

On-the-spot report from Chennai

Death of Renault Nissan worker exposes reality of India's pro-investor policies

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The horrific death of Thiagarajan Mahalingam, a 29-year-old a junior engineer at Renault Nissan's auto plant in the Oragadam Special Economic Zone near Chennai, India, reveals the brutal working conditions in most of the country's factories. A mechanical engineer in the plant's maintenance department, Mahalingam was crushed to death by a hydraulic press January 6 as he was inspecting the machine in the engine assembly section.

Basic safety has been subordinated to the profit needs of foreign and local investors due to changes in labour laws enacted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Modi's weakening of the factory inspection system has resulted in an increase in wholly avoidable industrial accidents that have claimed the lives of young workers like Mahalingam.

Renault Nissan is a leading global auto company and second largest car manufacturer in India. It was formed in the 1999 alliance of France-based Renault and Japan-based Nissan, and employs nearly 450,000 workers globally. Renault Nissan is the leading plug-in electric car manufacturer in the world. The company began its Indian operations in Oragadam in 2010. The city lies 50 km from Chennai, capital city of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The Oragadam plant manufactures 480,000 cars per year and markets them in India and 106 countries around the world. The plant employs more than 10,000 workers including regular, contract and apprentice workers. Confronted with the global slump along with the impact of Modi's socially incendiary demonetisation policies, the company fired 900 workers last month.

The company issued a perfunctory statement on the young worker's death: "The safety and well-being of our employees is always our top priority. We are deeply saddened that Renault-Nissan Automotive India Pvt Ltd employee Thiagarajan Mahalingam died on 6th January in an industrial accident at the plant."

Fearing a backlash from angry workers at the plant soon after the death, the company immediately ordered the workers to leave the premises. The next day, Saturday, was declared a holiday and the plant did not open until Monday morning.

Contract workers at the Renault Nissan plant gate spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about Mahalingam's death. Regular full-time workers are brought in and out by company buses so our reporters were not able to speak with them. Indian companies are increasingly using contract labour who are paid a fraction of the wages regular workers get for the same work. They are also denied limited benefits and other rights regular workers have due to past struggles by industrial workers.

Mareeswaran, 23, a worker from Trigo contract agency, told the WSW. "I am a BE (Bachelor of Engineering) graduate and all those who work with me are also graduates. I get a monthly salary of 12,000 rupees (US\$176). We don't get the concessions given to permanent workers such as canteen and bus transport. For tea and meals we have to pay from our own money. I am not paid according to my educational qualification. Many of my co-workers are from Ariyalur, Trichi and Sivakasi, down south of Tamil Nadu. Since we are all unmarried we stay together in a rental room."

Commenting on the death of the young engineer, he

said, “If this happened to an engineer with technological skill who looks after the maintenance of machines, what would happen to workers who don’t know about technological issues? Since the engineer was management staff, his next of kin may get compensation. But if that happens to a worker, what security is there for him?”

“We do the same work as regular workers but we are paid almost half. Management tries to keep workers divided and even a separate entry and exit path for contract workers has been arranged.”

Insisting on publishing his comments, he said he was “impressed by the WSWs as it is fighting to unite workers internationally.”

Sakthivel, 27, a worker from SS Utility Service, said, “I have been working in this company for a year-and-a-half. We get work mostly 10 months per a year. I come from a village nearby Kancheepuram. The monthly salary of 10,000 rupees (US\$147) I get is not sufficient to maintain a family.”

On the death of Mahalingam he said, “He was going to get married this month. He was at work in the same place I was working when he died. As a maintenance officer he was looking into a sensor problem in a punching machine, a hydraulic machine. He put his head inside under the punching machine to probe the problem of non-functioning sensor. However, while his head was still inside, suddenly the punching machine began to work, crushed his head under it.”

Sivasankaran, 27, a worker from Place Craft contract agency, said, “I have been working for the past four years in this company. There are three contract agencies that supply workers who work along with regular workers inside the plant. For this set of contract workers, the company provides bus transport and canteen facilities. I am paid 10,000 rupees per month. After deductions for ESI [health insurance] and PF [provident fund], I take home a net salary of 8,500 (US\$124.78) rupees a month. We don’t even get work regularly. At the beginning of the year there is no work for two months. On the third month, we have to come to the company gate to see if work is available.”

He said he comes from an agricultural family with a lot of hardships. “I am finding it very difficult to run my family with these low wages and can’t even afford my children’s education.”

For all management’s claims about giving safety “top

priority,” Mahalingam’s death is not the first incident that revealed dangerous conditions in the plant. In 2013 a fire at Renault-Nissan’s logistics company raised serious questions about unsafe conditions. The same is true for other plants operated by global automakers seeking cheap labour and few regulations. A worker recently died in an accident in a Hyundai Motor plant at Irungattukottai Special Economic Zone. This was followed by a serious injury suffered by an apprentice.

In an effort to attract foreign investors, Modi has relaxed what limited safety regulations that remain. In the place of regular visits by government labour inspectors, Modi is pushing a “self-certification scheme,” which will allow factory owners to issue certifications declaring they are upholding safety standards. This type of scheme is already in operation in at least 10 Indian states, including Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Labour inspectors will also lose the discretion over which factories they want to inspect and instead will act based on a computer-generated list.

These measures have already been approved in Lok Sabha, the lower house of national parliament. The Modi government has not yet been able to get it passed in Rajya Sabha, the upper house because of the lack of a majority. However, if the bill becomes law and is implemented, employers will completely disregard basic safety regulations.



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