

India: Thousands join convention and protest to defend victimised Maruti Suzuki workers

Arun Kumar
15 December 2012

Thousands of auto workers joined a convention and a protest march in New Delhi last Sunday to defend the victimised workers of the Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) car assembly plant in Manesar, in the northern Indian state of Haryana, defying threats and intimidation by the Congress governments of both Delhi and Haryana. This underscores the growing militancy among auto workers in India, who want to fight the slave labour conditions they are subjected to.

The auto workers convention held at Ambedkar Bhavan in New Delhi and the march about 5 km from Paharganj to Jantar Mantar were organised by the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the independent union MSI Manesar workers have formed in defiance of a company stooge union. In addition to MSI workers, several hundred auto workers from the Gurgaon-Manesar to Noida-Ghaziabad industrial region also joined the protests to demonstrate their class solidarity with victimised Maruti Suzuki workers.

The MSI and other auto workers who gathered in New Delhi last Sunday demanded the release of the 149 jailed MSI workers and the reinstatement of 546 permanent and about 2,000 contract workers who were sacked. The protesters also demanded an end to all intimidation and harassment, the abolition of the contract system in the auto industry, decent wages and the right to unionise.

Using a company-provoked altercation between workers and the management staff at the MSI Manesar plant on July 18, which led to the death of a senior manager, Haryana police arrested 149 workers, including the entire leadership of the MSWU, in late July and early August, on the basis of lists provided by management. The workers have been behind bars now for more than four months and subjected to torture by the police in an attempt to extract confessions from them. When the plant was reopened in August, following a month-long lockout, management sacked 546 permanent and about 2,000 contract workers on charges of being involved in the July 18 incident, without even the pretense of an inquiry.

A company-government joint vendetta has been launched against militant MSI workers, aiming to smash their independent union in order to crush workers' opposition to MSI's cheap labour regime. The continuing pursuit by the company and the government of their repression of MSI

workers, keeping the 149 MSI workers in Gurgaon jail, has been increasingly revealed as a witch-hunt against the workers.

As MSI workers argued at the December 9 convention, at least 100 to 125 out of the 149 jailed workers were not in the Manesar plant during July 18 incident. But none of them have been granted bail, even though they are under bailable charges. An MSWU statement on December 6 charged that "the state has put all its weight to ensure that they are denied bail and continue to be treated as criminals". It also noted that on December 4, even 15 of the workers whose names were not in the FIR (First Information Report) filed by the police were denied bail.

In a further revelation of the baseless nature of police-company accusations against the jailed workers, the charge sheets filed by the prosecution are incomplete. Neither lists of witnesses nor proper supporting documents have been filed. Even though the Haryana government-constituted special investigation team has failed to convict anyone among the sacked MSI workers, management continues to refuse to reinstate any of them.

At the convention, Rakhi Sehgal, the leader of a Maoist-influenced trade union federation, New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), said, "The jailed MSWU leaders are being told by the administration that if they take the charges of attempt to murder upon themselves, the innocent ones will be allowed to go. This proposal has been categorically rejected because all the arrested workers are innocent."

This move by management reveals the real objective of arrests and police actions. They have nothing to do with what really happened on July 18, but are aimed to smash the workers' independent union by witch-hunting its entire leadership. This so-called "offer" by management is also a clear attempt to divide MSI workers.

The MSWU statement, issued the day before the convention, points to concerted efforts by the state governments and their police forces to block workers' gatherings and protests. It states: "They [the Haryana and Delhi government administrations] have denied us permission to hold the convention in the evening today with the imagined reason that this will disrupt peace in the area. And for the last two days, Haryana Police and CID have been calling on us and our

parents and relatives to strongly threaten against holding this program and any such program in the future, or force will be used against us.”

A leaflet issued by the MSWU said that a number of MSI workers and their supporters were arrested at two incidents—in Gurgaon by the police and in Noida by Honda plant security guards—on December 7, while they were distributing leaflets at factory gates calling workers to attend their convention. They were released within a few hours. But these arrests had no legal basis, particularly in the case of Honda security guards, and were clear attempts to break the workers’ campaign for the convention and against the witch-hunt of MSI workers.

For the past two years, the Congress Party-led Haryana government and its police force have been working hand in glove with MSI to suppress the militant struggles of workers at the Manesar plant. The global brand transnational corporations that operate in the Gurgaon-Manesar to Noida-Ghaziabad industrial belt 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 militant struggles in India and internationally.

The major trade unions active in the industrial belt have been complicit in the witch-hunt of the MSI workers, blocking industrial action in their support during last year’s strike struggles and limiting their opposition to the company-government victimization campaign to pro forma pledges of solidarity. 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).

At the invitation of the MSWU Provisional Working Committee, representatives of the CITU and other unions involved in a 16-member Gurgaon Trade Union Committee established last August with the ostensible purpose of mounting a struggle in defence of the MSI workers addressed the convention. Once again these officials pledged their support while committing themselves to do precisely nothing.

In a statement issued earlier this month, the *World Socialist Web Site* called for the Indian and international working class to come to the defence of the victimised MSI workers and elaborated a strategy for their defence: “The opposition to the company-government witch-hunt of the Maruti Suzuki workers must be based on the fight to mobilize the working class in industrial and independent political struggle against big business, the Congress Party-led Haryana and UPA governments, and the crisis-ridden capitalist system as a whole”.

The statement went on to expose the pernicious role played by the Stalinist parties in creating a cruel deception about the very forces that jointly suppress MSI workers: “The claims of the trade unions and the Stalinist parties—the Communist Party

of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM—that the government and courts can be pressured into interceding on the workers’ behalf are a cruel deception. As the struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers has itself amply demonstrated, the government, courts and police are all instruments of big business.”

Under the political influence of the Stalinists, the current MSWU leadership advances the same perspective of appealing to the Congress governments, placing MSI workers’ courageous and militant struggle to defeat the company-government witch-hunt in danger. Following two previous protest marches in Haryana, the MSWU leadership met and presented the case of MSI workers to two ministers of the state government—Youth and Sports Minister Sukhbir Kataria on November 8 and Industries Minister Randeep Surjewala on November 12—and promoted the illusion that those ministers would press state chief minister to act on behalf of the victimized workers. At the conclusion of the December 9 march as well, they submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to persuade him to “consider” MSI workers demands. As the head of the Congress Party-led central government, he is determined to push ahead with socially incendiary policies at the expense of the workers and rural masses and on behalf of local and foreign big business investors, including Maruti Suzuki.

MSI workers must oppose the bankrupt and dangerous policy of appealing to the same politicians of the bourgeois establishment who work on behalf of investors against workers. It is necessary to draw the lessons from their own bitter experience. Workers must break politically and organizationally from the entire political establishment, from the Congress and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) through to the Stalinist CPM and CPI and their Left Front, for all these parties are enforcers of India’s cheap labour regime. It is a precondition for workers to mobilize their independent class strength on the basis of an alternative socialist policy.



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