

The Maruti Suzuki frame-up and the history of international labor defense campaigns

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The call by the International Committee of the Fourth International for a worldwide campaign in defense of 13 Maruti Suzuki autoworkers who were condemned to life in prison in India rests on a long tradition of international workers' action on behalf of the victims of capitalist "justice."

The 13 workers were convicted March 10 in a frame-up trial in Haryana state based on bogus murder charges stemming from a 2011 altercation at the company's Manesar car assembly plant in which a manager was killed. Twelve of the 13 workers were members of the leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) formed by the workers in opposition to the pro-company, stooge union at the factory. Another 18 workers were convicted on lesser charges.

The frame-up is aimed at intimidating workers and suppressing resistance to the Indian ruling elite's efforts to transform the country into a cheap labor platform for transnational corporations. The convictions came in the face of evidence presented by defense attorneys of fabricated evidence, collusion between company officials, the police and prosecutors and the coaching of witnesses. The concocted character of the case is further demonstrated by the fact that the manager killed in the altercation was the only management official sympathetic to the workers, and the fact that the judge was forced to exonerate 117 of the 148 originally accused because of the lack of even fabricated evidence.

In the best tradition of the socialist workers movement, the ICFI is seeking to mobilize the working class in every country and all defenders of democratic rights to demand the freedom of these workers.

In 1927, James P. Cannon, who would go on to lead the American Trotskyist movement, summed up the principles that must guide such an international labor defense campaign. "Our policy is the policy of the class struggle. It puts the center of gravity in the protest movement of the workers of America and the entire world. It puts all faith in the power of the masses and no faith whatever in the justice of the courts. While favoring all possible legal proceedings, it calls for agitation, publicity, demonstrations—organized protests on a national and international scale. It calls for unity and solidarity of all workers on this burning issue, regardless of conflicting views on other questions."

Throughout the history of the working-class movement, the most class-conscious and militant workers have always fought for the independent mobilization of the working class to fight labor frame-ups. This has been true particularly in the United States, the heart of world capitalism, where the ruling class has met every manifestation of class struggle with violent, bitter opposition, unleashing its armed thugs against striking workers, antiwar protestors, civil rights activists, socialist campaigners and other expressions of anticapitalist sentiment.

The concept of international labor defense dates back well over one hundred years. International May Day, established by the Second International in 1891, commemorates the Haymarket Massacre and frame-up in Chicago in 1886 that developed out of a nationwide general strike in the US beginning on May 1 called to demand an eight-hour workday. At a

rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago on May 4 a provocateur threw a bomb. Police then opened fire on the crowd and in the ensuing melee eight police officers were killed along with numerous civilians.

The bombing evoked a hysterical response by the US ruling class, with hundreds of immigrant and left-wing workers detained or arrested. Eventually eight leading anarchists were convicted of murder and seven sentenced to death. There was no serious attempt to tie the men to the bombing. They were prosecuted and found guilty entirely because of their views and role in organizing the working class.

One of the accused, August Spies, defiantly told the judge after being sentenced to death, "But if you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery, the wage slaves, expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but here, and there, and behind you, and in front of you, and everywhere, the flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand."

Four of the men were eventually hanged and another committed suicide. The harsh sentences and brutal ruling class justice led to the creation of an international defense effort aimed at securing the release of the jailed anarchists. Hundreds of thousands turned out for the funeral of the executed men and soon after May Day became an international symbol of working class solidarity.

Finally, in 1893, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld granted the three surviving defendants absolute pardon, acknowledging the frame-up nature of the convictions.

In 1906 Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer and George Pettibone, three leaders of the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), faced frame-up charges in relation to the murder of the former governor of the state of Idaho.

A bomb planted by a dubious and unstable provocateur, Harry Orchard, had killed former governor Frank Steunenberg in 1905. Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone were charged with the killing based largely on their syndicalist ideas, not on any actual physical evidence tying them to Orchard.

The men were essentially kidnapped from their union offices in Colorado and transported to Boise, Idaho to stand trial.

The three IWW leaders were saved from almost certain death only by the militant intervention of the working class.

Workers' organizations mounted a massive international defense effort, spearheaded by American Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs. The defense campaign secured early on the assistance of prominent defense attorney Clarence Darrow. Russian writer Maxim Gorky visited the United States and wired the jailed men, "greetings from the workers of Russia."

In the weeks leading up to the trial, massive demonstrations were held in major US cities, including New York. The trial began in May 1907. At its conclusion, the jury found Haywood not guilty in relation to the death of

Steunenberg. Moyer was subsequently found not guilty and the prosecution decided not to prosecute Pettibone.

Another case that saw the international mobilization of the working class involved the frame-up of Warren Billings and Tom Mooney in the 1916 "Preparedness Day" bombing in San Francisco that killed 10 spectators. The patriotic demonstration had been organized by business groups with the support of then-president Woodrow Wilson to promote patriotic fervor and to lay the groundwork for eventual US entry into World War I.

Mooney, a union organizer and a Socialist Party leader, was singled out by police officials based on his antiwar stance and his militant union activities. Sentenced to death by the US courts after a sham of a trial, he was saved from execution in large measure by a protest of Russian workers, organized by the Bolshevik Party and headed by Vladimir Lenin, outside the American embassy in Petrograd in April 1917. The protest so embarrassed the US government, which was courting the newly installed Russian Provisional government at the time, that then-US President Woodrow Wilson urgently requested that the governor of California commute Mooney's sentence to life in prison.

More international protests followed. Finally, in 1939 Mooney was pardoned and freed after 22 years in prison at the notorious San Quentin prison. He tragically died in 1942.

