"There is an air of worker rebellion in India and China"

A conversation with Professor Immanuel Ness on the Maruti Suzuki workers

Jerry White
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Immanuel Ness, a professor of political science at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, has written extensively on the class struggle in India, including in the country's newly developed, globally connected automotive sector. As a member of an international team of lawyers and labor rights advocates, Ness travelled to India in May 2013 to investigate the persecution of workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, near Delhi.

In July 2013, the New York-based International Commission for Labor Rights issued a report "Merchants of Menace: Repressing Workers in India's New Industrial Belt," which detailed the mass arrests and sackings that followed a company-provoked confrontation on July 18, 2012 and the death of human resource manager Awanish Dev.

Professor Ness is also the author of the 2015 book *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class.* It includes case studies of worker struggles in India, China and South Africa. He recently spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Jerry White about the Maruti Suzuki case and its implications for workers around the world.

Explaining his involvement in the case, Ness said, "I was one of the eight people from the international community who conducted an impartial investigation in India about 10 months after the July 18, 2012 incident. We wanted to determine the credibility of the government of India, the state of Haryana and the corporation's contentions that these workers were involved in the killing of a human resource manager. At that time, there were 150 arrested and jailed workers."

Commenting on the brutal sentences an Indian district court meted out on March 18 of this year to the 13, including all 12 elected leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, Ness said, "It was shocking that 13 workers would be condemned to life imprisonment when the evidence shows they had absolutely no involvement in the asphyxiation of the manager, who to a large extent supported the workers' efforts. He died in a fire due to smoke inhalation. Even if a worker had started a fire, which is not the case, that would be one worker, not 13.

"When someone is killed, you take it seriously, I certainly do. Among the members of the commission, however, there was unanimity that these workers were not involved in it, that the government had engaged in violations of their rights, and that the workers should have restitution. We found that Maruti Suzuki had violated international labor provisions that relate to the right of workers to organize, engage in collective activity, and protest.

"Anyone who reads the court documents, who has interviewed the workers will recognize that the July 2012 conflict was initiated by what is referred to in India as 'bouncers' or company thugs dressed in workers' clothes. They went on a rampage in the factory, I would argue, to disrupt the organizing campaign. The workers had already filed a petition to form the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union in the Haryana state capital in Chandigarh. This was done to stymie their organizing, and subsequently there has not been any organization of workers there, not that there haven't been any efforts.

"After the incident hundreds of workers, and not just workers, but their family members, were rounded up. The workers at the plant, both the full-time and contract workers, were completely replaced. So, anyone who engages in protests at that factory or probably anywhere at Maruti Suzuki, will be replaced."

Ness then turned to the real motives behind the legal witch-hunt. "During the trial, as you have pointed out on your web site, the prosecutor and Haryana officials made references to the concerns of the Indian ruling class about maintaining a friendly business environment for foreign investors.

"In 2012 and again in 2017 there was a large push for India to industrialize and create exports mainly for the imperialist countries and the profits of Wall Street and the City of London. Maruti Suzuki is owned by Suzuki, which is one of the most rapacious Japanese companies in the way they treat Japanese workers. They have implemented conditions of extreme speed-up and a lot of things that workers in the United States have experienced in the past, only to an even higher degree now in India. The Indian government is trying to encourage Foreign Direct Investment from auto firms, electronic firms and beyond."

The discussion then turned to the conditions of the family members of the arrested workers. "When we were there in May 2013 there was a great degree of suffering among family members. You had women with infant children who never saw their fathers. You had family members who had to live together because they could not afford rent or food costs. There was a tremendous amount of psychological, emotional and physical suffering among family members, especially younger women whose husbands had been arrested and jailed. These women have been separated from their husbands for long periods of time. This pattern, which still exists, was detailed in Rahul Roy's film, *The Factory*.

"We visited Kaithal, an administrative center in Haryana, in May 2013 where shortly before police had arrested people engaged in solidarity actions in support of the Maruti Suzuki workers. They were rounded up and put into jail in abysmal conditions. The delegation visited a jail and a police commissioner.

"The commissioner had a basic line: the Maruti Suzuki workers were guilty (of the murder and other grave criminal charges laid against them) and, the people who blocked the road to protest in their defence were also guilty. There was absolutely no effort to take into consideration the rights of protesters and there was a fixed opinion among the employers, the police, and the Labor Department around this. It really revolved around the issue I pointed out earlier, the importance that the Indian ruling class attaches to foreign investment. They would stop at nothing to ensure that

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that business-friendly environment is safeguarded."

This reporter pointed out that this is the official policy of all the capitalist parties whether it is the Congress Party, the traditional party of the Indian ruling class, which led the Haryana and the national government during the height of the persecution of the Maruti Suzuki workers, or Narendra Modi and his Hindu-chauvinist BJP, which came to power at the centre in May 2014.

"I would argue that the Modi government is probably worse on this question," said Ness. "But, yes, there really is no difference between both parties, and even some of the regional parties on the question of workers' right to organize. There is very little justice in that system especially towards workers."

Ness described the young workers who labor in the new Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and Export Processing Zones (EPZ) that surround India's mega-cities. "In Delhi and Haryana, for example, many workers are from Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh and beyond. They come from rural villages and, in many cases, are forced to go to the cities to survive when the farms no longer have work for them."

