

India: Framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers sentenced to life imprisonment

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Thirteen Maruti Suzuki autoworkers were sentenced to life in prison by an Indian court on Saturday. Four others have been given five-year prison terms, and 14 more sentenced to three-year jail terms.

The workers are victims of a monstrous frame-up mounted by the automaker, the police and judicial authorities, with the full complicity of India's principal political parties—the Congress Party and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The 13 workers condemned to life in prison include the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). The MSWU was established by workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant in opposition to a stooge union that had connived with the company in their brutal exploitation.

The workers have been framed for a 2012 company-provoked altercation and fire that resulted in the death of a company human resources manager.

“The victim Awanish Kumar Dev was beaten brutally and he could not escape from the fire because of the injuries inflicted by the accused,” claimed prosecutor Lal Singh at a sentencing hearing Friday, at which the prosecution demanded capital punishment for the 13.

Justice R.P. Goyal did not condemn the 13 workers to execution—a penalty the prosecution itself said should be reserved for the “rarest of the rare cases.” But a life sentence in an Indian prison, where living conditions are deplorable and prisoners are routinely beaten and otherwise abused, is tantamount to a slow death.

Many of the workers were previously subjected to torture, including severe leg stretching, electric shocks and water immersion, carried out in an attempt to extract forced confessions.

All 31 workers are the victims of what an MSWU press release has aptly described as “class justice.”

The Indian state and political establishment were determined to impose savage punishments on the Maruti Suzuki workers to intimidate workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and across India and reassure

investors that the Indian elite will ruthlessly enforce sweatshop conditions.

In 2011, the Manesar assembly plant emerged as a centre of militant opposition to low wages, a brutal work regimen and the widespread use of contract and temporary labour—conditions that prevail throughout India's new, globally connected industrial sector.

In defiance of the government-recognized stooge union and against the counsel of the traditional labour federations, the Manesar assembly plant workers mounted a series of walkouts and sit-down strikes in the summer of 2011. Their determined stand galvanized support from workers across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, a huge auto-making and manufacturing centre located in Haryana state, on the outskirts of Delhi, India's capital and largest city.

Little more than a year after the first strike mounted by the MSWU's short-lived predecessor, the MSEU, Maruti Suzuki and the state combined forces and used the July 18, 2012 altercation and fire to launch a vendetta against the most militant workers. While police arrested MSWU leaders and other militants on the basis of company-supplied lists of “suspects,” Maruti Suzuki management, with the explicit backing of the Congress Party-led Haryana state government, purged its workforce. Prior to reopening the plant, which was partially destroyed by the fire, the Japanese-owned automaker dismissed and replaced more than 2,300 permanent and contract workers.

On March 10, more than four-and-a-half years after their arrest, a Gurgaon District court pinned criminal responsibility for the July 18 events on the 31 workers. All 12 members of the MSWU executive and the worker whose abuse by a Maruti Suzuki labour contractor triggered the altercation on the plant floor were found guilty of “culpable homicide” (murder), attempted murder and other offences. The 18 others were convicted on multiple charges, including intentionally causing hurt, rioting and destroying property.

In reaching these verdicts, the court had to wilfully ignore its own finding that there had been collusion between the police and Maruti Suzuki management and fabrication of

evidence.

So transparent was the frame-up, the court had to exonerate 117 other workers in its March 10 judgement, declaring all the charges against them without foundation.

Prosecution witnesses repeatedly failed to identify those against whom they had given evidence.

Moreover, defence lawyers showed that 89 of the workers had been arrested on the basis of names provided police in alphabetically organized allotments by four Maruti Suzuki contractors and ostensible eye-witnesses to the July 18, 2011 events. Thus, all the “rioting workers” that one witness reputedly saw had names with a first letter from A to G. Another only “saw” rioters with names in the G-P range, and so on.

There were another 11 workers against whom there were no witnesses whatsoever.

The 117 exonerated workers spent years in jail, because the prosecution, in flagrant contradiction to standard Indian practice, vehemently opposed their bail applications. Up to their acquittal earlier this month, the prosecution continued to insist that they were all guilty of grave crimes.

The evidence against the 31, including the 13 now condemned to life imprisonment, is not of a qualitatively different calibre. It too is full of inconsistencies, holes and obvious fabrications.

But from the start, what has motivated the company-state vendetta against the Maruti Suzuki workers is base class interests. With the prosecution case in tatters, the court acquitted some of the workers in the hope that it would thereby be able to enhance the legitimacy of, and move forward with, the frame-up against the MSWU leadership.

The pivot of the state’s case is the fire. But the prosecution was not able to provide any direct evidence linking any worker, let alone any of the 13 convicted of murder, to the lighting of the fire. They have never conclusively established where the fire began or how it was lit. Hours after the initial search of the fire site, investigators claimed they had found a match box that was mysteriously unscathed by the flames that had consumed all around it. This match box, in any event, has never been tied to any worker.

Underscoring the unstinting support of the political establishment for Maruti Suzuki, India’s largest automaker, the frame-up of the Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers was begun under Congress Party-led Indian and Haryana state governments, and has seamlessly continued under the BJP-led governments that later replaced them.

There is broad support and sympathy for the victimized and persecuted Maruti Suzuki workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt. On Saturday, just hours after Judge Goyal delivered his punitive sentences, workers in four major Manesar factories, including Maruti Suzuki’s

Powertrain plant and a Suzuki Motorcycle plant, staged a one-hour “tool-down” strike.

Fearing mass worker protests against the frame-up, the Gurgaon District authorities have invoked Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, illegalizing all gatherings of five or more persons until next Saturday, March 25.

On Thursday, during a brief period when Section 144 was not in effect, up to a 100,000 workers in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt boycotted lunch and dinner at over 50 plants in a show of solidarity.

While the Indian state and political establishment have stood four-square behind Maruti Suzuki and the frame-up of the militant Manesar workers, the union federations have systematically isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers.

The Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) have maintained, for the past four-and-a-half years, a criminal near-silence about the state-company vendetta. They have urged the MSWU and the victimized workers to expend their energies appealing to the big business politicians and courts for “justice,” and have vehemently opposed a strategy for their defence based on the mobilization of the industrial strength and independent political power of the working class.

The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers exemplifies the worldwide assault on autoworkers and the working class as a whole. With the support of the big business politicians and the state, the transnational auto companies are imposing sweatshop conditions, and not just in their newly opened plants in India and Mexico, but also in the traditional auto centres of North America and Europe.

Workers across India and around the world should come to the defence of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers, to force their immediate release, the vacating of all guilty verdicts and the reinstatement of all the workers purged in 2012.

The building of an international defence campaign can be a powerful step in developing a united global struggle of autoworkers against the transnationals to secure the jobs and basic rights of all workers.



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