

Sri Lankan free trade zone workers call for release of Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality supporters in Sri Lanka have won important support from Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers for the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) campaign to free jailed Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India.

In March this year, 13 leaders of the workers at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki car plant in India were sentenced to life imprisonment on trumped-up murder charges concocted by the company and the Indian police. Another 18 workers were given three- to five-year jail terms on lesser charges.

The judiciary and the Indian political establishment, including the previous Congress-led government and the current administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, backed this blatant anti-democratic attack on autoworkers.

The Katunayake FTZ is the oldest and largest free trade zone in Sri Lanka. Established in 1978, the zone, located near Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport, provides cheap labour and lower taxes to scores of international manufacturers and local businesses.

About 40,000 workers are currently employed in the FTZ. They face similar working conditions to those at India's Haryana-Gurgaon industrial belt where Maruti Suzuki is located. Over the past decade, companies in the Katunayake FTZ have progressively reduced the number of permanent jobs, replacing them with contract workers, and driving up exploitation rates to match their global competitors.

After being told by SEP supporters about the frame-up and imprisonment of the Maruti Suzuki workers, Muditha, who works for Hydramani garments in the FTZ, said: "We face this kind of exploitation in Sri Lanka with the introduction of contract jobs. Young

men from the village areas are being subjected to exploitation during the day and for night work by the manpower companies. No one talks about this situation. I agree with an international program to unite workers against this kind of attack."

Muditha said he had seen news reports that some workers in India and Bangladesh were not being paid wages, just given meals. This, he said, exposes the Modi government, which "tries to pretend that India is a highly developed country."

Commenting on his own working conditions, Muditha said: "I joined Hydramani because I found it too difficult to work at the Smart Shirt factory. I worked continuously for two months, including doing overtime, but wasn't even able to earn 50,000 rupees [\$US326]. This is the real situation facing workers."

Two women workers from the Nest factory endorsed the ICFI's campaign, saying: "We are ready to extend any support for the release of these workers. If we don't who will support them?"

SEP teams distributed *World Socialist Web Site* articles on the Maruti Suzuki workers and had extended discussions with FTZ workers in nearby residential areas. Many workers condemned the imprisonment of the Indian autoworkers and said they should be immediately released. Several workers with email accounts signed the online petition launched by the WSWWS.

A young working couple from the Katunayake Crystal garment company discussed the poor working conditions in India and rising unemployment in Sri Lanka. "We are from Anamaduwa [in the North-Western Province]," the couple said. "But we found that farming there was difficult and the drought is endless. Although there are also factories in our area, the wages are very low, so we can imagine how the

poor in a large country like India are being exploited.”

Prasanna, originally from Anuradhapura, works at the Smart Shirt factory. He explained how FTZ workers fought against the former President Mahinda Rajapakse government’s attempts to slash workers’ pension funds.

Workers suddenly walked out in protest, he said. “On that day our factory’s gates were locked to try and prevent us joining the struggle, but workers from other factories unlocked our gates. Police were deployed to suppress the struggle and one of our colleagues, Roshen Chanaka, was shot dead. Many other workers were attacked by the police.”

Prasanna spoke about his job and living conditions. After seven years working for the company his basic monthly salary is just 17,000 rupees. This increases to 24,000 rupees if he does overtime, he explained

Prasanna’s wife works in the same factory and they are expecting their first child. The factory provides three months’ paid maternity leave. The couple’s wages are so low, however, that she will have to return to work, forcing Prasanna’s mother to come and look after the baby. They are currently living in single-room accommodation, which is difficult. The rent is 3,500 rupees and after their baby is born they will face many other expenses.

Other Katunayake FTZ employees noted the similarity between their wages and conditions and those confronting the Maruti Suzuki workers. Breaks during the day for Maruti Suzuki employees are less than 45 minutes in total—30 minutes for lunch and 7 minutes each for morning and afternoon tea. This is exactly the same as the time for work breaks in the Katunayake FTZ.

The basic monthly salary of a Maruti Suzuki worker is 8,000 Indian rupees (\$US123) with an additional 8,000 rupees for overtime work. If workers are absent for a single day during the month they lose an attendance money payment. These harsh penalties are also imposed on Katunayake FTZ workers.



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