

# Sri Lankan workers support campaign to free framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents  
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Workers in the port and industrial areas of Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city, expressed enthusiastic support for the global campaign initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in the northern Indian state of Haryana.

In a case concocted by the Japanese-owned car-company Maruti Suzuki in collaboration with the state government, its police and the courts, 13 workers were sentenced to life imprisonment on false murder charges this month. Another 18 were given three- to five-year prison terms on lesser charges.

The workers were framed-up in retribution for a series of militant struggles including strikes, factory occupations and protests in 2011-12 against harrowing workplace conditions.

The ICFI has launched an online petition and is calling upon workers and youth worldwide to fight for the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

A campaign team of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke with Colombo port and industrial workers in recent days and visited a working-class neighbourhood in the city. They distributed the ICFI statement "Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers" in Sinhalese and Tamil.

Colombo port workers expressed support for their class brothers in India. Sri Lankan workers have themselves been targeted by a privatization campaign launched by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

A number of workers drew parallels between the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers and the brutal police crackdown against Sri Lankan workers protesting against the privatization of the Colombo and Hambantota ports early this year.

**Devika**, who works in the Information Services section of Colombo port, said: "It's important that you campaign

against such injustice. The same thing can happen to us in the near future. Just think of the way the government responded to port workers demands."

She commented on the drive to replace permanent workers at the port with contract labour, noting, "Most contract workers are paid much less than the permanent workers. They have no benefits. Even female workers are hired for hard labour jobs."

Devika expressed appreciation for the ICFI's campaign. "Unions limit the worker to see just the immediate issues, and discourage them from discussing broader political problems. I studied political science as a student. I think as workers we should start studying these things more systematically. I'm a reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* and will support your international petition," she said.

**Kalum**, a worker in the boat house of Colombo, said that the Maruti Suzuki case demonstrates how the right to protest is being stripped from workers. "Isn't it the same in Sri Lanka?" he asked. "The government seeks court injunctions to block even the most peaceful protests. If the injunctions are violated, the organizers are persecuted. Now the government is going to assign designated places and times of the week for protests."

He added, "It's not a question of whether this is happening in India, Sri Lanka or America. Incidents like these make clear that the unity of workers on a global scale is imperative to face the attacks of the ruling class."

**Shahen**, an auto worker, said: "I condemn the frame up against those workers because capitalist governments in other countries like Sri Lanka will also take this as an example to suppress workers' rights."

"The workers need standard working conditions and it is their right to fight for that," Shahen said. He stressed the importance of "defending workers' rights through the international unity of the working class."

"This is the first time I encountered an international campaign of this nature. So I greatly appreciate your

campaign and will definitely sign the online petition.”

Two female janitorial workers attached to a private company sympathized with the victimized Maruti workers. One of them said: “We also work under extremely difficult conditions. Normally, our shifts are 11 or 12 hours a day and we work 30 days in most months, to earn about 28,000 rupees [\$US185] per month.”

She continued: “How can we understand these political issues? We had no opportunity for formal education, and now we are stuck with an impossible workload. We feel we are in the dark forever.”

SEP campaigners explained that the task of the revolutionary party is to develop the political consciousness of the working class. “Yes what you are doing is very important,” she responded. “I will give this leaflet to my children. With all the difficulties, we have given them a better education than what we had.”

SEP campaigners visited an area around the Panagoda “Templeburg” industrial zone in Homagama, south of Colombo, where 44 small and medium factories operate. The estate’s workers, who are mostly from far away villages, live in tiny rented rooms in abysmal conditions.

**Kanthi**, a woman living with her son in a small room, expressed anger over the frame-up of the Indian workers. “These workers are our brothers,” she said. “We all face the same pathetic work and living conditions, but are unable to demand anything.”

Pointing out that her average salary of 600-800 rupees a day is nowhere near what is required to cope with the growing cost of living, she added: “Like the Maruti Suzuki workers we want to uplift ourselves from these terrible conditions. But we don’t have organizations to fight. I think we will have the strength to fight if workers unite internationally.”

A group of young male workers also spoke out. “The suffering of these 13 workers is our suffering too,” one commented. He noted that like the Maruti Suzuki workers, they are not allowed to form new unions and that the existing unions have betrayed them. “The courts always protect the power of the powerful,” he said. “Everything is channelled to maximize the profits of the companies.”

Another worker, **Karunapala** interjected: “Maruti workers have been punished as per the wish of the Indian government and the factory owners. Now the Sri Lankan rulers will also take an example of this and say, ‘If it happens in India, why not in Sri Lanka?’”

He added: “When something happens to the poor and oppressed, who else can fight against it other than the

workers? Your campaign builds connections among workers worldwide. We will go a step further with this.”

SEP campaigners visited a residential area near Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ), some 30 km from Colombo, which employs more than 40,000 workers. They are subjected to slave labour conditions. The majority are young females from rural areas living in small rooms of 3.5 x 2.5 meters.

Companies are increasingly hiring contract workers from labour companies to cut production costs by paying lower wages and denying even the meagre benefits of permanent workers.

**Geetha**, a female worker, said: “Workers in every country should fight to release the framed-up workers in India. The workers have only workers’ support. They face the same conditions in every country. The capitalist governments and their judiciary work for the companies. In fact, tomorrow Sri Lankan workers will face what the Maruti Suzuki workers have faced today. I appreciate your campaign.”

Referring to her own experience, she said that her husband went to work at the OCS garment factory in Jordan hoping to receive a better salary. “Although he worked there for more than a year, the factory was closed early this year,” Geetha said. “He was not given any compensation or paid the salary promised by the agency.”

Pointing to the increasing use of contract labour in the Free Trade Zone, she said: “When coming to office, this government promised to abolish contract labour and to increase our salaries by 2,500 rupees. But they have proven to be false promises. There is no organization or media outlet that explains those issues. If they are explained like this, we can understand a lot of issues.”

Another female worker at the Jeep Way Lanka factory said: “Some women workers in the FTZ have become infertile due to the chemicals used in their factories. Workers have been forced to work under such difficult conditions. Of course, what should be done is mobilize the strength of the working class internationally against injustice like this.”



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