

Campaign for release of Maruti Suzuki workers wins support in India and Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
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The International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) campaign to free the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers is winning growing support in India and Sri Lanka. Last Saturday, the Gurgaon district court in the northern Indian state of Haryana sentenced 13 Maruti Suzuki workers to life imprisonment on bogus murder charges and imposed heavy prison terms on 18 other workers who were convicted on lesser charges.

The ICFI has denounced the convictions and sentences as a cruel frame-up by the company, the police and the judiciary with the full complicity of India's main political parties—the ruling Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the Congress Party. The jailed workers are innocent men whose only “crime” was fighting against the slave-labour conditions at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant. The ICFI, which has launched an online petition, has called upon workers and youth throughout the world to fight for their release.

ICFI supporters distributed copies of the ICFI statement “Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers” in Tamil outside several auto plants on the outskirts of Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital, and the Indian Railway-owned Integral Coach Factory (ICF) in the city. Many workers expressed their support for the campaign and agreed to sign the online petition.

Vinukrishnan, a contract worker at Hanon Systems, which supplies auto components to Ford and Hyundai, condemned the life sentences. He said Maruti Suzuki's highly exploitative contract labour system was also being used by employers in Tamil Nadu.

“The contract labour system is affecting workers and day by day the number of permanent workers is being reduced. While global companies are coming to India to exploit the cheap labour, there is another form of exploitation occurring within the country.

“Impoverished workers from northern Indian states,” he continued, “are coming to Tamil Nadu in search of jobs.

They are being employed on low wages—a pittance—and this way the companies are trying to drive down everyone's wages. And these workers from the north are being made to work for 12 to 14 hours per day. We must oppose it.”

Naveen Kumar and **Lakshmanan**, from Ucal Fuel System, expressed their anger over the brutal jailings. “This is to intimidate any worker who dares to challenge the company's anti-worker acts,” they said. “It must be condemned.”

Renugopal, another Ucal Fuel System worker, declared. “This is an act of revenge against Maruti Suzuki workers and should be condemned.”

Suerender, 30, an ICF worker, said: “All the capitalist parties, including the BJP and Congress, are against workers. No other party has launched a campaign for the release of the 13 workers sentenced for life.

“The Japanese-owned company believes that these militant workers must be crushed so they will never attempt to fight against lower wages and the contract system. The Indian government is also sending a message to the investors and it is complicit in this brutal life sentence. The international campaign is very helpful for the victimised Maruti Suzuki workers.”

Madavendran, 40, who works in the ICF Shell section, explained that he had been witch-hunted by employers. “I worked for the Ford Auto company for 10 years and it was similar to the situation at Maruti Suzuki. The company victimised workers who took the initiative to form a union and demanded a wage increase.

“I was victimised for participating in the struggle to form a union. When the union was formed, Ford management harassed me a lot and I was forced to resign. I then joined ICF and have been working here for the past eight years. I don't believe in any unions because they work for management not for the interests of workers.

“I like this international campaign... The Fourth

International is doing work that no other organisation has taken up in defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers. This sort of international campaign is necessary in the current situation.”

Madavendran said he wanted to write his own words about the issue. The following is a translation from Tamil: “Whichever institution—company, political or judiciary—that oppresses workers has never progressed in history. Likewise, the degraded act of the judge is condemnable. Further, the defence of international workers is being called into question. These words are written by me.”

Another ICF worker **Sasikumar**, 42, said: “Company management falsely charged these workers in order to have this sentence delivered against them. As your statement points out, the charges were not substantiated and the innocent workers are being punished by the joint collaboration of the company, government, police and the courts.

“I’m glad about your campaign and that you meet workers in person and ask their opinions about the judgment against the Maruti Suzuki workers. I believe that, like me, workers internationally will definitely support this campaign and I’m confident Maruti Suzuki workers will win.”

One ICF worker who wished to remain anonymous said: “I’ve seen many trade unions, many parties and many governments. I’ve completed 30 years in my job but the unions are not like before. They work hand-in-glove with management, who know very well that these unions are not for defending workers.

“I’m happy that you’re carrying out an international campaign and, although I’d heard about the Maruti workers before, I only learnt about the court verdict through you. They kept these workers in jail for four years, from 2012, denying them the right to bail on false murder charges and for fighting against the contract labour system, trying to form a trade union and for demanding a wage hike.”

Another ICF worker said: “All the political parties and governments are against workers and the people. The punishment given to the Maruti Suzuki workers is to intimidate workers from fighting for any of their basic rights. The judges speak in favour of investors and company management. I’m sure all workers will support this campaign and that this international campaign would prove the class strength of the working class.”

In Sri Lanka, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social

Equality (IYSSE) distributed Sinhala and Tamil leaflets at the Templeburg Industrial Estate in Homagama. Campaigners spoke with dozens of workers from different factories about the Maruti Suzuki frame-up. Around 5,000 people are employed in the estate, which is located 30 kilometres from Colombo.

Saman, a worker from Senaka Builders (Pvt) Ltd, said he had not previously heard about the jailing of the Maruti Suzuki workers. “I’m very angry about this court decision,” he said. “Whatever their country, these victimised workers are our brothers and we should oppose this by every means and fight to get them released.

“We recently saw a brutal attack by the Sri Lankan government against the striking workers in Hambanthota Port. And university students, who are fighting against the cuts in education, often face cruel police attacks. In this developing scenario, we could be a target of the type of frame-ups used against the Maruti Suzuki workers.”

Saman initially voiced some doubts about whether the ICFI campaign would force the Indian government to release the jailed workers. When campaigners pointed out that its purpose was to unite and mobilise the strength of the international working class, he said: “Yes, I think we can achieve that unity through this type of campaign. Such unity would, in itself, be a huge achievement. As you point out, we have to build an international working class movement against these attacks.”

Indika, from Lanka Ashok Leyland plant, said: “As an auto worker, I felt sad about these victimised Maruti Suzuki workers. They had fought for a higher wage and better working conditions and they have the democratic right to do so. Now, however, they have been sentenced to a lifetime in jail.

“If we can’t exercise our rights then why do we have to live in this sort of society? We should think about establishing a different society where we can enjoy our rights and, as you say, the only way to build such a society is through the unity of international working class.”



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