India: Tata Nano auto workers strike over suspensions

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Over 400 workers at Tata Motors' Nano plant in Sanand, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, in the western Indian state of Gujarat have been on strike since Monday, demanding the reinstatement of 28 workers suspended by the management. Striking workers are continuing to protest outside the factory.

Significantly, there is no trade union at the site, so workers formed their own seven-member committee to conduct the strike. A government labour official who attempted to intervene to shut down the walkout said the workers refused to meet her. "Now the department has started the process of prohibiting the strike and declaring it illegal," M.S. Patel, assistant commissioner of the Labour Department, told the media yesterday.

The dispute began two months ago, when Tata Motors suspended two workers on alleged disciplinary grounds. One worker was accused of "abusing" his supervisor, while the other's "offence" was walking into another department. Workers responded by going on an immediate strike to oppose this management witch-hunt.

In order to end that industrial action, government labour department officials immediately intervened to negotiate a compromise. As a result, the company said it would conduct an inquiry into the accusations against the two workers within a month and submit a report. On that "promise," workers called off the strike.

However, the management's failure to keep its promise after two months led workers to strike on Monday night, demanding the immediate reversal of the suspension of the two workers. The company went onto the offensive by suspending 26 more workers, accusing of them "scratching and damaging" some 50 vehicles in the plant. Workers then demanded the reinstatement of all 28 workers.

Determined to intimidate any opposition among workers, the company insists that no suspended worker will be taken back without an inquiry. In an attempt to criminalise workers, the management branded the strike "illegal" and barred all workers from speaking to the media. Police were deployed at the plant on Tuesday to terrorise workers. In a statement, Tata Motors claimed there had been "continued agitations for further monetary increases as well as protests against disciplinary actions against those instigating the workmen, resulting in serious threat to company personnel as well as losses due to tampering."

Tata Motors originally planned to build the Nano plant at Singur in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. However, farmers in Singur mounted continuous protests against then Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM)-led state government's forced land acquisitions to clear a site for the plant. That forced Tata Motors in 2008 to shift the proposed complex to Gujarat, where then Chief Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) state government assured companies of the provision of land and other facilities, "free" from workers' opposition.

Given this background, the eruption of the flash strike at the Nano plant is particularly significant, because Modi, now the prime minister, has promoted Gujarat as a "model" for India as a whole. Under Modi's rule, Gujarat was hailed as a "prosperous" and "high growth" state. The Indian ruling elite backed Modi's elevation as prime minister, hoping that he would repeat his "success" in Gujarat at the national level.

Modi's record in Gujarat was based on wooing local and foreign investors, providing them cheap land, other infrastructure and "trouble-free" cheap labour, through autocratic and draconian methods. He facilitated the operations of big business at the expense of the vast

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majority of the state's population, that is, the working people and rural toilers.

Elected as prime minister nearly two years ago, Modi promised to bring jobs and development to India, but instead the economy has been battered by the global slump. India's exports have fallen for 14 months in a row, industrial production is stagnant—the Nano plant itself is running at only 10 percent capacity—and tens of millions of workers are unemployed or underemployed.

The Nano workers' strike is a sign of the growing social unrest fuelled by the deteriorating living and working conditions of workers in Gujarat and throughout India. This is a country where 70 percent of the population has been forced to live on less than $US2 a day.

Over 200,000 state government workers in Tamil Nadu struck work for 10 days from February 10, demanding the abolition of a contributory pension system, higher wages and the filling of vacancies in the government sector.

The current agitation by Jats, a sub-caste based in northern state of Haryana, demanding inclusion in the central government's reservation system, i.e. a guaranteed quota of public sector jobs and university places, is another indication of the intensifying discontent. However, their reservation demand is politically bankrupt and reactionary, serving to divide the working class along caste lines, and reflecting the betrayal by trade unions of a series of workers' struggles.

There have been major strikes in the auto industry, as well as other sectors, during recent years. Opposition to the widespread use of contract labour, as a brutal form of exploitation and a lever to push down conditions for all workers, has been a key issue in most of these struggles.

Workers at Maruti Suzuki auto assembly plant at Manesar, Gurgaon, in the northern Indian state of Haryana, engaged in series of strikes and plant occupations in 2011 against slave labour conditions and the contract labour system. In March 2014, Toyota's two plants at Bidadi in Bangalore were shut down for 36 days by a strike over higher wages.

However, India's two Stalinist parties, the CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), and their affiliated trade unions have again and again isolated and sold out these struggles. Politically, these parties have joined or propped up a succession of national governments that have pursued pro-market agendas. In the states where they have formed governments themselves, as in West Bengal and Kerala, they have imposed "pro-investor" policies.

The Nano workers' strike has erupted under conditions where Modi's government is scheduled to release its 2016-17 budget proposals next Monday. It is now under mounting pressure from the international and Indian corporate elite for further concessions for investors and harsher attacks on the living and working conditions of workers and rural toilers. This will fuel the disaffection among broad sections of the population.

The Nano plant in Sanand has become a microcosm of the stalling of the Indian economy, which is triggering aggressive moves by major companies such as Tata Motors to boost their "global competitiveness" by further cutting workers' wages and conditions. Because of fierce cost-cutting throughout the auto industry internationally, the plant reportedly only produced 42,560 cars between January 2014 and December 2015, a fraction of its capacity of 250,000 cars per year.

These are the conditions driving the mass suspension of Nano workers. Tata Motors, backed by the state and central governments, is intent on intimidating and breaking the courageous resistance of the plant's workers to its offensive.

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