

Support grows for framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India

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Popular anger is growing in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt on the outskirts of Delhi, India's capital city, after a court meted out life sentences to 13 workers who were framed up on murder charges after a July 2012 labor confrontation at the country's largest car assembly plant.

Just hours after the sentences were read out in Gurgaon District Court, 30,000 workers at Maruti Suzuki plants and supplier factories in and around Manesar carried out a one-hour "tool down strike," despite management threats of an eight-day pay cut. The action halted production at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar, scene of the July 2012 confrontation, a second assembly plant in Gurgaon, Maruti Suzuki Powertrain, Suzuki Motorcycle India and two auto parts companies.

The six area unions that called Saturday's strike have announced a March 23 protest rally in Manesar, in defiance of a ban on all gatherings of 5 or more people that authorities have imposed in Gurgaon until March 25, precisely because they fear mass worker opposition to the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

The Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), formed by the Manesar plant workers in a rebellion against a company stooge union, also reports that plans are being made for an April 4 national day of protest.

MSWU President Ram Meher and the union's eleven other executive members are among the 13 condemned to life imprisonment.

Advocate Rajendra Pathak, a defense attorney for some of the framed-up workers, denounced the sentences, telling a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, "The judiciary is comprised of the people who have the mindset of the capitalists. The rich have all the means with them in this capitalist society, the judges too."

Pathak said the workers will appeal their sentences and conviction in the High Court. "There is no evidence on file to substantiate the charges of murder against the 13 convicted workers," said Pathak. "But since the fight is against the capitalist society, I cannot say for sure what the outcome of such a case would be. It could be prolonged for years ... and the 13 will be forced to stay in custody until the final judgment."

Expressing the growing opposition of workers, a worker from

a Maruti Suzuki feeder plant told the *Hindustan Times*, "Today it is Maruti, tomorrow it could be us in jail. We want our comrades to be released, but Maruti has already united workers more than any trade union could."

In addition to Ram Meher, the others facing life imprisonment are Sandeep Dhillon, Ram Bilas, Sarabjeet Singh, Pawan Kumar, Sohan Kumar, Ajmer Singh, Suresh Kumar, Amarjeet, Dhanraj Bambi, Pradeep Gujjar, Yogesh and Jiyalal.

The workers are victims of a ruthless frame-up mounted by the Suzuki Corporation, 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 International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has initiated an international defense campaign to oppose this travesty and demand the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers. An online petition has already been signed by workers and defenders of democratic rights throughout the world.

The pretext for the frame-up was the death of human resource manager Awanish Kumar Dev on July 18, 2012, from asphyxiation during a fire that mysteriously erupted in the midst of a management-provoked altercation on the factory floor. There is absolutely no evidence that any worker, let alone member of the MWSU executive, had anything to do with the death of Dev, who was sympathetic to the workers and had even helped them register the MSWU on March 1, 2012.

The July 18 altercation began when a supervisor, using caste-based slurs, accosted a worker, Jiyalal, on the factory floor. When other workers sprang to his defence, private security guards, already heavily present in the factory, provoked a violent clash with the workers during which the fire broke out, gutting a section of the factory.

Jiyalal was the "prime accused" in the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers and has been condemned, along with the twelve MSWU executive members, to life imprisonment.

In the wake of the July 18 altercation, the government and state apparatus, working in league with the automaker, unleashed a furious campaign of state repression aimed at smashing the MSWU and any resistance from workers. Police

swept through workers' living quarters, beating and arresting hundreds of workers based on lists of "suspects" supplied by Suzuki management. The company then locked down the factory and purged the workforce by firing and replacing 2,300 workers in August 2012.

This witch-hunt took place after more than a year of courageous struggle, during which workers repeatedly mounted walkouts and sit-down strikes, successfully rebelled against a company stooge union and formed the MSWU to fight for their demands. Central to these are abolition of the hated Worker Contract System, which enables Suzuki to hire and fire thousands of low-paid temporary workers before they qualify for full-time positions. At present, "company temps," who are on a seven-month contract and then laid off for five months, are paid 14,000 rupees a month (US \$214)—less than half the salary of permanent workers, who earn Rs 35,000 (US\$536) or more.

The MSWU's interim leadership has issued a statement condemning the frame-up convictions and savage sentences as "anti-worker" and aimed at sowing "fear and terror among industrial workers in the country." It noted that the prosecution's final arguments "talked of the need of restoring 'confidence' of capital, and the prime minister's initiative of inviting global investors for 'Make in India'. The confidence of these foreign and national capitalists depend on one thing: a cheap and compliant labour force, so no unions or any raising of demands."

The multinational auto company, meanwhile, is literally baying for the workers' blood. Vikas Pahwa, counsel for Maruti Suzuki, told the *Indian Express* that the court "has sent a strong signal to labor workers and union members that they cannot take the law in their hands." But the company, he added, will "challenge the judgment in the HC (High Court)" both because of the "inadequacy of the sentence against the convicts" and the court's acquittal of 117 other workers.

The prosecution argued at last Friday's sentencing hearing that all 13 defendants should hang. Instead, the judge gave the workers life sentences—that is, condemned them to a living hell in India's brutal prison system.

Of the 18 other workers convicted in the case on lesser charges, including rioting and causing injury, four were sentenced to five years in prison and the other 14 to three years. After paying fines, the latter group were released due to time already served.

Those who have now been freed—like the 117 workers the court was forced to exonerate in its March 10 judgment—endured lengthy and brutal imprisonment for more than three, and in many cases four, years. A September 2012 investigation by the civil rights group, the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), found that the arrested workers were beaten, subjected to injurious leg-stretching, and submerged in dirty water for long durations.

The government of BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its Congress Party predecessor have received crucial assistance

in their drive to demonstrate to investors that they can stamp out worker resistance and provide them an endless supply of cheap labour from India's major trade union federations. The unions have systematically isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers, while promoting illusions that they can get justice in the capitalist courts and by lobbying big business politicians.

Neither of the Stalinist parliamentary parties has breathed a word about the conviction and sentencing of the Maruti Suzuki workers. Nor has the Communist Party India-allied All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

Yesterday, with anger mounting against the frame-up across India, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation aligned with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, issued a perfunctory statement in which CITU President K. Hemalata expressed "distress and anguish" over the sentences.

The Stalinist parties and their trade union affiliates have downplayed the frame-up and effectively shunned the Maruti Suzuki workers, because they support the ruling elite's efforts to undercut China and make India the low-wage sweatshop of the world.

During the September 2, 2016 national strike, which involved some 150 million workers, the CPM and CPI and their union affiliates never raised the demand for the freeing of the Maruti Suzuki workers. Instead, they called for developing worker "solidarity" by seeking an alliance with the union apparatuses affiliated to the big business Congress Party and BJP.

Like tens of millions of other workers throughout Asia, the Maruti Suzuki workers are largely drawn from impoverished agricultural regions and are now subject to the most brutal exploitation by transnational corporations. They have repeatedly demonstrated a heroic determination to fight in the face of relentless corporate-government violence. Workers throughout the world must come to their aid and demand the immediate release of the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers and the vacating of all convictions.

Sign the "Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!" petition here.



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