

Witch-hunt continues against Maruti Suzuki workers in India

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Company management and the Indian Congress-led government in the northern state of Haryana are continuing their vicious campaign of repression against auto workers at the Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) plant in the town of Manesar, just outside of the capital of New Delhi.

Using a list supplied by the management, the state government has recently arrested another worker bringing the total number of incarcerated auto workers to 150. In addition, a police manhunt is underway for another 65 workers on the list who have fled or are in hiding to escape police repression.

Last summer, 149 workers including the entire leadership of the breakaway Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) were rounded up by the police in a dragnet operation. They were framed up for the July 18 death of the human resources manager who died during a management instigated attack on workers at the plant by hired goons and management. The arrested workers were subjected to severe torture to extract “confessions”. (See “India: Jailed Maruti Suzuki workers subjected to torture”)

Many of the tortured workers were not even present at the plant when the altercation occurred. Nevertheless, they were rounded up after MSI management included their names on a list given to police.

To date there has been no independent and reliable investigation into what led to the death of the manager—Awanish Dev—who was generally thought well of by workers. A Special Investigation Team (SIT), headed by the assistant police commissioner, whitewashed the role of management, placed sole blame on the workers and went so far as to suggest auto workers planned to murder every manager in the plant. Even this frameup report has yet to be made public.

The global auto giant—the largest auto company in India—and Congress Party state officials want to make an example of the workers and make clear that no struggle in

opposition to low wages and brutal working conditions will be tolerated.

The Congress Party—the dominant partner in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governing coalition and the Indian bourgeoisie’s premier political party—is reacting with particular ruthlessness because the Maruti Suzuki auto workers have maintained their determined fight despite relentless repression. The extraordinary resiliency of the workers has threatened to provoke a wider movement of the working class in the vast Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt where the MSI plant is located and more broadly throughout India.

The entire economic strategy of the Indian ruling class, since opening up the country to the world economy in the 1990s, is dependent on guaranteeing vast profits for foreign investors by providing a ready supply of cheap and highly exploited workers. Like the mass struggles of Chinese auto workers in 2010, the struggle of MSI workers threatens this whole arrangement.

In a continuing witchhunt the plant management abruptly transferred 12 regular workers from the Manesar plant to the company’s various manufacturing facilities across the country. Company officials have given no reason for this arbitrary move, declaring only that it is within management’s prerogative. As a condition of employment at the plant the workers are compelled to sign a document accepting the right of management to transfer them to any facility of the company at any time they please. There is no doubt this is another mechanism used to weed out militant workers.

Additionally, the company summarily dismissed 546 permanent workers and 2,000 contract and temporary workers in September. Even the relatives of the workers have been subjected to arbitrary harassment by the police and some have been jailed.

The MSI chairman R C Bhargava arrogantly declared that the company will not reinstate any of the thousands

of sacked workers because they “took part in violent activities” and “they were part of the mob.”

Workers at his plant have been fighting for over a year for the recognition of their union, which was founded in a struggle against the company’s stooge union. For over a year both the company and Congress Party-led state government have refused to recognize the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU).

Corporate and government officials want to smother any attempt by workers to break free from company-sponsored unions or the existing trade union federations led by the Congress Party or the Stalinists, which are just as committed to the nationalist program of offering up India workers as cheap labor.

As S Y Siddique, CEO of the MSI told the press, the labor cost in US auto plants is around \$35 an hour, whereas in India the same labour is available at \$3 per hour. “We have huge advantage” said Siddique.

Maruti Suzuki has also announced a plan to open a new car plant in the western Indian state of Gujarat, which is ruled by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Recently reelected Hindu-communalist chief minister Narendra Modi has ingratiated himself with both foreign and domestic big businesses by not only offering tax breaks and other incentives, but also actively intervening in workers’ strikes to declare them “illegal.” A case in point was the strike by Apollo tire workers last November, which the Gujarat government outlawed giving management permission to fire workers en masse.

The attack on auto workers takes place as India’s export-dominated economy is being hit by the effects of the world economic crisis. Siddique said, “[the] MSIL plant is coming up at a cost of Rs 4,000 (\$727 million) in Gujarat and is expected to take off in 2015-16...” He admitted that “[although] the growth rate was projected at 14 per cent for the auto-industry, it has [now] slowed down to 4 to 5 per cent in the current fiscal” period. Thus, he added that “it [has] created a bit of confusion about our Gujarat plans.”

There is enormous and widespread sympathy for the MSI workers. If the government and company have been able to mount a vendetta against them it is because the trade union federations in the Gurgaon-Manesar belt and the Stalinist-led Left Front have systematically isolated the MSI workers. Instead they have sought to divert workers down the deadend of appeals to the Labour Department, the courts, and the Congress Party Haryana government. This, even as all of these forces have 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, they have pursued what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies.

Alarmed by the continuing militant mood among the MSI workers, trade union officials who have done everything in their power to isolate the MSI workers have begun to appear at rallies organized by workers affiliated to MSWU. At a December rally organized by MSWU, officials from the Stalinist CPM-affiliated CITU, CPI-affiliated AITUC and various other smaller union federations addressed the rally issuing empty promises of solidarity.

As has been amply demonstrated, the MSI workers cannot rely on the trade union apparatus but must fight for independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the existing trade unions and the political parties that are behind them. At the same time, appeals must be issued to auto workers in the US, Europe, Asia and throughout the world to develop an international strategy to fight the global auto companies and the capitalist system, which is impoverishing the working class throughout the world to enrich a tiny handful.

The authors also recommend:

Defend auto workers victimised by Maruti Suzuki and Indian authorities
[6 December 2012]



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