

# Behind the UAW's "support" for the Maruti Suzuki workers

Jerry White

5 December 2012

The United Auto Workers union in the United States has issued a letter of protest against the firing and arrests of workers at a Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) car assembly plant in the north Indian state of Haryana.

According to reports in the Indian media, UAW President Bob King has written Shinzo Nakanishi, the CEO of the Japanese-owned company, calling on management and the Haryana state government to recognize the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) and engage in collective bargaining. He has also called for the release of 149 imprisoned workers and an end to the repressive measures by the police against workers and their families.

The rank-and-file workers at the MSI plant—one of the largest auto factories in India—organized the MSWU in opposition to the company union at the factory. They have waged a courageous 18-month struggle against the sweatshop conditions and poverty wages that the Indian ruling elite has used to attract foreign investors.

The Indian Congress Party-led government in Haryana has responded to this struggle with brutal repression. Four months ago, 149 workers—including the entire leadership of the MSWU—was thrown in jail on trumped-up charges stemming from a July 18 altercation—started by company thugs—that resulted in the death of a senior manager. The workers, who are still in police custody, have been subjected to torture, including beatings, electric shocks and waterboarding.

Last month, several thousands of workers in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt where the MSI plant is located joined a protest, called by the MSWU, to demand the release of the jailed workers, the reinstatement of more than 500 workers that MSI is trying to purge from its workforce, and the rehiring of more than 2,000 contract and temporary workers whom management is also trying to dispense with.

The MSI workers' struggle, however, is being isolated

by the major union federations, including those controlled by the Stalinist CPI and CPM, who are also wedded to the economic policy of offering up the Indian working class as cheap labor.

The embattled Suzuki workers certainly need the solidarity and active support of auto workers in the US and internationally to break this isolation and beat back the brutal attack on their living standards and basic rights. And, it is a fundamental truth that auto workers in North America and Europe cannot defend their jobs and living standards as long as their brothers in Asia, Latin America and other impoverished regions are super-exploited.

However, the letter from UAW President Bob King has nothing to do with uniting American and Indian workers in a common struggle against the global auto giants. The UAW does not speak for the interests of American workers. It has nothing to do with the organization that was founded three quarters of a century ago on the basis of mass struggles, sit-down strikes and bitter battles against the auto bosses and the capitalist state.

Like the national-based unions all over the world, the UAW responded to globalization in the 1970s and 1980s by abandoning any struggle and transforming itself into a tool of corporate management. This was the inevitable outcome of the purge of left-wing militants and socialists by the UAW bureaucracy in the 1940s and 1950s, and its decades-long alliance with the Democratic Party, based on their common defense of the profit system and American imperialism.

Bob King epitomizes this degeneration. The son of a former personnel director at Ford Motor Company, King declared in a speech last year that globalization had put an end to the "UAW of the 20th century." The "21st-century UAW," he said, "no longer views these managements as our adversaries or enemies, but as partners in innovation and quality."

Over the last three decades, the UAW has "partnered"

with the auto bosses in destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs and the rights and benefits won through generations of struggle. In 2009, it collaborated with the Obama administration to slash new workers' wages in half, drastically increase working hours and bring back conditions of speed-up and exploitation not seen since the 1930s. In return, King and the rest of UAW executives were handed control of billions in corporate stocks.

Today, the UAW boasts that it has cut labor costs at GM, Ford and Chrysler's US plants so low that the Detroit-based auto companies have removed some production from their plants in Mexico, China and other low-wage countries in order to "in-source" it to the US.

In addition to writing the Maruti Suzuki CEO, King has reportedly written Bo Shin Seo, CEO of Hyundai Motors, to urge the company to reinstate 27 workers it fired in 2008. It is also calling on the company to recognize the Hyundai Motor India Employees' Union (HMIEU) or hold a fair election to decide the majority union, and to renegotiate a recently-concluded wage agreement with the United Union of Hyundai Employees (UUHE).

But as the Indo-Asian News Service reported, "While UAW has written to the two Asia-based auto companies, it has not written any letter to the Indian subsidiary of the American auto major Ford Motor Company (FMC), which is also facing a similar labour issue. According to a union official at Ford India Employees Union (FIEU), the UAW officials are in talks with FMC to sort out the labour problem at its subsidiary Ford India Pvt Ltd."

No doubt King and the UAW, which are major shareholders in Ford, are eager to help Ford gain a competitive edge against its Asian-based rivals.

But the principal reason that King is giving "labor relations" advice to Suzuki, Hyundai and the Indian state is because like them, he fears the impact of the growing militancy among Indian auto workers. A powerful movement of the working class in the most oppressed countries will encourage auto workers around the world to resist.

King is urging the auto giants to recognize these unions with the aim of locking workers into a "collective bargaining" regime predicated on the defence of the profit system and designed to thwart worker militancy. He hopes such an arrangement can be used to block the development of a socialist opposition within the working class.

Despite his nationalist "Buy American" outlook, King is no stranger to the CEOs of Japanese- and Korean-owned companies, having written them before about the

cost-cutting advantages they would attain if they recognized the UAW in their plants in the US.

Insofar as the UAW exercises any "internationalism," it is to help the American-based auto companies exploit their workforces in other countries too. Last year, General Motors appointed King to the board of directors of its European Opel subsidiary in advance of major job and wage cuts. He was sent to import US-style plant closings, mass layoffs and labor "flexibility" on European workers.

The clearest proof of the UAW's hostility to the international working class is its enthusiastic support for the Obama administration, which has escalated the imperialist wars, drone attacks and bloody occupations against the people of Central and South Asia and the Middle East.

Over the last several years there has been a growing rebellion by American auto workers against the UAW. Workers see it as a company union no different than the one that existed at the MSI plant. Union officials have been shouted down, thrown out of meetings and their sellout agreements rejected by rank-and-file auto workers.

The MSI workers confront a crucial crossroads in their struggle. They cannot defend themselves through appeals to the courts or capitalist politicians. They need and must have the support of auto workers in the US and internationally to defend their most basic rights.

This cannot be achieved through the UAW or other corporatist trade unions. A struggle must be taken up to unite auto workers across the globe independently of the trade unions, the big business politicians and the capitalist system they defend. In this fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* will prove the most powerful weapon to unite the struggles of the working class internationally.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**