

Toyota in India intensifies repression against workers

Arun Kumar, W.A. Sunil
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Ever since workers at Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) were ordered by their trade union TKMWU (Toyota Kirloskar Motor Workers Union) to return to work on April 22, plant management has intensified its hostile and repressive measures against the workers. TKM is a Japanese-Indian joint venture situated in Bidadi, 50 kilometres from Bengaluru (Bangalore), the state capital of the South Indian state of Karnataka.

TKM management had imposed an illegal lockout of the workers at the plant beginning March 16 in order to browbeat the workers into abandoning their demand for a meagre annual wage increase, rupees (Rs.) 4000 (\$65) per month for 2014, and safe working conditions. (See “Toyota locks out auto workers in India”)

From the beginning, the TKMWU leadership adopted a strategy of appealing for the intervention of the notoriously pro-business Congress Party state government instead of appealing to other workers in this industrial area for support.

For its part, the Karnataka state government remained indifferent when TKM management arbitrarily locked the gates of its plants despite it being in violation of the country’s industrial disputes act. In the beginning, the state government tried to end the conflict by unleashing the police to crack down on the locked-out workers on April 6. (See “Police attack locked-out Toyota workers in India”)

When this failed, the state government made a tactical shift soon after the national parliamentary poll on April 17. On April 21, it intervened by asking TKM management to lift the lockout without requiring the workers to sign the good conduct agreement in exchange for workers returning to the plant “unconditionally”.

In exchange for the government convincing the plant management to forego its demand for a “good-conduct bond”, which the TKM management had previously insisted was a precondition for reopening the plant, the

Congress Party government ordered the union leadership to restore “normalcy unconditionally” at the plant.

Revealing the narrow-minded perspective typical of the union leadership in India, TKMWU General Secretary Sathish justified the union’s dead-end tactics that led to its capitulation. In comments made to the WSWs, he said: “We think it was a good decision to return to work. After the government prohibited the lockout, we could not continue the strike because it would amount to illegal activity and we don’t want to do anything illegal. We didn’t want to take the law into our own hands.”

This decision to return to work has been unconditional, with the workers having won neither their wage demand nor their demand for safe working conditions. Instead the union leadership has placed the fate of the wage increase and safe working conditions entirely at the mercy of the state labour commissioner and the courts.

From the beginning, the TKMWU leadership worked assiduously to avoid any confrontation with company management, which expects nothing but absolute subservience from the workers. The union leadership also eschewed appealing to the sizable working class population in this industrial area. Instead it appealed to the very state government that initially tried to end the worker agitation through police violence.

As the workers’ anger towards management became palpable after the lockout, the union leaders were compelled to mount a limited struggle. However, without the active mobilization of support from other sections of workers, including contract workers and apprentices at the plant, the struggle became isolated and impotent.

The union also engaged in long and futile negotiations with management for over a year and even reduced its demand for a wage increase from Rs. 8500 (\$142) per month per worker to Rs. 4000 (\$65) per month. Even such a massive retreat by the union was insufficient for the management, which insisted that workers accept its “final

offer” of Rs. 3050 (\$51) per month.

Emboldened by the union’s surrender after the state government intervention, the management has gone on the offensive. Several workers eagerly described the vindictive measures management has taken since the workers returned to work.

One worker said: “In order to prevent workers from gathering together, the management has removed Carom board (a popular game), which workers used to play during their break. And the pictures of gods that workers had hung on the wall for conducting prayers on Fridays were also removed.

“Going to the bathroom even for a pee or to drink water during working hours is now considered ‘missed’ time and penalty is imposed. Hence some workers out of desperation have been forced to pee in the dustbins at workshops. Workers get only 10 minutes for tea breaks and just half an hour for lunch.”

Another added: “Several workers have received an ‘advice letter’ or ‘incident report’ for using mobile phones or for having spent too much time in the toilet. Now workers will have to be present at the workshop 20 minutes earlier than the starting time. This 20-minute requirement was arbitrarily imposed on the workers after the ending of the lockout. We are now picked up by company buses 20 to 25 minutes early to arrive at the plant earlier.”

The requirement for workers to arrive 20 minutes early has had a huge impact: “On April 22 at the Jigani route, the company bus came 25 minutes earlier to pick up second shift workers and left 36 workers stranded. Again on April 25 at Dasarahalli road the same problem occurred and 14 workers were not picked up. The union has not protested against these arbitrary measures.”

The TKWU leadership is trying to make much out of the fact that the workers refused to sign the “good conduct” agreement as management had at first insisted. But the truth of the matter is that the management—having arbitrarily declared a lockout and suspending 30 workers—raised this demand for each individual worker to sign a “good conduct” bond as a calculated move to intimidate and silence the workers.

From the beginning the union leadership tried its best to end the strike as quickly as possible. When the workers became angry over the endless negotiations over the wage increase, the union called for a one-day token strike in February. But when management declared a lockout, the union leadership initially remained passive. It was only after two weeks that the leadership indulged in a hunger

strike beginning April 2, itself a desperate move aimed at pressuring the Congress Party state government to intervene.

As the agitation dragged on and remained isolated, a section of the workers became demoralized and began to return to work, even before the union called off all protests after the government’s intervention.

Hundreds of workers, however, opposed the union decision to return to work unconditionally. The TKMWU leadership refused any discussion of this opposition, fearing that it might spread among workers and thus undercut the union leaders’ plans to end the protest immediately.

To convince the workers to return to work “unconditionally”, the union invited advocate Ananada Ram to speak to the workers, who warned that if they continued their struggle then they risked their strike being declared illegal.

The attacks against Toyota workers in India are an integral part of the global offensive being waged by auto companies against workers around the world. They are attempting to offset the falling rate of profit through ruthless wage-cutting and plant closures in countries such as Australia, while moving plants to cheap-labour havens.

Other auto companies in India are also desperately trying to suppress struggles by Indian workers against brutal labour conditions, seeking the help of governments, the police and the courts. One such example is the brutal repression of 147 Maruti-Suzuki autoworkers who are being framed up for the murder of a plant manager who was killed in July 2012. (See “India: Frame-up trial of Maruti Suzuki auto workers continues”)

This attack will only intensify in the wake of the just concluded parliamentary elections. There is an urgent need for Toyota workers to adopt a perspective unifying their fight with that of other workers, both in India and internationally, to wage an uncompromising struggle against sweatshop conditions and contract labour, and ultimately against the capitalist system that is the root cause of human misery.



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