

India: Thousands protest victimization of Maruti Suzuki workers

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Several hundred workers who Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) has targeted for firing as part of its government-supported campaign to break all opposition at its Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant staged a two-day hunger strike and sit-in in Gurgaon, the district capital, last week.

At the protest's conclusion, on the afternoon of November 8, several thousand workers from other factories in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt joined a mass rally in support of the victimized MSI workers.

The Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed in opposition to a company-stooge union at the Manesar plant, called last week's protest to demand the release from jail of 149 workers facing frame-up charges, the reinstatement of more than 500 workers whom MSI is trying to purge from its workforce, and the rehiring of more than 2,000 contract and temporary workers that management is also trying to be rid of.

The Haryana state Congress Party government ordered police out in force during MSWU's Nov. 7-8 protest to harass the victimized workers and threaten those now employed at the Manesar assembly plant.

In late July and early August, the Haryana police detained 149 workers—including all the MSWU's leaders—claiming that they were criminally involved in a July 18 altercation between workers and management that result in the death of a senior manager.

The charges constitute a crude frame-up. The altercation was provoked by management goons. Moreover, many of those who have been arrested were not even at the plant when the melee occurred.

The police have admitted that the arrests were made at the company's instigation and using lists supplied by management.

The arrested workers, who remain behind bars, were brutally beaten by the police and many, including the 12 MSWU office-bearers, were subjected to torture, including electric shocks, severe leg-stretching and water submersion. (See: "Many could have been tortured to death," charges

lawyer for jailed Maruti Suzuki India workers.)

The company, with the government's support, has also used the July 18 altercation as the pretext for a purge of its workforce. When MSI reopened the Manesar plant in late August, 546 workers were sacked. (Later, so as to conform with labor laws, the victimized workers were told they were indefinitely suspended pending final determination of their status. But MSI management at the highest levels has publicly vowed that it will ensure the victimized workers are stripped of their jobs.)

The arrest and frame-up of the 149 workers is the culmination of a concerted government-state campaign to assist Maruti Suzuki in smashing the independent union at the Manesar car assembly plant and uphold the company's brutal work-regime.

Haryana Labour Department officials repeatedly refused to recognize the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), the MSWU's predecessor, insisting the company-stooge union was the workers' representative.

The Haryana Congress Party government mobilized hundreds of police to help the company expel workers from the plant when MSI imposed a lock out in August 2011, and publicly demanded that the workers sign the company's "good conduct bond."

The government has also repeatedly accused "outsiders" of fomenting labour strife at the plant in order to damage the state's economy and chase away investment.

The Congress government is clearly determined to make an example of the Maruti Suzuki workers so as to intimidate the working class and demonstrate to foreign and domestic capital that it will do everything in its power to ensure that they are supplied with a regimented, cheap-labor workforce.

A recent article in *Business Week* voiced the fears and concerns of international big business over growing resentment among Indian workers over the sweatshop conditions to which they are subjected. Titled "Knife Attack Shows India Strife Clouding [Prime Minister] Singh[s] Investment Appeal," the article points to a rise in labour

strife, including an incident where a young worker at Everest Industries Ltd, in Nashik, Maharashtra, stabbed three managers after talks failed to resolve a 10-month wage dispute. “The confrontation,” said the article, “is symptomatic of a breakdown in trust in Indian industrial relations two decades in the making. While a jump in productivity has enabled a twenty-fold surge in average factory profits since the opening of the economy in 1991, inflation has erased wage gains.”

Over the course of the past two years the Manesar MSI workers’ struggle has repeatedly threatened to spark a wider upsurge of workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—a huge concentration of auto and other factories that lies only a short distance from the national capital, Delhi.

Because it remains fearful of such a possibility, the Haryana Congress Party government responded to last week’s protests with still further repression.

According to an MSWU statement, “police intimidation, which we have already witnessed these three months,” was increased “manifold.” It reported that authorities at the Gurgaon Central Jail “threatened to ‘beat up’ and increase the torture” of the 149 jailed workers if they mounted a hunger strike in conjunction with that being staged by the other victimized workers.

On the morning of November 7 police dismantled a tent and other amenities protesters had set up in front of the District Collectors’ Office and arrested more than forty of the victimized workers. Due to vigorous protests, the police soon released all of the workers, with the exception of two members of the MSWU Provisional Working Committee (the acting MSWU leadership body under conditions where all its elected officials are in jail.) These two, Jat and Ramnivas, were kept inside the police station under the pretext of “further questioning” until late evening.

A thousand police and company-paid thugs were meanwhile deployed inside the Manesar plant to prevent workers from observing a lunch boycott in support of the victimized workers.

According to the MSWU, “The Manesar police summoned each worker inside the company to the police station and ... threatened all of them [with] ‘dire consequences’ and termination if [they were found] to be even remotely in touch with any of the terminated workers...or attending any meeting or dharna [sit-in-protest].”

There is enormous sympathy and support for the MSI workers. If the government and company have nonetheless been able to mount a vendetta against them, it is because the trade union federations that operate in the Gurgaon-Manesar belt and the Stalinist-led Left Front have systematically isolated the MSI workers and urged them to place their faith in appeals to the Labor Department, the courts, and the

Congress Party Haryana government even as they have all been shown to be working hand-in-glove with management.

Particularly pernicious has been the role of the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which are respectively the union federations of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. The Stalinist-led AITUC and CITU repeatedly urged the Manesar workers to curb their demands and submit to the corporatist, pro-big business collective bargaining system as part of their efforts to convince employers that unions can assist them in managing their labour relations. The CPI and CPM and their Left Front have repeatedly propped up Congress Party-led governments in Delhi, even as they implemented neo-liberal “reforms,” and in the states where the Stalinists have held office have pursued what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies.

Under the influence of these and other pro-capitalist political forces, the MSWU is organizing the defence of the victimized MSI workers as a protest campaign aimed at pressuring and winning the ear of the government and big business politicians. The Nov. 8 MSWU-led demonstration marched to the residence of the Sukhbir Kataria, the local Congress Party state legislator and Youth and Sports Minister in the Haryana government, to give him a memorandum with their demands. An MSWU statement issued November 10 promoted the false hope that Kataria could serve as an advocate for the workers, saying that he “came down to the street to listen to our demands, and gave us assurance of resolving our demands by taking it up with the Chief Minister after *diwali* [a Hindu festival this year celebrated on November 13].”

To defeat the corporate-state vendetta against them, the MSI workers must make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the working class throughout India—an offensive aimed at securing basic worker rights and at constituting the working class as an independent political force so that it can prosecute the struggle for a workers’ government and socialism against big business and its political hirelings.



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