

Tamil workers in northern Sri Lanka support Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents
27 April 2017

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) visited Chavakachcheri, a small town, about 25 kilometres from Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, as a part of the campaign by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to demand the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

Thirteen autoworkers have been condemned to life imprisonment on bogus murder charges. The Indian and state of Haryana governments, along with the corporations, are using the witch hunt to reassure foreign investors that they will crush worker opposition to low-wages, precarious contract labour and brutal exploitation.

Distributing copies of ICFI statements, the campaigners discussed the international significance of the case with workers and small traders in the town. The area suffered severely during the communal war carried out by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).

Workers and small traders in the town expressed their support for ICFI campaign and denounced the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers. They discussed their oppressive conditions, saying that they were similar to what autoworkers face at the Japanese-owned assembly plant in Manesar.

Niruban, a railway worker, is a temporary employee like many of the Maruti Suzuki workers. “I have no permanent appointment in the railway although I have been working there for two years. Because of the coming local government elections there might be a chance to get hired full-time but it is not sure. I support the campaign of your party and oppose the life sentences imposed on these poor workers by an Indian

court without any evidence. They should be released.”

“I support your campaign for the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers, because we all are workers,” Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) employee **Uthayakumar** said. “All governments support the employers to suppress the workers. The people of Tamil Nadu [in southern India] raised their voices for us when we were suffering during the war. Similarly we have to give voice for their [Maruti Suzuki workers’] release.”

He also criticised the Tamil bourgeois parties collaborating with New Delhi, which supported former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s war on the LTTE. “The Indian government has suppressed the struggles in the North and East of Sri Lanka. The war ended with the co-operation of India with heavy human losses. The Tamil parties still work with India.

“Just like Maruti Suzuki there are about 25 people working temporary here at the CTB. Every year they are fired and re-hired. By doing so, management keeps them as new workers continuously and they don’t get the benefits the permanent workers have.”

Ruben, a photo framing worker, asked the campaigner why the SEP is fighting to release Maruti Suzuki workers in India while there are so many local issues. “There are many problems here. People are fighting for the release of their lands from military occupation, relatives of disappeared persons are protesting and the unemployed graduates are campaigning for jobs. Don’t you fight for these? Why are you conducting a struggle for the Maruti Suzuki workers’ problems,” he asked.

The SEP members explained the unique record of the SEP in fighting for the democratic rights of Tamil people, particularly against the nearly three-decade communalist war, which was based on the party’s

socialist program and fight to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers. They pointed out that the frame-up of Maruti Suzuki workers was not an isolated Indian event but the most extreme example of the class war being conducted against workers throughout the world. In Sri Lanka, they explained, workers are being subjected to repressive measures by employers and governments. Under such conditions, the only way to fight these attacks is to mobilise the industrial and independent political strength of the working class internationally.

Ruben expressed his agreement, “We have not had regular jobs here since the end of the war. In the guise of self-employment, the banks are giving loans. All people are debtors. This is the result of the war.”

Madhan, a vegetable vendor, explained how Sri Lankan authorities work in the same manner as their Indian counterparts in trampling basic democratic rights. “I want the Indian workers to be released. Just like in India, the courts here are punishing people for what they think. Police autocratically arrest people. It is scary to intervene in any public issue,” he said.

Commenting on the Tamil bourgeois parties, he added, “The leaders we voted for do not care for us after they come to power. I’m talking about the Tamil National Alliance [TNA]. If we go to their offices for any purpose, they ask us to come with letters. Then they postpone it for tomorrow. The TNA is united with the government.”

He pointed to conditions of Tamil people in the north and east. “Many people [who lost their houses during the war] have not been provided houses eight years after the end of the war. The military will not withdraw from people’s private lands that they are occupying. During the final battle, my brother was killed by the military shell attack. He had three children. I have to maintain three families on the small income earned through this vegetable business.”

Madhan immediately compared his situation with the suffering of the families of the imprisoned Maruti Suzuki. “It is sad and similar. Who is taking care of their families who are experiencing great difficulties? They say India is becoming a major power but there are problems like poverty, water and the farmers are struggling. The Indian government has no solution for that.”

Selvarasa, another vegetable vendor, added, “Those workers must be released. Everywhere there are

problems. We voted for the TNA but they favour their own people. My son studied and worked in the harbour but they suspected that he was a supporter of the LTTE and fired him.”

Hari, a shop worker, said the media had not publicised the case of the Maruti Suzuki workers. “This means workers in India are being treated as slaves. I studied up to advanced level [university entrance] but I could not find a suitable job. How do we get a job when graduates do not have a job? I support your campaign.”

S. Ketheeswaran, a shopkeeper, added, “The democratic rights of Indian workers must be protected. Likewise, the rights of workers and people here should be protected. The struggle for land, the struggle for disappeared persons and the struggle to release political prisoners should be addressed. Child labour is high in this war-affected area. Some of the poverty-stricken children are employed for one vadai [a small fried dough snack], one tea and 200 or 300 rupees [US \$1.33 or \$2] per day.”

Another shop keeper joined the discussion and said he had not heard about the persecuted Indian workers: “I learned about this frame-up through your leaflet. I cannot understand why the media are covering up this problem. As you said all the parties in India, in particular the BJP [the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party], Congress and Dravidian parties are silent about this. I condemn it.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact