

Indian authorities seek to imprison more Maruti Suzuki workers on frame-up charges

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The government of the northwest Indian state of Haryana is set to challenge the acquittal of 117 former Maruti Suzuki auto workers who were exonerated by a court earlier this year on frame-up charges.

The charges arose from a July 2012 management-provoked altercation and fire at the company's Manesar plant that resulted in the death of a company manager. The Japanese-owned automaker, Indian state and political establishment used the July 18, 2012 events to launch a legal witch hunt against workers at the car assembly plant—which had emerged as a center of opposition to sweatshop conditions in the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt on the outskirts of India's capital, Delhi—and to purge its workforce.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government has also said it plans to seek stiffer sentences for 18 workers convicted of “rioting” and other charges related to the incident. The men were given jail terms ranging from 3 to 5 years.

Haryana's Advocate General, Raj Mahajan, told the press last Thursday that the state's appeal against the verdict has been prepared and will soon be submitted in High Court.

In March, a district court in Gurugram (Gurgaon) convicted 31 former Maruti Suzuki workers on charges stemming from the 2012 events. Thirteen of the 31 were convicted on trumped-up murder charges related to the death of the manager and received life-sentences to be served in India's brutal prison system. Those jailed for life included the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), an independent union workers built through a series of militant strikes and occupations in 2011-12 in opposition to a pro-company, government-backed union.

They are victims of a legal vendetta. The workers' only “crime” is to have opposed the poverty wages and brutal work-regimen the transnational companies impose on workers in India's new, globally-connected industries.

The court acquitted the 117 workers in the face of incontrovertible evidence that the police and prosecution had fabricated evidence, coached witnesses and illegally

colluded with Maruti Suzuki management.

Defence lawyers showed that police had arrested 87 of the 117 on the basis of lists supplied by a senior Maruti Suzuki official who was not even employed at the Manesar plant and was not a witness to the altercation. Later, fearing that this would come out in court, the police fabricated evidence, getting four Maruti Suzuki labour contractors to claim that they had implicated the 87 men.

The police's illegal actions against the 87 were in keeping with the state's conduct throughout the case. Police failed to carry out elementary forensic tests on key pieces of evidence. The prosecution changed basic parts of its narrative, including what weapons workers purportedly used in their alleged attack on company managers. The prosecution failed to tie any Maruti Suzuki worker to the mysterious fire that erupted in the factory in the midst of the altercation, although the fire was the crux of the prosecution case as it led to the death by asphyxiation of the company manager.

Yet the judge willfully ignored all this and upheld the frame-up charges against the 31, including the MSWU leaders.

The Haryana state government's appeal of the convictions and sentence is a further vindictive measure. It is aimed at intimidating workers across India and proving to big business that the authorities and political establishment can be counted on to stamp out any resistance to cheap-labor conditions in the auto plants or other manufacturing facilities. Government and legal officials have themselves repeatedly said that an example must be made of Maruti Suzuki workers so as to reassure investors.

Maruti Suzuki is the Indian affiliate of the Japan-based Suzuki Motor Corporation. Suzuki is Japan's fourth largest auto company and is typical of the transnational corporations that scour the globe in search of the lowest production costs. As part of its cheap-labor regime, it employs a large proportion of super-exploited contract workers. Indeed, one of the MSWU's chief demands was to abolish contract labor.

Through the victimization of the Maruti Suzuki workers, management has intensified the exploitation of its workforce and further swollen investor profits. The automaker boasts that it currently produces one car every 12 seconds at its Indian plants.

Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley recently visited Japan to appeal for additional investment. While there, he met with Suzuki Motors chief Osamu Suzuki. Out of this meeting Suzuki promised to invest US\$880 million in the Indian state of Gujarat.

The trial of the Maruti Suzuki workers was a sham from beginning to end. A company attorney acted as a co-counsel for the prosecution. None of the workers at the factory were permitted to testify at the trial, while managers were given free rein to provide contradictory and transparently coached testimony.

The presiding judge refused to allow defense attorneys to call back prosecution witnesses for re-examination. A High Court found that this would deny the accused their right to a fair trial. But India's highest court, the Indian Supreme Court, intervened to sustain the frame-up and overturn the High Court ruling.

To provide a pseudo-legal pretext for convicting the 31, the trial judge made a series of rulings that essentially shifted the burden of proof from the shoulders of the prosecution on to the workers, in violation of basic legal norms.

In explaining why he called for the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers convicted of murder to be sentenced to death by hanging, Special Prosecutor Anurag Hooda declared: "Our industrial growth has dipped, FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] has dried up. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is calling for 'Make in India,' but such incidents are a stain on our image."

Likewise the establishment parties in India have thrown their support behind the frame-up. This includes the ruling Hindu supremacist BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the opposition Congress Party.

It was a Congress Party-led state government in Haryana that initiated the legal vendetta against the Maruti Suzuki workers and it is a BJP state government that is now appealing the acquittal of the 117 and seeking to impose harsher sentences on the 18 workers convicted on lesser charges.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* have launched a campaign to mobilize the international working class to win the immediate release of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers and the vacating of all charges against them. Pickets and meetings have been held in India and Sri Lanka and an international petition campaign has garnered significant

support.

The ICFI insists that no reliance can be placed on the corporate-controlled courts, the big business political parties or the pro-management official trade unions. Only the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class can secure the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

The campaign by supporters of the ICFI to defend the Maruti Suzuki workers is being carried on in the teeth of attempts by the official Stalinist-controlled unions to divert them into futile appeals to the establishment politicians and to shut down protests in their support. The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM has sought to sabotage the defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers because they support the Indian government's drive to attract overseas investment into the country based on holding down wages and suppressing workers struggles. The Stalinists fear the rebellious spirit of the Maruti Suzuki workers, just as they are hostile to any displays of independent initiative by the working class.

If the state authorities now feel emboldened to launch further vindictive measures against the Maruti Suzuki workers, it is a testament to the treacherous role of the Indian Stalinists, who have sought to bury the case. For weeks the CPM's English-language organ, *People's Democracy*, failed to even report the conviction of the 31 Maruti Suzuki worker and the life sentences given 13 of them, including all 12 members of the MSWU executive.

The ICFI and the WSWS urge workers all over the world to come to the defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers. In challenging sweatshop conditions, they were striking a blow for workers all over the world. Conversely, if Suzuki and the Indian ruling elite are able to successfully frame up and incarcerate these militant workers, it will only strengthen and embolden the transnationals and their political hirelings.

We encourage workers all over the world to sign the online petition to oppose the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers and make this case known widely among workers all over the world.



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