatus. It is imperative that the working class, particularly in this industrial belt, come to the aid of their class brothers at MSI and launch a sustained offensive by the working class against this brutal exploitation and abuse.



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