

The Factory: Documentary brings Indian auto workers' struggle to an international audience

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The Factory, a 132-minute documentary from filmmaker Rahul Roy, sheds welcome light on the brutal conditions facing workers in India's rapidly expanding, globally integrated auto industry and their growing and increasingly explosive resistance.

The "factory" in question is the car assembly plant operated by Maruti Suzuki India (MSI), a subsidiary of the Japanese automaker Suzuki, in Manesar, Haryana in northern India, 30 miles from New Delhi.

Roy documents the protracted struggle that the Manesar MSI workers mounted against India's largest automaker and a company-stooge union. This struggle brought them into headlong conflict with the police, courts and Haryana's Congress Party state government. The film's core is the exposure of the collusion of the company, state and political establishment in the frame-up of the leaders of the new, independent union and scores of other militant workers.

Since the summer of 2012, 148 Manesar MSI workers have been facing trumped-up charges of murder, arson and other major crimes. Until just a few months ago, they were all caught in the jaws of India's notoriously brutal penal system. After years of legal skirmishes, 112 of the workers recently succeeded in obtaining bail. The other 36 workers, including the entire executive of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, continue to languish in jail.

Roy gives voice to these workers and their families. In doing so, he provides a sensitive portrait of an important struggle of the Indian working class and a searing indictment of the savage exploitation and authoritarian structures that are propelling Indian capitalism's much-vaunted "rise".

The Factory is not without limitations. Little is said about the role of the Stalinist-led labour federations, the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) and the Confederation of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which wield considerable influence in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, and about the parliamentary parties with which they are affiliated, respectively the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). The significant implications of this omission will be addressed toward the end of this review.

Nonetheless, *The Factory* is a compelling and important film.

The film focuses on the year between July 18, 2013 and July 18, 2014—that is, between the first and second anniversaries of the factory-floor altercation that served as the pretext for the frame-up of the 148, as well as the purging of 2,500 other workers, most of them contract employees.

Roy also includes footage of the struggles of the Maruti Suzuki workers in past years as well as the history of "the factory" itself. As early as 2010, a state authority that registers trade unions tips off the MSI management that workers are seeking to establish a new organization in opposition to the company union. The new body, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union, leads a series of explosive strikes, but collapses after

management buys out its leaders in November 2011. The workers persevere and in early 2012 form a third organisation, the MSWU.

It is within the context of this continuing worker defiance that company goons instigated an altercation with the workers on the floor of the Manesar plant on July 18, 2012. It ended with the factory ablaze and a manager dead, the only manager whom the workers considered sympathetic to them. (Over the objections of his superiors, he had helped them apply to the state Labour Department for recognition of the MSWU.)

Roy's *The Factory* shows how management, the police, and state government seized on these events to try to break resistance to the company's sweatshop regime. Pro-company news footage, with images of the fire and damage to the factory running in the background, show a minister of the Haryana Congress Party state government vowing to charge everyone involved in the unrest with "arson, assault as well as attempt to murder".

With the entire leadership and many of the most militant members of the MSWU jailed, the Manesar workers gather to elect an MSWU Provisional Committee to lead the struggle to get their comrades released and win reinstatement of the 2500 workers that MSI has purged. It is this phase of the struggle *The Factory* expands upon.

The film begins with a victimized MSI worker, a member of the Provisional Committee, leading a protest march, briefly stopping to make appeals to those gathered. "150 of our comrades have been in jail since 18 July, 2012", he says, and "2,500 workers have been dismissed from their jobs". Appeals to the government and the Haryana chief minister to get their comrades released on bail are curtly rebuffed.

The documentary exposes how the judiciary worked with the government and the company to keep the workers, who have committed no crime, in jail for years. "We're not being prosecuted, we're being persecuted", a defence lawyer declares. "A multinational company is involved in it. The state is out and out for the multinational company".

The crude character of the frame-up is exposed when a defence lawyer shows that the prosecution's four ostensible "eye-witnesses" to the crime saw it in "alphabetical order"! The first of them allegedly saw those with names beginning with the letter A to G committing arson in one section of the factory, the second saw those whose names starting with H to P and so on.

The Congress Party state government's mobilization of the police to intimidate the workers is graphically captured. A police officer preparing to confront a worker rally boasts that "a full battalion" is on duty in Manesar to protect the factories and that the police are giving "priority to industrial peace". The camera then moves to a magistrate who attempts to disperse the workers. "You don't have permission to march". When the workers protest that they have the right to protest, the magistrate angrily replies, "You have democratic rights if the situation permits".

Roy's *The Factory* also exposes the brutal work regime inside the plant through a white board presentation made by a former worker with which footage from monitoring cameras at the plant is interspersed. A car rolls off the Manesar assembly line every 50 seconds.

