

Maruti Suzuki workers lead protest demanding freedom for 13 workers jailed for life

A WSWS reporting team
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The World Socialist Web Site calls on its readers to sign the online petition demanding the release of the 13 framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!

More than 8,000 workers joined a protest in Manesar, Haryana yesterday to demand the immediate release of 13 Maruti Suzuki workers who have been sentenced to life in prison on trumped-up murder charges, as well four other workers sentenced to five-year jail terms on lesser charges.

The 13 include all 12 office-bearers of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). Workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant established the MSWU in bitter struggle against a company-controlled union as part of their fight against poverty wages, contract labour jobs, and a brutal work regime.

Just months after Maruti Suzuki was forced to recognize the MSWU, the Japanese-owned automaker staged a provocation, working hand-in-glove with the police and Congress Party-led Haryana state government. Maruti Suzuki seized on a company-provoked factory-floor altercation and a fire, which mysteriously broke out in the middle of the melee, to mount a legal witch-hunt against the workers and purge its workforce.

In joining yesterday's march and rally, workers defied a blanket ban state authorities have imposed on all gatherings of five or more people in Gurgaon, the district in which Manesar is situated, until May 14.

An MSWU spokesperson told the *World Socialist Web Site* that police initially tried to prevent workers from marching from their respective plants, at the end of the day shift, to a Manesar park. However, when they saw the size of the protest—especially at the Manesar Maruti Suzuki plant where some 3,000 workers were gathered—they decided to let it proceed.

The government deployed five hundred police on the streets of Manesar to surveil and intimidate workers. It also let it be known that “two battalions” of additional security forces were standing by.

Yesterday's protest involved workers from dozens of factories in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, a huge auto-making and manufacturing centre on the outskirts of Delhi,

India's capital. There were also delegations from other industrial suburbs of Delhi, including Noida and Faridabad, and as far away as Alwar, in Rajasthan.

Addressing the rally, MSWU Provisional Working Committee member Ram Niwas said, “We are holding peaceful protests, but that does not mean we are weak. We will hold an all-India protest against the state and the Maruti management on April 4 and will continue doing it until our 13 brothers are given justice.”

Niwas went on to denounce the monstrous frame-up of the 13 workers for the death by asphyxiation of a Maruti Suzuki Human Resources (HR) manager, the arrest and years-long imprisonment of close to 150 other workers, and Maruti Suzuki's firing of more than 500 permanent and 1,800 contract workers after the July 18, 2012 altercation.

“When the post-mortem report held suffocation due to fire as the reason behind the death of the HR manager, how come the workers are charged for murder?” asked Riwas. “They ruined hundreds of lives by rendering them jobless, and now they have finished the lives of these 13 workers. We are in touch with international labour organisations to gather support.”

Kuldeep Janghu, general-secretary of the Maruti Udyog Workers Union, told the rally, “These convicts are innocent and we will appeal against the District Court's judgment in the Punjab and Haryana High Court. We will request the court to conduct a judicial inquiry as well so that the truth is revealed. We want all the 13 workers convicted of murder in the case to be released.”

Both the rally speakers and workers interviewed by the press denounced as a sham the “investigation” that a police Special Investigation Team made of the 2012 events. They noted that even the judge who convicted the 13 had had to admit that the police had colluded with management and had fabricated evidence. They also pointed to the incontrovertible evidence that police beat and tortured many of the 148 workers with the aim of extracting phony confessions from them.

Khushi Ram, head of the MSWU Provisional Working Committee, said the union is fighting for the reinstatement of all 546 permanent workers the company fired during its August

2012 workforce purge. “They terminated 546 workers,” said Ram, “despite the special investigating team naming only 214 of them in its report. Now, even the [District] Court has acquitted 117 of those who were implicated in the case. The company should now take them back.”

The Maruti Suzuki workers are the victims of a company-state vendetta aimed at intimidating workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and reassuring investors that India’s political establishment will ruthlessly suppress worker opposition to the sweatshop conditions that furnish their massive profits.

At the March 17 sentence hearing, the prosecution pointed to the Indian government’s “Make in India” policy, which aims to entice foreign investors to turn from China to India for cheap labour, in arguing for the court to sentence the 13 to hang.

No time can be lost in rallying workers and all those who uphold democratic rights, in India and around the world, to demand the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers, the vacating of all the convictions against them, and the reinstatement of all the victimized workers.

The Japanese-owned automaker has said it intends to press the authorities to appeal the acquittal of the 117 workers and to seek harsher penalties for those convicted. In other words, it is pressing to have the 13 men whose only “crime” was to have challenged their brutal exploitation executed.

There is intense anger among workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and across India at the horrific “class justice” meted out to the Maruti Suzuki workers. However, the major labour federations, including those affiliated to the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—are adamantly opposed to the struggle to mobilize the working class in defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers. Neither the CPI nor CPM has even issued a press release condemning the March 10 conviction or March 17 sentencing of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

During the nearly five years the Maruti Suzuki workers have been fighting the company-state frame-up, the Stalinists have used their influence to prevail on the MSWU to focus its efforts on appealing to the capitalist courts and big-business political establishment for “justice.”

Indian supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened at a rally in Chennai yesterday to call for the mobilization of the independent strength of the Indian and international working class to fight to free the Maruti Suzuki workers.

The rally had been called by the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), which is affiliated to the Maoist Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML), to commemorate Bhagat Singh, a revolutionary terrorist executed by the British colonial regime on March 23, 1931.

The ICFI supporters distributed copies of the ICFI statement

“Free the Framed-up Maruti Suzuki Workers!” and won a warm response from many of the nearly 300 workers in attendance, despite the AICCTU leaders’ attempts to impede their discussions.

Nadaraj, a 27-year-old Renault-Nissan worker, said, “I am also working in a global company which manufactures cars. I believe it is important that through this international campaign we should develop interaction with global autoworkers. Since Maruti Suzuki is also a global company, challenging it would require the international mobilisation of workers.”

Anandan, a driver said: “The international campaign to defend the Maruti Suzuki workers is important. Keeping the workers who fought for legitimate rights, such as the right to form a union and wage hike, in jail for four years without bail shows the courts are not for workers. Rich people like Sekar Reddy could come out of jail in bail within a week even if he did carry out a murder. ... It is painful to imagine how the families of the jailed workers would have suffered. Now 13 are given life sentences. Their families will be thrown on the streets.C

Venkatesan said, “In India the cheap labour contract system prevails in all industries including in public industries. The jobs are not secure even in the government-owned companies. Maruti Suzuki workers were framed up by the collusion of company, police and the government. The political parties serve the capitalist class. Workers and the masses don’t get anything by these parties and the courts. Therefore, this international campaign is useful.”

Another worker, Surender said, “I strongly condemn this verdict. I am confident the Maruti Suzuki workers will win. The global companies think they can do anything with money. But the unity of the international workers is more powerful than that. We are not hesitant and we would like our comments and photos published. This will reflect the international unity of the workers and through the united struggles of the young workers a change can be made.”



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