After the victory of the Russian working class in the October 1917 Bolshevik-led revolution, the newly formed Communist International called for the establishment of an International Labor Defense committee aimed at freeing victims of ruling class justice. Formally nonpartisan, it appealed for the defense of frame-up victims from all over the world based on the methods of the class struggle. Its ranks included US Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs, American Communist and former leader of the Industrial Workers of the World James P. Cannon played a leading role in the early years of ILD.

One of the first cases pursued by ILD was the defense of Italian-American anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were convicted of robbery and murder in 1920 in connection with a payroll robbery. The case grew out of the anti-Bolshevik and anti-immigrant witch hunts stoked by the US ruling class in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution. It followed the Palmer raids in which over 4,000 foreign-born workers accused of being communists and radicals were seized and 1,000 deported.

Both men had been involved in strikes, political agitation and antiwar activities. The defense alleged prosecution misconduct, including perjured testimony and planted evidence. The trial itself took place in a lynch mob atmosphere, cultivated by lurid accounts in the big-business press.

The judge sentenced Sacco and Vanzetti to death in the electric chair; however, mass protests by workers internationally stayed the hand of the executioners for seven years.

The ILD organized a worldwide campaign of protest against the convictions. Mass demonstrations took place around the world in every major city. In Toronto, demonstrators picketed the American embassy. In Montevideo, Uruguay a protest strike shut down the city for 24 hours. There were also protest strikes in Boston and New York City and other smaller towns across the United States. In New York City alone hundreds of thousands of garment workers participated in a one-day general strike organized by the Socialist Party and Communist Party. In his last public statement before his death Debs wrote a stirring appeal distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies.

The courts carried out the death sentence in August 1927 amid international protests, including mass rallies in New York, Berlin, London, Copenhagen, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Helsingfors and Johannesburg.

Writing in the wake of the executions, Cannon declared, "There is power in heroic example to stir the imagination of the masses and inspire in them the courage and solidarity and faith without which there can be no

fight and no victory. The martyrs of 1887 and the martyrs of August of this year have alike set before the present and the coming generation an example of noble dignity and selfless daring unsurpassed in the history of all times and all classes."

The campaign to defend Sacco and Vanzetti exposed starkly before tens of millions of workers the real nature of capitalist justice in America. The defense campaign, which united millions of workers in mass protests and political strike action around the world, was a powerful mobilization of the international working class and a heroic example. It helped set the stage for later successful defense campaigns, including the defense of the Scottsboro boys, African American youth framed up for rape during the period of lynch law violence in the US state of Alabama.

The period following the defeat of the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike in the United States saw the ruling class revive the methods of labor frame-up. In contrast to an earlier period, where the reformist leaders of the trade unions were forced in many cases to give at least verbal support to the victims of state repression, the degenerated, increasingly corporatist unions in the United States regularly joined with the capitalist press and courts in denouncing militant workers caught in the clutches of the state.

In the mid-1980s, four AT Massey miners in eastern Kentucky—Donnie Thornsberry, David Thornsberry, Arnold Heightland and James Darryl Smith—were the victims of one of the most vicious frame-ups since the formation of the mass industrial unions in the 1930s. The miners were arrested by FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) agents on federal conspiracy charges, in an elaborate frame-up supervised by the US Justice Department and based on the testimony of paid stool pigeons. The frame-up was the outcome of the isolation and betrayal of the strike by 2,000 AT Massey miners by the United Mine Workers (UMW).

According to the prosecution, the men opened fire from a hillside on a scab coal truck near Canada, Kentucky in May 1985. So flimsy was the evidence the state authorities made no attempt to charge the men with murder. Instead they were charged with interference with interstate commerce, a federal crime. The men were not arrested until 1987. The prosecution witnesses consisted of scabs, bounty hunters and perjurers, the same type of degenerate social elements found in every labor frame-up trial. No physical evidence linked the men to the shooting and several had solid alibis. A fifth miner, Paul Smith, accused of being the actual trigger man in the shooting, was found innocent by a jury in a separate trial. Despite this, the four men were found guilty by a predominantly middle-class jury in a trial held outside the mining areas. The judge then handed down the maximum prison sentences of 35-40 years.

The UMW refused to issue a statement defending the miners and then, to add insult to injury, cut off strike pay to the families of the men following their conviction. As a result of their isolation by the official labor movement, the four were forced to serve out their jail sentences, despite the anger and opposition of militant workers throughout the coalfields. The silence of the UMW on the case encouraged further provocations by the coal companies, culminating in the shooting death of John McCoy, another A.T. Massey miner from West Virginia, in 1990. The company thugs responsible for the killing were never arrested.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its American section, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, waged a determined campaign in defense of the framed-up A.T. Massey miners, campaigning throughout the working class for their release. The Workers League defied physical threats by UMW officials to bring its campaign to coal miners and other workers in the mining areas of Kentucky and West Virginia.

During this same period, the Workers League played the central role in the acquittal of Paul Massey, a victim of an entrapment scheme in relation to a strike against Milburn Colliers in West Virginia. Massey gained acquittal after thousands of miners signed Workers League petitions

demanding his release and the party's exposure of the frame-up aided Massey's defense attorney to show that his supposed accomplice in the alleged bomb plot was in fact a provocateur and BATF informant.

Today, the class struggle is more globally interconnected than ever before. The persecution of the Maruti Suzuki workers is the high point of a class war being waged against workers in every country. The challenge by these workers, in turn, to the cheap labor and sweatshop regime in India is a blow on behalf of workers in the United States, Germany, Japan and around the world.

This brief overview of some of the most notable labor frame-ups underscores that the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki workers will not be won through relying on the capitalist courts, much less the corrupt, pro-company and nationalist unions, but only by mobilizing the strength of the international working class. It is in this spirit that the International Committee of the Fourth International is seeking to revive the powerful traditions of international labor defense.



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