On-the-spot report from India

Maruti Suzuki worker condemns court verdict as “pre-determined”

Our correspondents
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A World Socialist Web Site *reporting team travelled to Delhi, India’s capital, and the nearby Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt last month to speak with those fighting to overturn the frame-up convictions and brutal sentences imposed on militant workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar.*

On March 18, a Gurgaon district court judge condemned 13 autoworkers to life in prison on trumped-up murder charges , arising from a July 18, 2012 company-provoked, factory floor altercation and fire in which a company manager died from smoke inhalation. Another 18 workers were given three- to five-year prison terms on lesser charges.

The 13 workers jailed for life include the entire 12-member executive committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed in 2011-12 in a rank-and-file rebellion against the plant’s pro-company, state-supported union.

The Indian ruling elite is determined to make an example of the Maruti Suzuki workers to intimidate the working class and demonstrate to foreign investors that they can be counted on to ruthlessly suppress all worker resistance to brutal exploitation.

In explaining why he had urged the 13 workers be sentenced to death by hanging at their March 17 sentencing hearing, Anurag Hooda , the special prosecutor appointed by the Haryana state government, 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.”

The corporate-controlled media in India and the major trade union federations have maintained a virtual blackout about the fate of the imprisoned workers. For weeks, People’s Democracy*, the English-language newspaper of the principal Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), failed to print a single word about the conviction and brutal sentences meted out to the Maruti Suzuki workers.*

To break this conspiracy of silence, our reporters interviewed members of the MSWU Provisional Committee—which took the helm of the union after the mass arrests of union leaders and rank-and-file workers and the purging of the factory’s workforce by the Japanese-owned company. The WSWS also spoke to autoworkers who were arrested, kept in jail for years without bail and finally released when prosecutors could not provide a shred of evidence against them.

The WSWS has conducted a detailed examination *of how the company, the police, prosecutors and judges, backed by Indian Union and Haryana state authorities led by the Bharatiya Janata (BJP) and Congress parties, railroaded the workers for the death of human resource manager, A wanish Dev .*

Our reporters in India spoke with defence attorneys active in the case about this travesty of justice and further legal efforts on behalf of the condemned men.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the World Socialist Web Site *are engaged in an international campaign to mobilize the working class and all those who defend democratic rights against this monstrous frame-up and to demand the immediate freedom of these courageous workers.*

The Maruti Suzuki workers are representative of the hundreds of millions of new workers that capitalist globalization has created in India, China and across Asia, Africa and Latin America. These workers are not just objects of exploitation, but a mighty social force and a powerful ally of workers in the advanced capitalist countries. Workers in North America, Europe and Japan must reject the economic nationalism and chauvinism promoted by Trump, Le Pen and the trade unions, and join forces with the workers of Asia, Latin America and Africa in the struggle for decent, secure jobs and social rights, and against imperialist war, one of whose principal aims is the re-enslavement of the masses in the historically oppressed countries.

In challenging sweatshop exploitation, the Maruti Suzuki workers were striking a blow not only for workers in India, but for workers around the world. Their defence is a vital first step in forging the international unity of the working class that is needed to fight global capital—that is, in making the objective unity of the international working class a conscious political strategy.

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Jitendra Kumar, a MSWU Provisional Committee member, spoke with WSWS reporters at the union’s office in Manesar. Kumar, who originates from the Rewari district in Haryana, was hired as an apprentice at Maruti Suzuki’s plant in Gurgaon in 2005 after he completed welding courses at an Indian Technical Institute (ITI). He was recruited to the Manesar plant, 10 miles away, as a trainee in 2009 and became a permanent worker in 2010.

Kumar reviewed the workers’ struggle to form an independent union and fight the hated contract labour system and slave-like conditions at the factory. “Learning that workers at the Honda auto plant in Gurgaon managed to get some benefits after forming a union, we thought at the Manesar plant if we formed a union we could also get our conditions improved. The management tried to impose MUKU [the company-controlled Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union] on us, but the workers rejected it. We formed MSEU [Maruti Suzuki Employees Union] and organised a series of struggles, strikes and occupations and faced a lockout too.”

The formation of the MSWU and the fight against contract labour

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Kumar described how the Manesar workers went ahead to form the MSWU following management's drive to break the MSEU and demoralize workers by threatening its principal leaders with dismissal, then bribing them to quit their jobs.

The principal demand raised by the MSWU concerned the thousands of temporary contract workers at the Manesar plant who are paid a fraction of the wages of permanent workers, although they do the same work. The MSWU demanded that these workers be "regularised," i.e., turned into full-time employees with the same job security, pay and benefits as the veteran permanent workers.

"Our union raised the regularisation of contract workers as our first demand from management. They insisted we drop this demand and move onto others. But the union pressed on and said before raising any other demands, the management must first settle the issue of contract workers."

