

What we have said:

The World Socialist Web Site and the Maruti Suzuki workers

Usman Khan
3 June 2017

Eleven weeks ago, an Indian judge handed down life sentences to 13 former employees of Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL). Their only “crime” was leading a struggle at their car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana to oppose the sweatshop conditions, which prevail throughout India’s factories and special economic zones (SEZ).

The corporate-controlled media and the major trade unions in India, along with their counterparts around the world, have largely fallen silent about the fate of the imprisoned workers. In contrast, the *World Socialist Web Site* has provided our worldwide readers with a detailed exposure of their persecution and frame-up by the Indian state and political establishment as part of the international campaign the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) are mounting to win the immediate release of these heroic workers.

The WSWS has covered the struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers over many years, explaining its international significance and providing a political perspective to fight state persecution. The scores of articles posted before and after the brutal sentencing constitute an invaluable record of this critical struggle and its political lessons.

As early as 1999, the WSWS reported on an 18-month struggle by 150 autoworkers sacked from the Suzuki Motors plant in Karachi, Pakistan. The workers, who wrote in to the WSWS for support, were demanding reinstatement and recognition of an independent union, the Pak-Suzuki Motor Company Star Workers Union. The article underscored the common struggle of autoworkers in Pakistan and India even as the ruling classes in both countries used religious communalism to divide them.

On June 4, 2011, the WSWS reported on a 13-day sit down strike at the Manesar assembly plant to demand improved wages and conditions, an end to the hated contract labor system, and recognition of what was then the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), in lieu of a company- and government-backed stooge union.

As 100,000 workers in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt were about to go out on a two-hour sympathy strike, the Communist Party of India (CPI)-affiliated All-India Trade Unions Congress prevailed on the newly formed MSEU to end the strike. None of the workers’ demands were met and the company fired two dozen militant workers.

This was followed shortly afterwards by a lockout by management, which demanded that workers sign a “good conduct bond” promising to submit to company dictates without any further disruptions of production. In September 2011, the WSWS posted an on-the-spot report on the lockout by a supporter in New Delhi.

After 33 days, the lockout was ended when the company-backed union agreed to the bond in exchange for a company pledge to hire back 1,000 laid off contract workers. When the company predictably reneged on this deal, the workers launched another strike and plant occupation.

On October 20, 2011, the WSWS issued a statement titled “Maruti Suzuki workers’ struggle must spearhead working-class political offensive,” which presented a political program

for the upsurge of the class struggle, which included walkouts of as many as 12,000 workers across the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt in sympathy with the MSIL workers. The statement warned about the role of the Stalinist-led unions—the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—which were promoting illusions that the then Congress-led state government in Haryana could be pressured into intervening on the workers’ behalf.

“The aim of the labor federations, including the AITUC and CITU,” we wrote, “is to convince Maruti Suzuki and the Haryana government that they can be ‘partners’ in upholding ‘labor peace,’ i.e., in policing the employers’ cheap-labor work regime. That is why at every point they have sought to isolate, contain, and suppress the strike movement.”

The statement noted that in West Bengal and Kerala where the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front had formed the state government, the CPM had pursued the same pro-investor policies as the Congress Party, including banning strikes in the IT sector and shooting down peasants who resisted the expropriation of their lands for Special Economic Zones.

(For more details on this record see: “Kerala’s Stalinist-led government pursuing pro-business agenda”.)

A WSWS reporting team also traveled to Manesar to interview striking MSIL workers and their supporters. One worker at the nearby Suzuki Powertrain plant said, “They don’t treat us as human beings. The supervisors threaten workers the way British colonialists used to treat the people.”

Isolated by the Stalinist unions once again, the MSEU abruptly called off the strike and its leaders were bribed to quit their jobs. Assessing the defeat, the WSWS condemned the treachery of the AITUC and CITU union federations. Referring to the MSEU, the WSWS article also pointed to the “fatal limitations of a perspective that does not go beyond trade union militancy, that accepts the capital-labor relationship as permanent and inviolable and seeks merely to get the best terms for workers’ sale of their labor-power.”

