

Indian auto workers fight to defend wages and conditions

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Auto workers at Maruti Suzuki, Honda and Tata and auto-parts manufacturers, Bosch, Rico and Pricol, have been involved in a series of bitter strikes across the industry to demand higher pay, permanency for contract workers and decent working conditions.

Thousands of mainly young auto workers have walked out on strike, occupied plants and held protest rallies and marches in defiance of corporate efforts, back by India's state and central governments, to slash jobs, wages and conditions in order to attract global investors.

India's auto manufacturing industry directly employs 7.6 million people with another 12 million in the auto distribution, retail and service sectors. Most of the country's auto manufacturing is located in three regions—the southernmost and largest near Chennai in Tamil Nadu, a northern cluster near New Delhi and the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt in Haryana, and a newly-emerging industrial area in Gujarat.

The overwhelming majority of Indian auto workers are employed on short-term, poverty-level wage contracts, labouring in harsh and highly-exploitative conditions where serious work accidents are commonplace. About 80 percent of Maruti Suzuki employees are on short-term contracts, 75 percent at Ford India and 82 percent at Hyundai.

India's national and state governments have responded to auto workers' industrial action by deepening their collaboration with corporate management and mobilising police to crush the workers' determination to overcome low wages, sweatshop conditions and the systematic victimisation of militant workers.

On Monday this week Hero MotoCorp auto workers in Gurgaon, Haryana held a sit-in protest in the factory's canteen to demand settlement of a three-year work agreement and wage rise outstanding since last August.

Three-year wage agreements have been finalised at almost all of Hero MotoCorp's plants. The workers were demanding wage parity with Honda Motor Company employees—the two companies were previously one entity, Hero Honda. Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India recently

agreed to a 23,300-rupee (\$US348) pay increase over the next three years. Hero MotoCorp management responded to the protest by calling police and breaking up the occupation.

On March 23, over 400 Tata Motors workers from the company's Sanand plant in Gujarat state ended a month-long strike to demand reinstatement of 28 victimised employees. While the strikers defied a joint vendetta by the company and the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led state government, they were forced to end the walk-out after being isolated by the major union federations, in particular those led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

When Tata Motors workers struck on February 22, the company claimed their action was "illegal." One week later, the Gujarat state government followed suit and mobilised scores of police to intimidate and arrest hundreds of strikers and force them back to work. The company moved 250 workers from its Pune plant to maintain production and break the strike.

A week earlier on February 16, hundreds of police and company thugs were used to smash an occupation of workers at the Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India (HMSI) plant in Tapukara in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. The occupation involved about 1,700 workers, who were fighting for their right to establish a union and improve their working conditions at the plant. The company responded to the auto workers' demands with a provocation—an HMSI paint-shop supervisor verbally abused and then physically assaulted an exhausted worker for refusing to do overtime.

The industrial action at Hero MotoCorp, Tata Motors and HMSI is part of a series of increasingly bitter struggles waged over the past six years by Indian workers against the auto companies, whose attacks on workers are being aided and abetted by the Indian state and central governments.

In 2010, police brutally smashed a two-day militant occupation of the Korean-based Hyundai car assembly plant in Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu. Over 280 workers were arrested and jailed. The protesting workers were demanding

reinstatement of 67 sacked employees over their role in a strike for recognition of their union, the Hyundai Motor India Employees Union, the previous year.

In July 2012, thugs organised by Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) management staged a provocation against workers attempting to form a union at the joint venture's Manesar plant in Haryana. Awanish Dev, a plant manager who sympathised with the workers, was killed in the resulting altercation.

The company responded by sacking about 2,000 contract workers and over 540 permanent employees. Hundreds of workers were arrested and framed up for "murdering" Awanish Dev. Determined to assure big business investors that their profits were safe, the Haryana state government—then under Congress Party control and currently led by the BJP—mobilised its police to assist the management witch-hunt and crush workers' opposition.

Almost 147 Maruti-Suzuki auto workers were arrested and held without bail for almost three years. With no evidence of any crime involving workers being established, 112 workers were finally granted bail early last year. Thirty-five workers, including the entire leadership of the then Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, remain incarcerated in jail.

In October 2014, auto-parts workers at Bosch's Aduogodi plant in Bangalore held a five-week strike for a 20 percent pay rise, a refund of wage cuts imposed following previous strikes, reinstatement of victimised workers and permanency for contract employees. The Karnataka state government declared the strike at the German-owned auto-parts maker illegal.

Cheap labour and generous tax concessions for international investors have made India a major hub for global carmakers. According to India's Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, the industry attracted \$US14.32 billion foreign direct investment (FDI) between April 2000 and December 2015. Suzuki, Toyota, Honda, General Motors, Ford, BMW and Mercedes Benz and Hyundai all have manufacturing facilities in India.

The auto industry currently accounts for 7.1 percent of India's Gross Domestic Product with ambitious government plans to encourage more foreign investment. The current international economic downturn, however, has impacted on local auto manufacturing and seen production targets decline in the past 12 months.

A recent study by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) revealed that vehicle production had fallen 1.34 percent in the past year, down to 1.95 million vehicles. SIAM told the media that the auto industry might not be able to meet the Indian government's expected target of a \$US145 billion turnover by 2016, and that it may now require a decade to accomplish that figure.

Indian auto workers have consistently demonstrated their determination to fight low wages, and harsh and highly exploitative conditions, including the widespread use of contract labour and speed ups. When workers have taken action to fight these conditions, India's state governments, who are in competition with each other to attract foreign investment, have deepened their collaboration with the auto company managements and mobilised police to repress the struggling workers.

The chief political problem confronting auto workers and the Indian working class as a whole are the main union federations, the Stalinist CPM-affiliated Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the CPI-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in particular. These organisations have worked systematically to isolate the auto workers and divert them into dead-end legal action and appeals to state governments to intervene on their behalf. In other words, their pleas are directed to the very bodies that have illegalised the strikes and sent police to intimidate and suppress the workers' industrial action.

The demagogic speeches and hollow statements of solidarity from the AITUC, CITU and other key union federations are aimed at covering up for the reactionary political role played by these organisations. This flows inexorably from the pro-capitalist politics of the CPI and CPM, which have collaborated with the class strategy of India's ruling elite to make the country a cheap labour centre and a magnet for foreign capital.

In addition to providing parliamentary backing to all the non-BJP central governments, which have carried out such pro-investor economic reforms and attacks on the working class since 1991, the CPM-led governments in the Indian states of West Bengal and Kerala, in which the CPI has been a coalition partner, have enthusiastically pursued the same big-business economic policies.

The author also recommends:

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

[23 March 2016]

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

[25 November 2015]

Defend auto workers victimised by Maruti Suzuki and Indian authorities

[6 December 2012]



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