

Striking Bosch workers in India defy state government ban

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Striking Bosch workers at the Adugodi plant in Bangalore, southern India, are continuing a five-week strike for higher wages and better conditions, defying the outlawing of their strike by the Karnataka state government.

They are demanding a wage rise of at least 20 percent, the refund of wage cuts imposed on workers for earlier strikes, an end to harassment and the reinstatement of victimised workers. They are also fighting for permanency for temporary workers with more than 240 days' service, a halt to a Valid Time (VT) study, which aims to increase production targets, and the reversal of health scheme cuts.

In a blatant bid to break the strike on behalf of Bosch, the Congress party state government banned it on October 10, invoking the 1947 Industrial Disputes Act. The company immediately demanded that workers end the strike, branding it "illegal." As a punitive measure, the company announced an eight-hour pay cut for every hour of striking.

On October 14, Karnataka police arrested around 150 strikers when a thousand gathered in front of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's residence to protest the government's ban. They were later released on bail.

German-based Bosch is one of the biggest automobile spare-parts manufacturers in India. It has another plant in Bangalore—at Nagnathpura, on the state capital's outskirts—one at Nasik in Maharashtra, western India and one at Jaipur in Rajasthan, northern India. Bosch India, a major supplier to companies like Toyota and Maruti Suzuki, recorded a net profit of 8.85 billion rupees (\$US308 million) in 2013 and 6.33 billion rupees in first two quarters of this year.

Bosch's Adugodi plant has 2,300 permanent workers, 370 temporary workers and 1,000 contract workers. On average, permanent workers are paid just 40,000 rupees

(\$649.3) a month. New entrant workers and temporary workers are paid about half that. Some young workers, employed as "job trainees," get only 13,000 rupees per month, can be forced to work on all three shifts, and can be fired at any moment.

The company maintains this multi-tier workforce to divide workers and extract higher profits. But permanent, temporary and contract workers have joined the strike, cutting across the management's attempt to split them.

Workers have been denied a salary increment since it was due in January 2013. They rejected a management offer of a 5,500-rupee monthly rise, which does not cover the rising cost of living, and demanded an increase of 8,500 rupees.

When the WSWs interviewed strikers, one explained that the VT study aims to increase production targets to unreachable levels and thus abolish current incentives paid to workers. The management even removed seating arrangements for production workers, forcing them to stand, compromising their health.

Another striker denounced new limits imposed by the management on the medical reimbursement scheme. "Every worker pays a monthly premium of 909 rupees for the medical reimbursement," he explained. "Now the compensation for major illness is limited at 150,000 rupees and compensation for serious illnesses like cancer is limited at 500,000 rupees."

While the Bosch strikers are determined to fight, their union, the Mico Employees Association (MEA), only reluctantly called the strike in the face of the mounting anger of workers. The union leaders have led workers on several marches to make appeals to the same government that has banned their strike.

In response to the October 14 arrests of strikers, MEA president Prasanna Kumar said: "We went there to

peacefully make our submissions to the chief minister and make him understand that the government's decision is in favour of management." Even after the ban, the union is trying to promote illusions that the government can be convinced to support the strikers.

The MEA is working to isolate the strikers. It has not called on workers at the nearby Nagnathpura plant to join the strike, let alone other Bosch workers. It has made no appeal to workers in other industries. This flows from the politics of the MEA leaders.

President Kumar is associated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated to Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. The general secretary, Amarjeet Bhatia, who claims to be "independent," is affiliated to the Industry All Global Union (IAGU). Other office bearers are associated with the Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the union wing of Congress, which holds office in Karnataka and led the previous national government for 10 years.

The CITU and CPM have a long record of politically subordinating the working class to the capitalist parties, from Congress to various regional and caste-based parties. CPM is committed to defending the interests of local and foreign investors against workers and rural toilers, as was seen in West Bengal, where it led the Left Front government in West Bengal for 34 years until 2011.

Congress, the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie, initiated the pro-investor economic agenda in 1991, with devastating consequences for working people, and ruthlessly pursued those policies in the office from 1991 to 1996 and from 2004 to last May.

As for the IAGU, like all international trade unions, it functions on behalf of major corporations to suppress industrial action. In an October 5 letter to the IAGU, MEA general secretary Bhatia said he had urged Bosch "to urgently conduct an audit at Bosch Aduodi plant in connection with human rights violations, unfair labour practices, un-ergonomic work practices, inhuman working environment, compression work culture and other malpractices." Bhatia asked an opportunity for the MEA to meet with a member of Bosch's board.

Far from there being any differences between Bosch's Indian branch and its parent company in Germany, the appalling working conditions in Aduodi plant are driven directly by the profit interests of the

German-based company.



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