

India: Chief Minister threatens victimized Maruti Suzuki workers

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When a delegation representing the victimized workforce at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant met with Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Hooda last week, he bullied and threatened them.

A Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) provisional committee member who participated in the meeting told the World Socialist Web Site that the longtime Congress Party leader had demanded that they end their protests against the dismissal of more than 2,500 workers and the jailing of 150 workers—including the entire MSWU leadership.

"I am the king of Haryana," declared Hooda. "How dare you make trouble on my turf."

After a management-provoked altercation at the Manesar plant last July 18, the police arrested 150 workers on lists supplied by the company. It also implemented a purge of its workforce, firing 546 permanent and nearly 2,000 contract workers.

The arrests and purge were the culmination of a joint campaign mounted by the company, India's largest auto maker, and the Congress Party state government to thwart the Manesar workers' fourteen month-old rebellion against sweatshop conditions and a pro-company stooge union.

After the major trade union federations active in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt failed to make good on a promise to mount a protest campaign against the firings and jailings, Maruti Suzuki workers took matters into their own hands. In recent months they have staged a series of protests.

This included organizing a rallying on January 27 in Hooda's home town, Rohtak. On February 5 thousands of workers in at least 15 states across the country joined demonstrations and rallies as part of an "All-India Protest Day" against the government-company witch hunt of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

After several times evading a meeting with a delegation from the MSWU provisional committee, Hooda gave them an appointment for Feb. 23, only to vent his anger against the victimized workers. The MSWU provisional committee member who spoke with the WWSW said the Haryana Chief Minister threatened that they would face "consequences" if they continue to agitate against the dismissals and frame-up charges. And when the workers protested, "He [Hooda] told us I will have you all arrested on the spot."

The worker further explained that when fellow provisional committee Imran Khan was arrested by police on January 24 while he was waiting to brief the media, they forced him to sign an empty piece of paper, then charged him with having participated in the July 18 altercation in which a company manager was killed. He added: "This is completely false. These people [the police] and the Chief Minister are in the pockets of the capitalists."

When contacted by the WWSW, Rajendra Pathak one of the defence attorneys representing the jailed MSI workers explained, "When the (Maruti Suzuki workers) met Chief Minister Hooda he has threatened them like a rowdy. He told them 'don't come to me anymore. The law will take its own course! If you talk too much you will not be able to go out of this premise, I can even get you arrested right here.'"

According to Pathak, the Chief Minister was particularly angered that the workers had staged protests in his home town of Rohtak.

Hooda's Congress Party-led state government has supported Maruti Suzuki throughout the past two years of labour strife. It joined with the company in refusing recognition to the workers' newly formed independent union; repeatedly mobilized police to act as enforcers of the company's diktats; demanded workers sign a

company-dictated “good conduct bond” meant to deprive the workers of any rights; blamed the workers’ opposition to “politically-motivated outsiders”; and has fully supported management’s purging of the workforce.

Last but not least, Hooda and his government have presided over the mass incarceration and frame-up on grave criminal charges of Maruti Suzuki workers.

More than 150 Maruti Suzuki workers are currently in prison—the vast majority of them since late July or August, that is for more than half a year. While in prison, the workers have been abused and subjected to brutal torture including electric shocks, severe leg-stretching, and water-immersion with the aim of extracting “confessions” implicating them in the July 18 altercation. In reality, most of those arrested were not even present at the plant that day.

The Haryana Congress government is determined to make an example of the Manesar assembly workers so as to intimidate the working class and demonstrate to domestic and foreign investors that they will ruthlessly stamp out workers’ struggles to improve their wages and conditions and defend their jobs.

As Hooda’s outburst indicates the government is extremely nervous that the Maruti Suzuki workers’ resistance could spark an eruption of class struggle in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt, which is a centre of India’s auto industry. Despite the opposition of the major labour federations, including the Stalinist-aligned AITUC and CITU, workers in 2011 staged sympathy strikes in support of the striking Manesar assembly plant workers.

Like workers across India, those employed in the Manesar-Gurgaon auto industrial belt are subjected to low wages, sweatshop conditions, and contract labour with the blessing of successive central governments including the incumbent Congress Party-led ruling coalition.

The experience that the Maruti-Suzuki workers had in their meeting with Hooda has demonstrated—yet again—the futility of the protest strategy that the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and their union allies have sought to foist upon the Maruti Suzuki workers. Utterly opposed to the mobilization of workers’ class strength against big business and the political establishment, the Stalinists have urged the

Maruti Suzuki workers to focus on appeals to the Congress-led Haryana and central governments, the state Labour Department, and the courts.

To defeat the Maruti Suzuki-government witch hunt, the Maruti Suzuki workers must turn to the working class across India and internationally, consciously linking the opposition to the autoworkers’ victimization with the fight to develop a working-class counteroffensive against low wages, sweatshop conditions, and contract labour. This struggle is necessarily a political struggle, because the government, state apparatus and all the political parties—including the Stalinists—serve as enforcers of sweatshop labour and because only through the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government on a socialist program can the capitalist crisis be resolved at the expense of big business, rather than working people.



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