India: Thousands join protests to support victimised Maruti Suzuki workers

Arun Kumar
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Thousands of workers joined protests held across India on February 5 to voice their support for victimized workers at Maruti Suzuki India's car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana. The workers have been subjected to a brutal witch-hunt by state police and company management with the full support of the Congress Party-led Haryana state government.

Protests were held in nearly 15 states including Delhi, West Bengal, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Rajasthan, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh Bihar, and Haryana.

The February 5 "All-India Protest Day" was in response to a call issued by the Provisional Working Committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the independent union representing MSI workers at the Manesar plant. The MSWU has demanded the immediate release of 150 jailed Maruti Suzuki workers, including the entire elected leadership of the MSWU, as well as of Imaan Khan, a Provisional Working Committee member who was arrested on January 24 while waiting to brief media. They are also demanding an end to police arrests and harassment of workers and their families and the immediate reinstatement of the 546 permanent and nearly 2,000 contract workers the company sacked last summer.

A company provoked altercation on July 18 between workers and management staff, which led to the death of a manager whom the workers considered sympathetic to their plight, and has been exploited by management to go on a full offensive against militant workers at the Manesar plant. The company attacks have the full support of the Haryana Congress government. Acting on a list provided by management, Haryana police have arrested 150 workers, mainly in late July and early August, and charged them with grave criminal offenses. The jailed workers have been subjected to brutal torture aimed at extracting "confessions" implicating them in the July 18 incident. In reality, most of them were not even present at the plant that day.

The participation of thousands of workers in the February 5 protests reflects growing concern within the working class over the victimized workers' plight and a growing recognition that they have been targeted for challenging the sweatshop conditions that prevail across India, including at the factories of transnationals like Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) and their subsidiaries.

With India's economy slowing under the impact of the global recession, big business is determined to intensify the exploitation of the working class. It is pushing for massive social spending cuts, the further sell-off of public sector companies, and the gutting of restrictions on layoffs and plant closures. These demands are echoed in recent statements issued by Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, as well as by the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia. While Chidambaram has vowed to cut tens of billions from spending in the current fiscal year, Ahuwalia is urging a "squeeze" on price subsidies for fuel, food, and fertilizer.

Primary responsibility for the continuing victimization and persecution of the Manesar workers lies with the principal union federations in the Gurgaon-Manesar area—the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The latter two organizations are respectively the union fronts of the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

Over the past two years of militant struggle on the part of the MSI workers, the AITUC and CITU have

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intervened repeatedly to urge the workers to "compromise"—that is to accept the company's terms—and to appeal to the big business Congress Party state government to intervene on their behalf. When the company launched its current witch-hunt against workers last July, these union federations refused to organize any industrial action in defense of the MSI workers. Instead, union officials have put in the occasional appearance at Maruti Suzuki worker protests, where the bleat empty promises of "solidarity."

The treacherous role of the Stalinist unions is bound up with the pro-capitalist politics of the parties with which they are aligned. Over the course of the past two decades, the CPI and CPM have repeatedly supported Congress Party-led governments in New Delhi that have ruthlessly pursued the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal "reforms", while implementing what they themselves describe as "pro-investor" policies in the states where they have held office—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura.

Trade unions affiliated to Maoist and other pseudo-left political formations, liberal human rights organisations, women's groups and student organisations took part in the February 5 protests. These organisations' political orientation is not fundamentally different from that of the Stalinist CPI and CPM. At most they call for more militant and vocal protests, aimed at pressuring the official union apparatuses and the Indian political establishment. All oppose linking the struggle to defend the victimised Maruti Suzuki to the fight for the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class against sweatshop conditions and contract-labor and for a workers' government.

A speaker from Inquilabi Mazdoor Kendra (Revolutionary Workers Centre) addressing a solidarity rally in Delhi on February 5 said workers would have to fight and if necessary fill the jails to achieve the rights guaranteed them by the constitution. Another speaker from the Maoist-aligned Bigul Mazdoor Dasta (BMD), while criticizing the central trade unions, called for an "Occupy" type protest in a central location of the city to force the unions to join them.

The BMD has also encouraged the MSI workers to appeal to the big business politicians for support. "We have submitted memorandums to CMs (chief ministers) of all the 15 states including the Haryana Chief Minister," boasted BMD spokesman Subhasini at one of the Feb. 5 protests.

A WSWS reporting team covered a protest rally held near the Memorial Hall in Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The protest was organised by the Maoist New Democratic Workers Front (DWF). The rally was attended by about 50 workers. They were addressed by Omprakash from the provisional working committee of the MSWU.

Supporters of the WSWS distributed copies of a statement entitled "Defend auto workers victimised by Maruti Suzuki and Indian authorities". A leading Maoist organiser wanted to know from the WSWS team why photographs of the rally were being taken. When asked why he did not challenge the police videotaping the entire protest rally instead of harassing the WSWS which has been defending and covering the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle extensively, he retreated.

Under the influence of the CPM, CPI and the Maoists, the MSWU is persisting with a protest campaign aimed not at mobilizing the independent strength of the working class, but at pressuring the Congress Party and the Haryana government. In its statement on the February 5 protests, the MSWU conceded, "we have seen only empty promises" from the politicians. Yet it went on to celebrate the fact that "massive demonstrations were followed by deputations, memorandums and rallies to the local elected representatives and to Bhupinder Hooda, Chief Minister, Haryana."

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