

Police attack locked-out Toyota workers in India

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Last Sunday, April 6, state police violently attacked dozens of Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) workers engaged in a hunger strike against the company's three-week lockout of 4,200 workers in India. The assault took place in Bidadi, about 50 km from Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), the capital of the southern state of Karnataka, where the Japanese transnational operates two assembly plants.

So violent was the police attack that two of the workers, already weak from hunger, were severely injured and hospitalised. According to witnesses interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the police attack was completely unprovoked.

The WSWs spoke to Shanmuga Gowda, vice president of the Toyota Kirloskar Motors Workers' Union (TKMWU), who has been hospitalised due to the effects of the hunger strike the union initiated on April 2.

"Early Sunday morning at around 1 a.m., nearly 40 policemen suddenly appeared at our makeshift camp," he said. "Led by two police officers, they said they came to take us to the hospital since we were on hunger-strike for over four days. But they brought our company bus instead of doctors and ambulances! We were immediately suspicious. So, we refused to go. The police were adamant and insisted we better come along."

Gowda continued, "The police then forcibly tried to shove workers into the company bus using such violence that two workers fell to the ground. They pounced on the workers, beating them and stomping on them with their boots. The two had to be hospitalised along with seven others who were suffering from the effects of hunger strike."

Shanmuga continued, "By this time, some of the workers used their mobile phones to call our colleagues

living in nearby areas. They also called the media. Within half an hour, more than 1,000 workers arrived. It was then that the police abandoned their attempt to force us onto the bus and beat a hasty retreat."

Toyota locked out its entire Indian workforce on March 16 after rejecting union demands for a meager wage increase of 4,000 rupees, or US\$66, a month. Management insisted it would not budge from its "final offer" of Rs. 3050 (US\$51) (see: "Toyota locks out auto workers in India").

As the lockout entered the second week, management also demanded that workers sign a "good conduct bond," pledging they would not engage in any slowdowns, strikes or other job actions. The workers refused, knowing full well this was another attempt to intimidate them and create the pretext for future victimisations and firings.

Under these conditions, 10 leaders of the TKMWU began a hunger strike on Wednesday, April 2. About 20 workers have joined the protest at a makeshift tent near the plant.

Though not formally affiliated with any big Indian trade union federations, the TKMWU has no independent perspective and is promoting the same dead-end politics as the major union federations. The union has appealed to the Congress Party state government and other corrupt political parties, which are totally committed to maintain India as a cheap labour haven to attract global corporations.

The Congress Party-led government in the northern Indian state of Haryana has brutally suppressed the long struggle by Maruti Suzuki workers against sweatshop conditions. One hundred and forty-nine workers remain incarcerated after being framed up, tortured and jailed on a bogus charge that they murdered a manager during a clash provoked by management (see: "India: Protest

denounces frame-up of Maruti Suzuki auto workers”).

According to the union, management is attempting to sustain production with 2,500 contract workers, apprentices and management, although the factory is only running one shift a day, producing 150 vehicles daily instead of 500 to 700 per day with two shifts. Management has also suspended 30 workers, union president Prasana told the WSWs.

WSWS reporters were driven by workers on motorcycles to meet with the seven hospitalised hunger strikers. They also met with two other injured workers who were forced to go to another medical facility because the first hospital refused them treatment after learning police were involved in their injuries.

Chandra Keerthi, 24, started to work at the plant four years ago. He suffered a broken leg in the police attack. “They [the police] have no heart. We were very weak, having not eaten for four days. All we were doing was simply sitting on the platform we had erected. The police dragged us violently and threw us on to the ground. If they were truly concerned about our health as they claimed, why did they not bring doctors and ambulances?”

Some of Chandra’s colleagues came to see him and Punith, another injured worker whose neck was badly hurt.

When asked by the WSWs reporters if they have received any support from other trade unions or political parties after the assault, they said, “So far, not a single union or a political party has condemned this unprovoked police attack.”

The WSWs also spoke to a group of Toyota workers at the factory gate who were eager to talk about how they have extended their support and solidarity to their comrades at Maruti Suzuki India.

“We have invited representatives of MSWU and donated Rs. 300,000 to support their struggle. For this, every member of our union donated without hesitation. In addition, workers at Toyota supplier plants have also donated an additional Rs.100,000.”

“In order to strengthen the struggle of workers in this industrial area,” the workers continued, “we have now formed Toyota Ancillary Workers Federation. Workers of 13 supplier companies have joined this federation. Together with them, we held a huge rally on February 28 in Bangalore city.”

They concluded by describing Toyota management’s

provocative behavior. “It was the management that deliberately made attempts to provoke the workers prior to the lockout. Since January, the company began penalising workers for “missed” time. If a worker returned a few minutes late from the bathroom, he would be fined.

“There was no salary increase last year. Normally, we used to get annual pay increments. It also seems that in addition to our wage demand, our demands for safety improvements have also upset management. We have raised numerous safety concerns for the past seven to eight years, but management has been totally indifferent and extremely hostile. As a result, many workers have been injured on the production line.”

The violent repression of auto workers poses the need for an independent political strategy for Indian workers. Toyota is carrying out a worldwide attack on workers, including its planned shut down of all auto production in Australia. This is part of an international restructuring by the global auto giants, which is seeing savage wage cuts in North America, plant closings and mass retrenchments in Europe, and brutal exploitation in China and India.

Auto workers in India must break free from the nationalist and pro-capitalist programme of the Stalinist-influenced trade unions, which tie workers to the Congress Party and other political servants of big business. What is needed is a new programme and leadership based on the fight for the international unity of the working class and the fight for socialism, including placing the auto industry and other major corporations under the democratic control of the working class.



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