Workers are only allowed a seven-minute break in the morning, 30 minutes for lunch and another seven minutes for tea. For some, the walk to and from the canteen could take up to 20 minutes. Wages at the factory amount to looting. Monthly, a worker is paid 8,000 rupees (\$122) fixed salary and 8,000 rupees variable salary. A single absence results in a 25 percent reduction of the latter, two days 50 percent. Beyond three days the entire 8,000 rupees is forfeited.

Former workers speak of the degrading and humiliating punishments administered to them. One worker was made to "hold his ears like a school child" for committing an error at work, another to "stand aside for 8 hours" for everyone to see.

The Factory includes a number of moving scenes capturing the lives of those targeted by the corporate-government vendetta. The jailed workers are shown being transported inside a truck like packed animals to court appearances, while they and their relatives gathered outside try to get a glimpse of one another.

A young wife speaks of her jailed husband. "In our first meeting, he told me that he had nothing", she says, adding, "He was a perfect husband". She quickly corrects herself, "Not 'was,' he 'is'". She is working two jobs as she now has to support her mother-in-law's cancer treatments. "I'll keep fighting for him", she says.

Another young wife recounts how her toddler daughter doesn't know "what a papa is". The young woman is beginning her daylong journey to visit her jailed husband. He'll be brought into court a day later, which happens to be their wedding anniversary. A rare cheerful expression passes across her face. "Whatever the circumstances, I'll never leave him", she says.

Roy seeks to dispel any illusion in an "independent judiciary" that stands for justice. He effectively exposes the corporate-government conspiracy against the Maruti Suzuki workers. On this basis, *The Factory* repeatedly returns to the theme of the need for a united workers' struggle. However, it is here that *The Factory* is most limited.

In one scene *The Factory* shows the leader of the MSWU Provisional Committee, which in a remarkable show of militancy led the struggle when the entire MSWU leadership was put in jail, congratulating the new union executive that has been elected in place of those still in jail. Despite the fact that the MSWU has not won any of its basic demands, he preaches collaboration with factory management. Subsequent scenes show how the new MSWU executive is reluctant to mount a fresh campaign to secure the release of their old comrades, despite the appeals of their relatives, fearing a confrontation with management. The crucial issues arising here are not explored.

In a discussion following the film's showing in Cambridge, Massachusetts in late September, Roy described what he called the "very difficult situation" confronting the Maruti Suzuki workers. "Their backs are to the wall", he said. "What can they do?"

Unquestionably, the Manesar workers do face a difficult situation. Arrayed against them are powerful forces, Indian big business, the state and political establishment, who are determined to make them an example so as to intimidate workers throughout the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and beyond.

But the MSI workers also have powerful allies in workers across India and around the world, workers, who like them, are confronted with transnational corporations that collude with the state to drive down wages and working conditions.

To examine why the working class was not mobilized in defence of the victimized Maruti Suzuki workers requires probing the limits of militant trade unionism, and above all, the politics of the Stalinist union

plunderations and parliamentary parties.

The latter isolated the militant struggle of the Manesar workers when it first erupted in 2011, suppressing solidarity strikes by other workers in Gurgaon-Manesar and prevailing on the fledgling union leadership to temper its demands. Then, when the company and state launched their vendetta against the Manesar workers in 2012, the Stalinists sat on their hands, organising no significant action in the workers' defence and urging them to put their faith in appeals to the Congress government, the Haryana Labour Department and the courts.

It is noteworthy that Rajendra Pathak, one of the defence lawyers who appears in *The Factory*, gave an interview to the *World Socialist Web Site* in January 2014, in which he said that he had come to regret his membership in the CPM. "The CPM is not offering anything to Maruti Suzuki workers", said Pathak, "and not doing practically anything to defend them".

Roy's failure to probe these questions is not a personal failing. For decades, "left" politics in India, including intellectual and cultural circles, have been dominated by the Stalinists, who have falsely claimed to be the continuators of the 1917 October Revolution while functioning as an integral part of the bourgeois establishment and palming off as Marxism a nationalist-reformist politics. The CPI and CPM long worked to confine the working class to trade union struggles, while politically subordinating it to the Congress and other bourgeois parties.

Roy is to be commended for bringing to screen the courageous struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers. He clearly has been personally moved and intellectually excited by the workers' defiance, solidarity, and self-sacrifice.

But for Roy and others Indian filmmakers who seek to depict, whether in fictional works or documentaries, the struggles and travails of the working class a pivotal challenge will be to confront the political legacy of Stalinism. This in turn requires an engagement with the history of the international working class and socialist movement in the 20th century, above all the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist deformation of Marxism.

That said, *The Factory* is an engaging work—one that deserves the widest possible audience in India and internationally.

The trailer for *The Factory* can be viewed on Youtube.



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