Pointing to their conditions, Ness said, "You have high levels of pollution, almost unbearable, and slums all around. Most workers in these zones are contract workers who are unemployed for much of the year. It depends on the zone, but a lot of the workers who are employed in the factories go to the Indian Technology Institute to get formal training. But by the time they are aged 30 to 35 the companies want to dispose of them because their wages will have risen.

"Even workers who have been trained with high levels of skill have been turned into contract workers. Some of the other zones have even poorer conditions. Around Chennai you have workers who by the age of 25 have become expendable to their employers. The work life of an Indian worker in these sectors is from age 18 to 25, and in some cases, up to 35. Then your life as a worker in these kind of facilities is over. Then you become further marginalized as a contract worker."

These are the conditions that led the Maruti Suzuki workers to repeatedly mount protests and strikes. "There have been efforts over the last 12 to 15 years to organize unions, first at the original plant in Gurgaon and then in the Manesar plant, which was opened in 2006. At the first plant, it ended with the creation of a company dominated union, the Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU). At the newer plant there were continuous efforts, starting in 2009, by workers to organize into independent unions, which culminated in 2012 with the establishment of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU)."

The traditional unions, Ness said, have proven incapable of organizing contract workers, which make up 94 percent of India's workforce, because of "the degree to which the Indian state prevents the mobilization of workers in these newly advancing industrial sectors."

This reporter suggested that an even more significant reason is that the major labor federations, including the Stalinist-led Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU) and All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), are frightened by and hostile to the militant strivings of these young contract workers. This is because the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM have repeatedly aligned with the Congress Party, including to prop up a Congress-led national government from 2004-08, and share it and the Indian bourgeoisie's program of making India into a cheap-labour hub for global capital.

Ness replied, "I would argue that the existing unions, irrespective of their political orientation, are at best social democratic and that they are not communist or engage in the type of policies they espouse. That was certainly true of the CITU union, whose party (the CPM) was in power in West Bengal for years, and no longer has any base whatsoever."

Ness went on to describe the growing struggles of workers in the Special Economic Zones. "In the specific area around Delhi there are significant labor struggles continuously—with dozens or more strikes going on regularly, including right now, as well as employer lockouts in the auto industry and what is referred to as the two-wheeler or motorcycle industry, and in auto-rickshaw production. I met with Honda parts workers this past January. These are highly skilled workers who are being displaced with contract workers. One of the key questions in India is that there is a great need and possibilities among contract workers for advancing their role through political activity.

"At Maruti Suzuki many people talk about the mobilization of the permanent workers in favor of the contract workers, but it should also be noted that the contract workers also mobilized. When you talk about 80 percent of the workforce, the contract workers are highly consequential. If those workers go on strike it would create the basis for a major rebellion or perhaps even more. I think the possibilities in India, China and elsewhere are extremely robust for worker mobilization.

"There is an air of rebellion. Go to a place like Gurgaon and go to a park and you will find hundreds of workers sitting around in circles talking about their conditions, about politics, about the possibilities of socialism and how to get there."

Ness rejects the demoralized claims by some academics that the working class and the class struggle have "disappeared." While many of the world's production facilities have moved outside of Western Europe and North America, he says, the hundreds of millions of highly-exploited workers in Asia, Africa and Latin America are emerging as a powerful social force.

"In India, the level of organizational activities is far higher than in other places. We've also found this in South Africa. The research that I and others have done around the mine workers, the platinum workers, and in places like Brazil and Mexico, have uncovered that there are vast mobilizations going on, which frequently don't make it to the front pages.

"We have wildcat strikes that take place spontaneously. But how do we build from that? I think we need to create organizations and there are a great number of workers who believe that. In India and here in North America people are moving to the notion that to advance workers' struggles you need new organizations and that the existing unions are not capable and not interested in doing that. The unions are very weak in this country as they are in the rest of the world."

Taking up this theme, this reporter discussed the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International in the early 1990s, of the failure of all nationally-based unions and labor parties in the face of globalization and the emergence of transnational corporations. How did Ness see the issue of an international strategy to unite the working class?, this reporter asked.

"I have a lot of faith in the workers themselves. In each of these struggles workers are going to fight and build solidarity amongst themselves. That is the key question: if they can build solidarity in their locations, they will have the capacity to engage in the kind of internationalism you are referring to.

"But we have very few examples of international solidarity and that has a lot to do with the nature of the AFL-CIO in this country, the fact that the AFL-CIO supports the United States government as opposed to workers' movements. There has been this kind of clamp on the ability of independent unions to engage in that kind of solidarity.

"There is a need to educate workers about the connection between the super-exploitation of workers outside of the United States, North America and Europe and how important it is to advance their conditions, to improve the position of the international working class."

In drawing the discussion to a close, this reporter pointed to the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Historical experience has proven, and this is the case in India, China, South Africa and most recently in Egypt in 2011, that without a revolutionary leadership the enormous militancy and self-sacrifice of workers will be defused, channeled behind one or another section of the ruling elite, and

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contained and crushed. For the working class to realize its strivings to end exploitation, state repression and war, it needs to be organized in its own international party to take power and replace capitalism with socialism.

"I think these are very crucial questions that we need to address," Ness responded, adding that he enjoys reading the *World Socialist Web Site* and strongly recommends the site to others. "Thank you very much for having me."

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