

Sri Lankan artists express solidarity with the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

Our reporters
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Several Sri Lankan artists have sent statements to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressing their support for the campaign to free the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers who were condemned to life imprisonment. An international campaign and online petition drive have been launched by the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The workers were sentenced to life imprisonment by an Indian court on March 18 on bogus murder charges following a years-long legal conspiracy by successive governments, police and judicial authorities. Twelve of the victimised 13 workers were leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed to fight their sweatshop conditions, which prevail in India's factories and special economic zones.

Eighteen other workers, also victims of this frame-up, have been sentenced for three to five years on lesser charges. The aim of this witch-hunt is to send the message that the political establishment is determined to protect the interests of international investors by suppressing workers' rights.

The artists' statements follow initiatives by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka. They held a picket outside Colombo's Fort Railway Station at the end of March, followed by a successful public meeting in Colombo that demanded the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

Nadya Perera is an independent researcher and a documentary and short filmmaker from Colombo. One among her main works is a documentary, *4th of February* (the date refers to the granting of "independence" in 1948 by Britain) on the plight of Sri Lankan female domestic workers in the Gulf region. It is woven around three workers, including Rizana, a young housemaid charged with killing an infant in her

care and beheaded in Riyadh. Another of Perera's films is *Thalattu*, a collaborative presentation on women affected by the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka. Through the lives of mothers it captures the sense of loss of human dignity of war victims.

Perera's statement is published below:

I first became aware of the Gurgaon-Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle in 2015 when I watched *The Factory*—a documentary film by Rahul Roy, screened in Colombo. The film showed the protracted struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers against the Japan-based multinational car giant and the company-controlled union. Since then, I have followed the escalation of the struggle that has culminated in the conviction of 13 workers—framed for murder—by a court in India and imprisoned for life. It is of course, no accident that 12 out of 13 of the convicted workers are members of the independent union set up by the Maruti Suzuki employees, despite carefully engineered attempts to brutally suppress the organisation of workers.

Apart from obvious differences in context, it is hard not to draw similarities between the demands for regularisation of contract workers in the Manesar industrial belt and the demands made during the recently-concluded strike action taken by Sri Lanka Telecom workers, whose recruitment has been outsourced to "manpower" agencies—a strategy used to deny them the status of "permanent employee" while carrying out the same type and amount of work.

The trend of converting more and more sections of the required workforce into precarious forms of labour, which translates to the same amount of work (or more) being extracted for lesser pay, no benefits and no job security, is a global capitalist phenomenon that's on the rise. And one that cannot be reversed unless workers' struggles forge unity across companies, sectors and

nations.

I have signed the [online] petition to demand the release of the 13 framed Maruti Suzuki workers and urge other Sri Lankans to do the same.

Malaka Devapriya is a filmmaker, visual artist, Sinhala radio playwright and short film and video director. His first full-length film is entitled *Bahuchithavadiya* (The Undecided) and his short films include, *Anxiety* (1998), *Life Circle* (2004), *Today* (2007) and *End Loop* (2008). His short plays include, *Forgiveness* (1991) *Volcano* (1992), *Bandana* (1993) and *Punish* (1995).

In his statement Devapriya declared: “Artists and writers should come forward to support the struggles of the jailed Maruti workers in India and the Sri Lankan Telecom ‘manpower workers’ fighting for their job security.” His statement continues:

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We should all demand that the victimised 13 Maruti workers be freed immediately to go back to their families and jobs. Both in Sri Lanka and in India workers are in struggles to defeat hire and fire systems of recruiting workers, which are on the increase. Correct wage scales are denied, permanent employment is refused and workers who struggle for decent work conditions are sacked and jailed under trumped-up criminal charges. A mass movement to free the Maruti workers is an urgent need. We are fighting the same struggle. I stand by the 13 jailed workers and their families.

Kingsley Gunatilake is a painter, installation artist and book illustrator. He is currently a visiting visual arts lecturer at Colombo’s University of Visual and Performing Arts. He states:

The witch-hunt of the Maruti Suzuki workers shows that the capitalist class in India and this region has created an extremely dangerous situation. This struggle gives a very clear warning of this danger. It is very clear that this is a barbaric, illegal and unjust act of vengeance. The most disturbing question here is: Why justice is continued to be denied even after the conspiracy is exposed so clearly? This is a clear example of [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi’s real policy. Politically, I see this as a grave situation. Why do other movements and individuals not act against this intolerable injustice?

In this campaign, the WSWs has clearly explained how the witch-hunt was set in motion. It reveals how politicians control and manipulate the law. They control everything. Law is made in such a way that it can be twisted by them. This subversion of the law is exposed absolutely clearly by the analysis of the WSWs. The videos, photographs and documents presented make this clear to everybody.

Workers in Sri Lanka too face the same situation as in India. I think a much more serious situation is going to arise within Sri Lanka. This government is unconcerned with the problems of the masses. This crisis will worsen. I think the punishment meted out to the workers by the Indian government will encourage the Sri Lankan government to take same path.



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