Kumar said the demand for regularising the contract workers came from rank-and-file workers who were permanent and full-time. "We, permanent workers, worked alongside the contract workers and became very friendly with them. Permanent workers thought if they had certain protections and benefits their contract colleagues should have the same. That is why they asked the union to raise the demand for the regularisation of contract workers."

After management was forced to recognise the MSWU in April 2012, Kumar said, company officials sought to manufacture a pretext to witch-hunt workers and smash the new union. This is what occurred on July 18, 2012, when a manager used a casteist slur against a worker and then suspended him. When workers came to his defence, they were accosted by company thugs, known as "bouncers" in India. Awanish Dev, a human resource manager who was sympathetic to the workers, was later found dead, having been overcome by smoke from a fire of still unexplained origins.

This provocation was used by police to round up and jail 148 workers based on lists provided by management. The company then sacked 546 permanent workers and about 1,800 contract workers at the plant in August 2012.

"The management thought it could control MSWU like it did MUKU. They tried, but when that failed, they decided to destroy the MSWU. If they couldn't smash the MSWU, management knew, they would be unable to keep the contract workforce, which was a huge source of profits."

Commenting on the conviction and brutal sentences for the Maruti Suzuki workers, Kumar said, "Well before the judge announced the verdict, the outcome had been predetermined. The trial proceedings were just a show. In delivering the verdict the message of the judge to the industrialists was that the government is with them."

The role of the Stalinist parties and their affiliated unions

The WSWS reporters asked Kumar about the role played by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)—the trade union federations affiliated respectively to the two Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The Stalinist unions systematically isolated the Manesar workers' struggle against Maruti Suzuki's cheap-labour regime and the joint company-government witch-hunt of militant workers. This paved the way for the frame-up of the Manesar workers.

"Those central unions are not eager to fight for workers," Kumar said. "They are only keen on expanding their membership. These unions are dividing workers. When independent unions like MSWU emerged [in the Gurgaon-Manesar belt] and we requested help from the central unions they did not support us. Instead they asked us to affiliate with them. We approached AITUC for assistance to organize a rally in support [of the victimised Maruti Suzuki workers] and they told us to organise it ourselves. 'Outsiders can't help,' they said. 'Do not demand outside help.' Basically, they tried to sabotage our movement.

"Most of my friends and fellow workers know the central unions are not working for workers' rights. Instead they are working to control workers' anger towards the government. They claim they are for workers—but they are really with the management to control workers. They know if the workers are not controlled, they will rebel. So, they pretend they are for workers when they are against us."

Our reporters explained that the treachery of the CITU and AITUC has its roots in the reactionary nationalist politics of their affiliated parties, the CPM and CPI. The Stalinist parties are committed to the Indian elite's policy of transforming India into a cheap labour platform for global capital. At the national level, the CPM and CPI have backed pro-capitalist governments, mainly led by the Congress Party, that have pursued this pro-investor agenda. At the same time, the Stalinist parties have implemented like policies whenever they have formed the state government in West Bengal and Kerala. The CPM and CPI share the same fear as the Congress and the Hindu supremacist BJP: that the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle can become a catalyst for a far broader movement of Indian workers against sweatshop conditions and state repression.

Of the 546 permanent workers sacked by management in August 2012, 362 were never charged with, let alone convicted of, any wrongdoing in regards to the July 18 altercation. Kumar is among this group. "After sacking us," he said, "management asked a labour court to approve the action. After two and a half years, the management withdrew the application, claiming it did not need permission from a labour court to sack workers.

"When the MSWU filed the case against the sackings it was taken to the Gurgaon Labour Courts in September 2012. We argued that there were not any grounds for sacking us since none of us were charged in relation to the July 2012 incident. Management claimed we had not been taken back because of their 'loss of confidence' in us. They cited a company order that if management feels any worker is going to harm the company or its properties it can remove that worker. The case is still going on in the Gurgaon Labour Courts.

"However, on March 2, 2015, the labour court fined the company 100,000 rupees (US$1,544) for each sacked worker. Management went to High Court in May 2015 and got a stay against that fine. Now this case is in the High Court."

Kumar said the MSWU received support from other independent unions in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and formed a Trade Union Council (TUC) to carry out a joint campaign against the witch-hunt of the Maruti Suzuki workers and to improve conditions of workers in the area.

While the greatest unity of workers is needed, the WSWS reporters explained, trade union militancy is not enough to fight the joint attacks of the employers and the government. Workers are confronting global corporations and an entire political establishment, from the government at the centre and state levels to the police and the courts, that defend the wealth and power of the capitalist class and the extraction of profit from the working class through brutal exploitation.

To break the economic and political domination of the corporate and financial elite, the working class had to be organized politically, based on the program of internationalism and socialism. The international defence campaign to free the Maruti Suzuki workers, our reporters said, was aimed at forging the international unity of the working class.

Kumar responded, "What you are doing internationally is right. We appreciate it."

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