

Modi's "Make in India" campaign and the battle of the Maruti Suzuki workers

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It is more than a month since a judge in the northern Indian state of Haryana condemned 13 workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant to life imprisonment on trumped up murder charges. This cruel punishment was the result of a years-long conspiracy by the Japanese-owned corporation and the Indian political establishment aimed at imposing exemplary punishments on workers at the Manesar plant, which had emerged as a center of opposition to the brutal sweatshop conditions that prevail throughout India's factories and Special Economic Zones.

The legal vendetta has been backed by both the Congress Party, the traditional party of the Indian ruling elite, and the current national government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). The workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant conducted militant strikes in 2011-12 to demand an end to speed-up, poverty wages and the hated contract labour system, cutting across the drive of both the Congress and BJP to attract foreign investment through the promise of a cheap, docile workforce.

Twelve of the 13 workers serving life sentences were leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was established in 2012 through a rebellion against a company-controlled and government-sanctioned puppet union. The resistance of the Maruti Suzuki workers spread like wildfire throughout the massive Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt, just outside of Delhi, where 80 percent of the workforce are young contract labourers, largely drawn from impoverished rural areas, who earn just 25-50 percent of the standard wage.

After a July 18, 2012 company-provoked altercation and fire at the Manesar plant, which claimed the life of a manager known for his sympathies for the workers, the Haryana authorities framed up the MSWU leaders and almost 150 other innocent workers on charges ranging from murder and attempted murder to rioting.

In rejecting the workers' bail requests in 2014, the Haryana High Court said their struggle and the 2012 altercation had "lowered the reputation of India in the

world." In explaining why it was determined to keep the workers behind bars, the court added, "Foreign investment is likely not to happen due to growing labor unrest."

Similarly, in arguing at the conclusion of the frame-up trial for the 13 workers to be put to death by hanging, prosecutors said an example had to be made of them to reassure investors. For his part, Maruti Suzuki attorney Vikas Pahwa in his submission to the court on March 9, 2017 declared, "The Government of India is promoting 'Make in India.' With this kind of volatile environment and industrial unrest no country would come forward and invest in India."

Modi's "Make in India" campaign is a continuation and acceleration of the Indian ruling class' drive to make the country a cheap-labour hub for global capital. This process began in 1991 with the "economic liberalization" program initiated by the Congress Party government of Narasimha Rao. It sought to attract private and foreign capital to India by slashing import tariffs, corporate taxes and social spending, reducing or eliminating government regulations and foreign investment limits, and privatizing state-owned enterprises.

Every government since—including those in the Center supported by the Stalinist parties and those in states, such as West Bengal and Kerala, directly led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—has pursued this pro-investor "reform" agenda. The CPM and CPI-affiliated unions—respectively the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)—have isolated workers, including those at Maruti Suzuki, who have challenged the drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital, while urging them to pressure the Congress Party and various regional and caste-based bourgeois parties to pursue "pro-people" policies.

Rattled by the post-2008 world economic crisis, particularly the fall in India's growth rate after 2010, the Indian bourgeoisie turned to Modi, an arch-Hindu supremacist, who had made a name for himself as chief minister in Gujarat by his readiness to act as a hand-maiden

and enforcer for investors, to ramp up the exploitation of the working class and more forcefully assert the Indian bourgeoisie's great power ambitions on the world stage.

Surrounded by 500 CEOs of major international and domestic companies, Modi launched his "Make in India" initiative in September 2014, just three months after coming to power. He vowed to make India "an easy place to do business," boasted that labour costs in India were lower than China, and set a goal of doubling the manufacturing sector's share of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 12.5 to 25 percent.

Modi announced, and this has since been expanded, 25 focus sectors in which 100 percent foreign direct investment (FDI) would be allowed. In aerospace, defense and media companies, Modi's government has raised the foreign investment caps to 74, 49 and 26 percent respectively.

In the name of its "Make in India" drive, the BJP government is pursuing a socially incendiary agenda that includes: the gutting of labour laws, especially restrictions on layoffs and plant closures; an accelerated privatization drive; employer "self-regulation" of labour standards; measures to make it easier to expropriate land from small peasant producers for big business projects; and the rolling back of India's flimsy environmental regulations.

Among the CEOs who attended Modi's MII launch was Kenichi Ayukawa, Maruti Suzuki's CEO and managing director since 2013. Speaking at the event, Ayukawa enthusiastically supported the MII initiative, while urging Modi to quickly implement the demands of global capital. "We are fully confident that, under the Make in India program of the prime minister, factors that adversely affect the competitiveness of manufacturing will now be quickly removed," said Ayukawa.

After the witch-hunt against the Maruti Suzuki workers in 2012—which included the purging of 2,300 full-time and contract labourers—management claimed that it was phasing out contract workers. However, last August *Livemint* reported that the largest car producer in India in fact increased the size of its contract-labour workforce by 61.5 percent between 2013-2014 and 2015-2016. In March 2016, the company had 10,626 contract workers and 13,259 permanent workers.

Last month the Indian magazine *Businessworld* published a long list of international companies that have recently invested in India's manufacturing sector, a development it attributed to Modi's MII initiative. "In 2015," noted *Businessworld*, "India overtook China and the United States to become the top destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by generating US \$63 billion and India has emerged to be the fastest growing economy with 7.6 percent growth rate in 2015-16."

The Modi government's slavish support for big business, above all its commitment to assist it in exploiting India's vast pool of impoverished labourers, is proving to be a magnet for transnational corporations. On March 9, Toyota and Suzuki chiefs, Akio Toyoda and O. Suzuki, met Modi to discuss their plans to collaborate in making small cars in India. After the meeting, the web site of the Indian Prime Minister's Office touted the deal between the two automakers, saying it will encourage other companies to seize the profit-making opportunities provided by "Make in India."

Another major goal of MII is to transform India into a major arms manufacturer and exporter. The official "Make in India" web site states, "[T]he opening of the defense sector for private sector participation will help foreign original equipment manufacturers to enter into strategic partnerships with Indian companies and leverage the domestic markets as well as aim at global markets."

This is bound up with the country's transformation into a "frontline state" in the US military-strategic offensive against China, a policy Modi is pursuing as a means of pursuing the Indian bourgeoisie's great power ambitions. Since the beginning of this century, India has rapidly expanded its military, including through the development of a land, air and underwater nuclear arsenal and a blue water navy. The Pentagon, the Modi government and General Dynamics are currently in negotiations about a plan to shift all production of F-16 fighter jets to India.

The struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers is a challenge both to the Indian ruling elite and transnational corporations like Suzuki, which scour the planet for the cheapest labour costs so as to maximize profits and shareholder returns. By ruthlessly suppressing these workers they are setting a new precedent to attack workers not only in India but around the world.

That is why workers in every country must come to the defense of these heroic workers. If this monstrous frame-up is defeated through the international action of workers, young people and all those who defend democratic rights, it will immeasurably strengthen the unity and fighting capacity of the international working class.



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