

India: Tata workers end strike after being isolated by the unions

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A month-long strike by over 400 workers at Tata Motors' Nano car manufacturing plant at Sanand in the western Indian state of Gujarat has ended after a committee of striking workers struck a deal with the company. Isolated by the national trade union federations, the committee agreed that workers would resume work today without winning their demand for the reinstatement of 28 victimised workers.

According to the agreement, brokered by state government labour officials, 13 out of 26 workers who were sacked on February 22, will be taken back, but only pending the outcome of a company inquiry into its trumped-up charges against them. Another 13 workers will remain suspended, waiting for the outcome of the inquiry, which the management says could take four to six months.

Two other victimised workers, sacked last December, were not reinstated, with the company saying the result of its inquiry into them will be announced within a week. Thus, Tata Motors has kept open its options for the witch-hunt against the workers at Sanand.

The Sanand plant employs 2,200 people—500 regular workers and 1,700 contract workers. The workers complain that their take-home monthly salary, which is approximately 12,000 rupees (\$US179) for regular workers and 9,000 rupees (\$134) for contract workers, is much lower than several other auto plants in the area.

The struggle erupted in December when company sacked two workers on disciplinary grounds. The real reason was to intimidate workers at the plant who were trying to forming a new trade union to fight for wage rises and better working conditions. Confronted with industrial action by plant workers against the sackings, the state labour department moved to broker a settlement. As a result, the company said it would conduct an inquiry into the charges against the pair

within a month and submit a report. On the basis of that “promise,” workers called off the strike.

However, when management reneged on its pledge, workers walked out on February 22, demanding the immediate reinstatement of the two workers. The company went on the offensive by suspending 26 more workers, accusing of them “scratching and damaging” some 50 vehicles in the plant. Workers continued their industrial action, demanding the reinstatement of all 28 workers.

The company immediately declared the strike “illegal.” A week later, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government outlawed the strike, effectively legitimising the company's actions against strikers. Yet the workers refused to be cowed and continued the strike. Tata Motors then brought around 250 workers from its Pune plant in an attempt to further intimidate the striking workers and ensure production of its new model, the Tiago hatchback.

Tata workers faced a joint vendetta by the company and BJP state government, which has unleashed its police force repeatedly to suppress striking workers in order to satisfy the demands of investors.

On March 19, nearly 300 striking Tata workers were detained when they staged a protest rally near the Sanand plant. Justifying the police action, Ahmedabad Rural Deputy Superintendent of Police, P.O. Bhatt told the media that the workers had gathered at a plant gate “without written permission from the magistrate for the event.”

Nearly two dozen trade unions worked to isolate the striking workers, refusing to call any support action by workers affiliated to their unions. These included the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which are affiliated to the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties, the

Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively. Others included the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) and New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI). These unions all played a key role in pushing the Tata workers to end the strike without the company meeting their demands.

NTUI vice president Ashim Roy acted as an adviser to the striking workers, according to *Business Standard*. Appealing to management, he declared: “The Tata Nano plant at Sanand was a role model for good industrial relations in Gujarat. However, if labour rights are not granted to Tata Motors workers then it becomes symbolic of the fact that there are no good industrial relations in Gujarat.”

In fact, Tata located its plant in Gujarat because the state became notorious under its former Chief Minister Narendra Modi, currently India’s prime minister, not only for Hindu communal attacks on Muslims but also for its anti-working class policies. Modi wooed investors by providing them cheap land, other infrastructure and “trouble-free” cheap labour, enforced via police-state methods. He became the darling of big business, which backed his elevation as prime minister to push ahead with pro-investor economic “reforms.”

Roy’s remarks on “good industrial relations” reflect not just the outlook of the NTUI but the corporatist character of all the unions, which are committed to working hand-in-glove with employers to make their operations “internationally competitive” at the expense of workers’ jobs and conditions. So-called “good industrial relations” means subjecting workers to the brutal conditions imposed by companies with the collaboration of the state and national governments.

While isolated by the unions, Tata Motors workers are not alone. The recent period has witnessed struggles by auto workers across the country, involving tens of thousands of workers, as well as struggles by car workers internationally, notably in the United States against sell-out work contracts imposed by the trade unions. New forms of organisation, such as factory committees, completely independent of the trade unions, are needed to fight to unify workers across national lines, guided by an opposed political perspective.

The strategy of the Indian ruling class, aided and abetted by the unions, is to transform Indian workers into a globally-competitive cheap labour force.

Workers need their own strategy to unite with their brothers and sisters across India and internationally against the capitalist profit system and to reorganise society on a socialist basis.



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