The MSEU, we said, “had no strategy for mobilizing the working class as an independent political force to defeat the line-up of the state government, police and courts behind Maruti Suzuki and to counter the machinations of the labor federations, who feared that the Manesar workers’ struggle would disrupt their collaboration with the employers.”

The statement continued, “A struggle for decent wages and working conditions and basic democratic rights requires the development of a movement of the working class that combines militant industrial action with political struggle against big business, the government and the whole bourgeois order.”

The autoworkers regrouped and reorganized into the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) and, after a series of other struggles, forced the company to officially recognize the MSWU at the end of March 2012. However, this victory was short lived.

On July 18, 2012, management and hired thugs provoked a confrontation with workers, which led to a fire and the death of a plant manager, which was used as a pretext to arrest hundreds of workers, fire thousands and smash the MSWU.

In a July 23, 2012 article the WSWS denounced the witch hunt and cited statements by MSWU President Ram Meher—one of the 13 workers later condemned to life in prison—refuting management’s claims. We interviewed a worker at the plant who explained that police were hunting fleeing workers like animals, using a loudspeaker to announce “that those who help to catch a Maruti Suzuki worker will be awarded 500 rupees (US \$9).”

After the roundup and arrest of 148 workers, the WSWS issued a major statement on December 6, 2012 calling on workers throughout India and around the world to come to the defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers. It denounced the Congress Party-led state government in Haryana, saying it was “determined to make an example of the Maruti Suzuki workers so as to intimidate the working class and demonstrate to foreign and domestic capital that it will do everything in its power to ensure that they are supplied with a regimented, cheap-labor workforce.”

In 2013, the WSWS reported on the conditions of the imprisoned workers who were subjected to torture and the eruption of protests involving thousands of sacked workers, villagers and relatives of the frame-up victims.

In early 2014, the WSWS interviewed Rajendra Pathak, one of the leading lawyers defending the workers, who said the “judiciary acts on the agenda of the capitalists.” We also conducted an extensive interview with Mahabir Dhiman, a spokesman for the MSWU Provisional Committee, which was set up after the incarceration of the entire union leadership. Dhiman told the WSWS, “The government, courts and police are all stacked against us.”

This was confirmed in the statement of a Haryana High Court judge cited in a WSWS report on the July 2014 decision to deny workers bail. Acknowledging the naked class interests behind the persecution of the workers, the judge declared, “Foreign investors are not likely to invest money in India out of fear of labour unrest.”

Throughout 2015 and 2016, the WSWS continued its coverage, including an interview with Indian filmmaker Rahul Roy and a review of his film “The Factory,” about the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

In March 2015, we reported on the court decision to grant bail to 77 of the almost 150 incarcerated workers, after they had spent almost two-and-a-half years in jail, because the company and police could not come up with any “eye-witnesses” to their alleged crimes. The WSWS also reported on a wave of strikes by Indian autoworkers in March 2016, including in Chennai, known as “India’s Detroit,” and a one-day general strike on September 2, 2016 involving tens of millions of Indian workers against the pro-investor policies of the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In March 2017 the WSWS reported on the conviction and brutal sentencing of 13 Maruti Suzuki workers—including the entire elected leadership of the MSWU—for “culpable homicide” (murder) and 18 others for rioting and other serious criminal offenses. Days later, on March 20, the ICFI issued a statement, which opened, “Workers across India, throughout Asia and around the world must come to the defense of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers whom an Indian court has cruelly and vindictively sentenced to life imprisonment.”

Since the convictions and sentencing, the WSWS has written dozens of articles on the international campaign to free these class war prisoners, exposing the bogus character of the charges against them, and explaining the necessity to mobilize the working class internationally against capitalist exploitation.

This coverage is a vital resource. It should be drawn upon in making the facts of the Maruti Suzuki case known to workers and young people around the world and in demonstrating how their frame-up epitomizes contemporary global class relations and the urgency of the international working class unifying its struggles.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact