

Jailed Maruti Suzuki workers in India continue to be denied bail

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One hundred forty seven workers from the Maruti Suzuki plant in the north India state of Haryana continue to languish in prison nearly two years after being framed-up for opposing sweatshop conditions in the factory. Their appeal for bail to the Indian Supreme Court has faced endless legal obstacles.

The 147 workers were thrown in jail based on false charges that they collectively murdered a plant manager during a management-instigated altercation with workers two years ago. Human Resource Manager Awinesh Dev died in a fire at the factory, the origin of which has not yet been determined.

The trial they are facing is a mockery of justice. The state police are working hand-in-hand with management to identify and victimize the most militant workers. Police used torture to extract confessions from workers who long insisted they had nothing to do with Dev's death. (See India: Jailed Maruti Suzuki workers subjected to torture). If convicted of the long-list of criminal charges being brought by the state, the workers could be condemned to prison for decades.

The workers have pointed out that far from being an enemy of the workers Dev was sympathetic to their struggle. He had reportedly aided workers in forming the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) after a bitter struggle against the company-imposed stooge union at the plant.

The Congress Party-ruled state government and judiciary is determined to maintain India as a source of cheap and brutally exploited labor and is using the case to assure foreign-owned corporations that they can continue to make high profits without resistance by the working class.

In rejecting the workers' first bail application in May 2013, the state high court judge declared that "foreign investors are likely not to invest money in India out of

fear of labor unrest." Far from being an aberration, the judge's statement captured the anti-working class and pro-investor outlook of the entire Indian judiciary. (See: India's "judiciary acts on the agenda of the capitalists")

Following the bail denial lawyers for the framed-up workers filed an appeal with the Supreme Court in July 2013. Instead of moving quickly given the oppressive conditions these young workers have faced, the Supreme Court judges have continuously dragged their feet. Before deciding on the bail application the Supreme Court sought the input of the special Haryana state prosecutor who is spearheading the vendetta.

The prosecutor insisted no decision should be made until he could present testimony from supposed eyewitnesses to the high court. The Supreme Court concurred resulting in an endless parade of witnesses that have delayed any decision for nearly a year.

Rajendra Pathak, one of the leading attorneys for the Maruti Suzuki workers, recently spoke to the WSWS about the legal maze his clients are trapped in. "Last February 17 when our counsel appeared in the Supreme Court, in relation to bail application, the special Haryana state prosecutor Mr. Dulsi said unless he examined all of the 23 witnesses the workers could not argue for bail.

"So far about 40 witnesses including doctors and two state labor officers have given testimony in the Supreme Court. Of the 17-18 witnesses who were 'eyewitnesses' to the main crime I can very well say none of them were able to prove who was murdered, how he was murdered, who set the fire that killed Dev and what the source of the fire was.

"There was only one person, Prasad, a senior plant manager, who claimed he saw Jialal [one of the 147 accused workers] set the fire and that he could easily

recognize him if he saw him. I then asked him to point out Jialal and he spent about 35 minutes staring repeatedly at the jailed workers. Even then he could not identify Jialal. I had to point out to the judge that Prasad couldn't take all day to identify a person he claimed to have witnessed setting the fatal fire."

The ongoing repression of the workers has a three-year history. Confronting the resistance of young workers and their demands for wage hikes, the regularizing contract labor and improved working conditions, MSI management implemented a well-planned agenda. This included a one-month lockout to allow management to purge the most militant workers by firing 546 permanent workers and over 1,800 contract workers.

After the death of the manager two years ago, the police, based on a list supplied by plant management, charged over 200 workers with "unlawful assembly" and "conspiracy to kill" the manager. The entire leadership of the newly formed MSWU was incarcerated and 147 workers were subjected to sustained torture in the presence of senior company executives at the police station.

Pathak noted the precedent setting character of the bail rejection by the state court. "The denial of bail for 147 workers has ominous implications. The entire leadership of the MSWU may face draconian punishment ranging from 20 to 30 years. Most of the remaining 135 jailed workers may also face severe punishment."

Only one of the workers Imran Khan—who was seized when he was about to give a press conference in January 2013—has been released on bail after spending close to a year in jail. Iman Khan was a member of the Provisional Working Committee formed to lead the MSWU after the previous elected leadership was swept up in the July-August 2012 police dragnet. One other worker out of the 148 originally arrested was let go on medical grounds.

Last April, workers defied the police and management and voted to seat a new leadership of the MSWU union at plants in Manesar and nearby Gurgaon. Militancy alone, however, cannot break the isolation of the framed-up workers or create the conditions for the mobilization of the working class against the exploitation by the transnational corporations and the repression of the Indian

government.

The Stalinist and other large unions, which are tied to the government and have long played the role of cheap labor contractors, have deliberately isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers while advising the MSWU leaders to put their faith in the same state government and courts, which are oppressing the workers.

As the WSWs has explained previously, Maruti Suzuki workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters not only in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt but throughout India and internationally. Such a struggle must be part of the fight to develop a politically independent movement of the working class based upon the program of international socialism.



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