

“There is no evidence to prove any charge”

## Four months since the frame-up and sentencing of Maruti Suzuki workers in India

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This week marks four months since a court in the northern Indian state of Haryana convicted and sentenced 13 autoworkers from the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar to life in prison on trumped-up murder charges.

After strikes, plant occupations and other militant actions forced management to recognize the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the company staged a provocation on July 18, 2012. It threatened to fire a worker who objected to a manager's casteist slur and later unleashed hired thugs (“bouncers”) to attack workers who came to his defense. In the midst of the altercation, a fire mysteriously erupted, which resulted in the death from asphyxiation of a human resource manager.

The workers were convicted on March 10 of this year. Eight days later, Judge Rajinder Pal Goyal condemned them to spend the rest of their lives in India's notorious prison system.

The workers are the victims of a monstrous frame-up, carried out by the Japanese-owned company and state authorities who are determined to crush all resistance to the sweatshop conditions that prevail in India's free trade zones and industrial belts.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* have launched an international campaign to defend these heroic workers. We encourage workers, students and all those who defend democratic rights to sign the petition demanding the immediate release of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

During the trial, the prosecution, which was originally seeking the death penalty, did not present a shred of evidence connecting the workers to the death of Avineesh Dev, the only manager at the plant who was sympathetic to the workers' struggle.

Twelve of the 13 men are leaders of the MSWU, which was built in a rebellion against a state- and company-sanctioned stooge union that connived in the workers' brutal exploitation. Following the July 18, 2012 company provocation, thousands of workers were fired, hundreds were arrested and the MSWU, which had won widespread support for opposing the hated contract worker system, was smashed.

The imprisoned men are: MSWU President Ram Meher, 30; Vice President Sohan Kumar, 28; General Secretary Sarabjeet Singh, 24; Secretary Pawan Kumar, 26; Legal Advisor Ajmer Singh, 27; Treasurer Suresh Kumar, 32; Chief Patron Sandeep Dhillon, 31; Ram Bilas, 25; Jiya Lal, 31; Amarjeet Singh, Dhanraj Bambi, Pradeep Gujjar and Yogesh Kumar. All come from poor rural areas and most have small children, wives and elderly parents who are entirely dependent on their lost incomes. (Background information on the condemned men can be accessed on this Facebook photo album.)

The *World Socialist Web Site* has published a detailed analysis of the frame-up, which involved collusion between the police and company, the coaching of witnesses, and the fabrication of evidence by police and prosecutors in Haryana, at the time governed by the Congress Party. The police systematically failed to carry out rudimentary forensic tests that would have exonerated the condemned men. For his part, the judge repeatedly shifted the burden of proof from prosecutors to the accused, while excluding any testimony by workers who witnessed the events but were not charged on the grounds that they would be biased.

Nevertheless, so frivolous was the prosecution's case that Judge Goyal had to declare 117 of the 148 workers brought before his court innocent of all charges against them.

In addition to the 13 workers sentenced to life prison terms, 18 workers were convicted of lesser crimes and given sentences of between two and five years in prison. On Tuesday, the Punjab and Haryana Court granted bail to four former Maruti Suzuki workers—Jogender, Iqbal, Ramshabd Morya and Pradeep Kumar—who had been sentenced to five years. The court previously released 14 others sentenced to two years.

None of the 117 workers whom the court had to exonerate have received any compensation for being illegally sacked by the company and held in prison without bail for years after being caught up in the police roundup that followed the July 2012 confrontation.

Moreover, the vendetta against the exonerated and released men is not over. Last month, the Haryana government, now led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),

announced that it would appeal the release of the 117 workers and seek to stiffen the sentences given the 18 workers convicted on lesser charges.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with some of the exonerated workers during a trip to the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt just outside the Indian capital, New Delhi. They explained the difficulties their families faced during their time in prison and said they had no funds to file cases in the labor courts to demand the reinstatement of their jobs.

