

India: Victimized Maruti Suzuki workers stage fresh protests

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Victimized workers from the Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) car assembly plant at Manesar in the northern Indian state of Haryana are continuing to protest their arbitrary dismissal and the frame-up charges laid by the police, at the instigation of the company and the Congress Party state government, against more than 200 workers.

The workers are also demanding an impartial inquiry into the death of the company's human resources manager, Awanish Kumar Dev, who was killed during a management-instigated dispute at the factory last July 18. MSI management and the state government seized on Dev's death to step up their efforts to stamp out the MSI workers' years-long struggle against slave-labour conditions at the Manesar plant.

The workers insist that the manager was killed by other sections of the MSI management, since he was sympathetic to the workers and even helped them register their union, the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), in February 2012. The workers fought for months to form the MSWU after rebelling against a company-stooge union. They insist that given Dev's sympathy towards them, they had no reason to want any injury to befall him.

The workers are also demanding the reinstatement of 546 permanent and 2,000 contract workers whom MSI purged from its workforce last August and September and the immediate release of 147 workers, including the entire leadership of the MSWU, who have been languishing in jail since late July. Many, if not all, the jailed workers have been abused and tortured by the police in order to extract confessions from them to grave crimes including Dev's murder. [See India: Jailed Maruti Suzuki workers subjected to torture].

Since the entire elected leadership of the MSWU has been thrown behind bars, a group of workers have established a provisional leadership of the MSWU to continue their fight against the combined onslaught of the MSI management and the state. So hostile has been the state towards the workers that it arrested one of the provisional leaders out of the blue at the end of January.

The latest agitation began on March 24 with workers holding protests in front of the house of the state industry minister, Randeep Singh Surjewala. Thousands of villagers, other workers and family members of the MSI workers lent their support.

Four days later the workers decided to intensify their agitations by pitching a tent in the vicinity of the house with four of the sacked workers launching a hunger strike. The workers demanded a meeting with the industry minister.

True to form, two days later on March 30 the Congress Party state government sent in a huge contingent of police supposedly to protect the industry minister from these peaceful and unarmed workers who were braving the wind and rain in an open tent. However the workers refused to be intimidated and continued with their agitation, while warning that they might have to consider other means to compel the industry minister to meet with them.

Finally Industry Minister Singh and Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda agreed to meet with the MSWU's provisional leadership April 3 so as to forestall the agitation from gathering further steam.

After the meeting, which was held in the state capital Chandigarh, the provisional leadership of the MSWU issued the following statement:

The CM (Chief Minister) and the Industries Minister gave word that the Addl. Labour Commissioner, Gurgaon will be informed that the workers who do not have cases in their name be taken back on duty. The jailed workers on whom the criminal case is going on as *State of Haryana v Jiya Lal & Others* will not be dealt with vengeance, they promised.

Based upon these completely worthless promises the hunger strike was called off, although the MSWU provisional committee concedes that throughout their struggle the government has effectively functioned as a tool of MSI management.

This has included upholding the authority of the stooge union, supporting the company's demands that workers sign a good-conduct bond, insinuating that the workers have acted at the behest of Naxalites (or in Indian government

parlance terrorists), and mobilizing police en masse to thwart or break worker job action.

During an earlier meeting with the provisional leadership of the MSWU, Hooda called the workers criminals. Surjewala, for his part, has said that his only responsibility as the state's industry minister is to acquire land for private corporations.

The Haryana government, acting in consort with the Congress Party-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) at the Centre, is determined to crush the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle so as to demonstrate to foreign and domestic big business that it will brook no challenge to the sweatshop conditions that are the rule in India's globally-connected auto and other industries.

An appeal issued from jail by the MSWU leadership has brought to light the desperate conditions facing them and the other jailed workers, and the harassment and intimidation to which their families have been subjected by MSI management and government authorities.

It states: Many of our fellow workers are without parents or guardians, and have been shouldering the entire burden of the household. Many workers' wives were pregnant when we were put behind bars. And even when the time of their delivery came, the workers were not granted bail, or even parole custody.

This desperate appeal added: We are under severe psychological stress inside the jail. Many of us are suffering from diseases like tuberculosis, piles, mental imbalance and several other diseases.

The main political responsibility for the suffering and predicament of the MSI workers falls squarely upon the shoulders of the main union federations that are functioning in Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt. They have systematically isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers since they rebelled against the stooge union. This includes the CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions), which is affiliated with the Stalinist CPM (Communist Party of India, Marxist), and the AITUC (All India Trades Union Congress) the trade union arm of the other Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India or CPI. The AITUC and CITU have advised the MSI workers to put their faith in toothless appeals to the very Congress Party state government that is colluding with the company management.

Other ostensible leftwing organizations that have joined the MSI workers protests, including Maoist groups and the New Trade Union Initiative, advance a similar perspective. They are urging the workers to appeal to the CITU and AITUC to organize protests aimed at pressuring the government and other big business politicians to intervene on their behalf.

Influenced by such thinking, the MSWU has focused on

protests to the government, not fighting to mobilize the class-power of the working class. The MSWU leaders reportedly decided to make the Industry Minister the focus of their most recent protest because he is manoeuvring to oust Hooda as Chief Minister and is said to be close to Congress President Sonia Gandhi. The true head of India's national government, Gandhi postures as a friend of the poor, while the UPA ruthlessly pursues pro-big business policies.

This protest orientation has led the MSWU workers, notwithstanding their militancy and the broad sympathy for them in the working class and poor villagers of Haryana, into an impasse. This is reflected in the statement issued by the jailed workers. It declares:

We've taken our appeal for justice from the State Industries minister to the Chief Minister, but the government has bent over backwards in trying to take side with the company management and owners rather than listen to us workers.

It continues: We appeal to the government for the last time, that before we are forced into a situation of committing suicide or killing others, we are given justice which is due to us.

The Maruti Suzuki workers should reject this perspective, which is the outcome of the isolation of their struggle by the Stalinists and all the trade union apparatuses.

They should make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and across India against low-wages, contract-labour and the pro-big business governments that uphold them. To do so will require building new organizations of struggle independent of, and in opposition, to the existing pro-capitalist trade unions and their respective parties, not least the Stalinist CPI and CPM.



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