Sri Lanka: SEP meeting demands release of Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful public meeting in Colombo on Tuesday to demand the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers. On March 18, an Indian court sentenced 13 workers to life imprisonment and another 18 to three to five years' jail on trumped-up charges.

Last week, SEP and IYSSE members and supporters held a picket outside the capital's Fort Railway Station and widely leafletted parts of Colombo, Jaffna, Kandy and other areas, winning support for the online petition initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

SEP political committee member K. Ratnayake, who chaired the public meeting, explained the significance of the ICFI's campaign to secure the release of the Maruti Suzuki auto workers.

Ratnayake said: "These victimised workers were demanding job permanency, decent wages and working conditions and an end to ruthless exploitation under contract labour system."

The contract system, he said, had rapidly expanded in India since the ruling elite deregulated the economy, a process that accelerated in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. The speaker explained that about 40 percent of India's total workforce were contract or casual workers, according to official reports in 2013–2014, and that this figure was growing. Sixty-eight percent of these workers had no written contract.

Ratnayake pointed out that 54 percent of workers in Sri Lanka were contract employees in 2012 and referred to the numerous articles on the WSWS about contract workers in America, Britain, Germany and Australia. The speaker also referred to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's mobilisation of navy soldiers last December to repress strike action by contract workers seeking permanency at Hambantota Port.

SEP assistant national secretary Deepal Jayasekera told the meeting that the harsh sentences against Maruti Suzuki workers at the Japanese-owned plant in Manesar, northern India, were the outcome of a joint company-government vendetta. Its purpose, he said, was to crush all working-class opposition to the brutal labour conditions being imposed by foreign and local investors.

Jayasekara detailed the ICFI's ongoing exposure of the frame-up and victimisation of the Maruti Suzuki workers. "The government and factory authorities feared that the struggle mounted by these workers against the sweatshop conditions at the Maruti Suzuki factory in Haryana would win the support of other workers in India suffering the same conditions."

The speaker reviewed the ongoing coverage on the WSWS, beginning in mid-2011 when workers launched a series of struggles, including walkouts, sit-down strikes and rallies, and its elaboration of an international program to take forward their fight.

Jayasekara explained the role played by the Indian Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their affiliated union federations—who politically isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers, creating the conditions for their persecution.

Delivering the main report, SEP general secretary Wije Dias said that workers around the world faced the same forces confronting the Maruti-Suzuki workers—the capitalist state, the union bureaucracies and various political parties falsely posturing as allies of the working class.

Dias explained that the brutal punishments handed out to the Maruti Suzuki workers revealed how the

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ruling elites, now facing their deepest ever financial crisis, would respond to a movement of the working class.

"Placed within the context of the breakdown of the capitalist system, the ICFI recognised the far-reaching implications of the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle," the speaker said. "This is why we decided to politically intervene from the very beginning, with WSWS reporting teams visiting industrial sites in Haryana, bringing the experiences of these workers to the attention of the international working class."

Dias demarcated the ICFI's fight for the release of the victimised Maruti Suzuki workers from the protests organised by various pseudo-left groups. Our struggle, he said, is not the same as these organisations who appeal to the employers, the government and judiciary responsible for incarcerating the Maruti Suzuki workers.

Dias said the ICFI campaign was based on three fundamental principles. "First, it is aimed at asserting the political independence of the working class from all sections of the ruling class and their agents in the workers' movement. Second, our campaign is focused on establishing the international unity of the working class. Third, it is part of the fight to build an international socialist alternative against the imperialist drive towards nuclear war.

"The goal of our international campaign is to develop a mass working-class base of the sections of the world party of socialist revolution, the ICFI, and to build new sections in every country, including India," the speaker said.

The event concluded with a resolution condemning the victimisation of the Indian Maruti Suzuki workers and denouncing it as a deliberate political victimisation orchestrated by company management and the police, with the support of India's entire political establishment. The resolution, which urged the Sri Lankan and international working class to support the struggle launched by the ICFI to defend democratic rights, was passed unanimously.

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