Subash from Panipat district in Haryana said he was arrested in August 2012. “The police searched my house and claimed to have found a steel rod. First, they asked me to come to the police station for an inquiry. I went there and surrendered, and then they arrested me.

“A total of 18 charges, including murder, arson and rioting, were leveled against me. The police tried to force me to confess for those charges but I refused. I am a father of a 14-year-old boy and a girl of eight years. My family and my parents suffered heavily while I was in jail for more than four years. My wife is not employed.”

Commenting on the murder verdict against the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers sentenced to life in prison, he said, “There is no evidence to prove any charge.”

Kamal Singh, 31, was arrested on August 17, 2012 at his home in Delhi. He said, “I had just been married for three months and my wife was pregnant. I was in jail for three-and-a-half years. I saw my child only after being released from jail, when he was three years old.

“Both my father, a worker, and my mother became seriously ill following my arrest. After I was arrested, my father was the only one earning any income in my family. He had to look after my wife and child too. I was a permanent worker at Manesar plant. Now I am unemployed.”

Commenting on his jail term, Kamal said, “You can’t see sunrise and sunset in the jail.”

The Maruti Suzuki workers have come under vicious and unrelenting attack because they challenged the class strategy of the Indian bourgeoisie, which aims to create the conditions for India to supplant China as the world’s principal cheap-labor hub. But their struggle also threatened the strategy of the global transnationals like Suzuki, which scour the world for the cheapest labor to maximize profits and shareholder returns.

As the Maruti Suzuki workers were being sentenced in March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with the heads of Suzuki and Toyota, and in May, Finance and Defense Minister Arun Jaitley met with Suzuki chairman, Osamu Suzuki, during a visit to Japan to strengthen economic and military-strategic ties. After the meeting, Suzuki announced that the company will invest another 100 billion yen (US\$880 million) to expand its newly built Gujarat production facilities in western India by the early 2020s.

For its part, Korean-based automaker Hyundai plans to invest

\$2 billion in India and has set a goal of annual output from India of 1 million vehicles by 2020-2021. US automakers Ford and General Motors already have assembly plants and other factories in the country, including in Chennai, which is known as “India’s Detroit.”

As part of his “Make in India” campaign, Modi has intensified the Indian ruling elite’s drive to woo investors, pushing through new socially regressive, pro-market “reforms.” These have included: sweeping cuts in social spending, the gutting of environmental regulations, an accelerated privatization drive, and allowing employers at small and medium-sized firms to “self-police” their compliance with labor and occupational health and safety standards.

Last month, more than 400 workers were arrested after police charged and beat workers and their families with lathi (heavy iron-bound bamboo sticks) for protesting in front of the Aisin Automotive components factory in Haryana. The workers, who face low wages and brutal conditions like their counterparts at the nearby Maruti Suzuki plant, were opposing the firing of dozens of casual workers after Haryana labor authorities rejected their application for an independent union.

The unions have again fallen silent on the Maruti Suzuki case, after calling a so-called “all-India day of protest” for which they did next to nothing to mobilize workers. Over the past quarter-century, the Stalinists of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, which control major trade union federations, have propped up a succession of governments that have pursued the ruling elite’s neo-liberal agenda to make India a sweatshop for world capital. In those states where the Stalinists have led the government, most notably West Bengal and Kerala, they have pursued what they themselves describe as “pro-investor” policies, including banning strikes in the IT sector and expropriating poor peasants for big business development projects.

In challenging their exploitation, the Maruti Suzuki workers have struck a blow not only for workers in India, but for workers around the world. Their defense is a vital step in forging the international unity of the working class that is needed to fight global capital.

The International Committee of the Fourth International’s campaign to free the Maruti Suzuki workers has already won the support of thousands of workers and young people throughout the world. But more must be done. We urge workers and young people to circulate the petition to demand their immediate release, share the Facebook page, and fight to mobilize the widest support in the working class to free these class-war prisoners.



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