

Aisin Automotive workers in India's Haryana state face a new company-government witchhunt

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Only a few months after 13 Maruti Suzuki workers in the company's car assembly plant at Manesar in Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled Haryana state were sentenced to life imprisonment on frame-up murder charges, another Japanese company, Aisin Automotive Haryana Private Limited, has launched a victimization of its workers. The Japanese-owned auto parts maker employs close to 800 in IMT Rohtak, Haryana.

The judicial frame-up of Maruti Suzuki workers was part of company-government joint vendetta against Manesar workers in retaliation for their struggle against sweatshop conditions and for forming an independent union in opposition to the company-stooge union. Now, Aisin workers are being witch-hunted for forming a union to fight similar slave labor conditions.

Aisin, which manufactures automobile parts like door latches and inside out handles, has another plant in the south Indian state of Karnataka. The company supplies parts to major automakers like Maruti, Honda and Toyota.

More than 400 workers are facing frame-up charges following their May 31 arrest, in a brutal crackdown aimed at breaking a month-long protest by about 800 Aisin workers and their family members outside the factory. A battalion of about 700 police personnel, called in at management's request, launched a brutal lathi (baton) charge against workers and family members who were in a *dharna* (sit-in-protest) outside the company gates. Even small children and the parents of workers were beaten up. 390 men and 35 women, Aisin workers and their supporters, were also arrested by the police.

Although female workers were released on bail the following day, male workers were kept in Sunarain jail in Rohtak and subjected to constant harassment. On June 1 workers held protests in New Delhi and Rohtak against the brutal police attack and the detention of the Aisin workers. Under conditions of growing opposition to this witch-hunt among workers in the area, 103 male workers were released

on personal bonds on June 3. Other workers were bailed out later after being kept in jail for about two weeks. All arrested workers are now out on bail and are facing frame-up charges.

Aisin workers were engaged in a months-long campaign against brutal and oppressive working conditions aimed at assuring super profits for the company. They are given only 12 seconds to assemble each product, with few or no water breaks and only a 15-minute tea break a day, apart from the lunch break. In order to speed up production, the number of workers per production line had been reduced from 25 to 18 and the target number of units to be produced per hour had been increased from 180 to 300.

Workers said they were punished for acts like drinking water and taking restroom breaks. They were subjected to verbal abuse, manhandling and even faced beatings by company thugs if anyone complained about the non-enforcement of India's meager labor laws. Women workers were subjected to sexual harassment. Leave was unpaid and frequently workers faced losing their jobs if they took a long leave. In a number of instances workers found they were replaced when returning from four or five days approved leave. Workers were poorly paid, earning a meager 6,800 rupees for casual workers and 8,620 rupees for trainees. Even permanent workers were not paid agreed wages.

The sweatshop conditions common in Haryana and other parts of industrial India are in part due to the fact that government policies have made agriculture economically unviable. Thus, unemployed youth from villages have no option but to come to the cities and work under brutal conditions.

Aisin workers decided to form a union to fight back. However, the Haryana state labor department on March 20 rejected their application for official recognition of the Aisin Automotive Haryana Mazdoor Union on the pretext that there were not enough members. As per modifications to the Trade Union Act 1926 passed by the Modi government soon

after it came to power in 2014, at least 10 percent of the workforce have to be members for a union to be recognized.

However, Aisin workers pointed out that they had enough members to form the union and that the company had wrongly shown a paper increase in the number of permanent employees so that the union application could be rejected. Although the company had 280 permanent workers and kept 250 as trainees and 150 workers on probation, it incorrectly showed 513 permanent workers in order to justify the rejection of the union's registration. In a telling incident, revealing the collusion between the company management and state labor department officials, management, through a Whatsapp message, informed workers of the decision to reject union registration 10 days before it was officially conveyed to them by the labor department.

On May 3 the company dismissed 20 casual workers active in forming the union. 600 other workers protested this unjustified sacking, resulting in the company declaring a lockout. The protesting workers were told to give an undertaking that they would not join any union and only then would they would be allowed in. However, they refused to sign the undertaking and started a protest outside factory gates demanding reinstatement of the 20 sacked workers. The workers' protest continued for a full month through May, in the scorching heat.

The state government labor commissioner in the arbitration meetings and mediation sessions lined up with company management in rejecting the workers' demands. With its hand strengthened by the open support of government labor officials, the company sacked 150 more workers and also lodged a FIR [First Information Report] at the local police station based on charges alleging that workers were carrying illegal firearms, thus preparing the brutal May 31 police attack.

Over 500 workers are continuing their protest 400 meters outside the factory gate, defying unbearable summer heat and also facing lack of basic necessities like drinking water. In a move aimed at breaking the workers protest, management has taken out a court order prohibiting any gathering within 400 meters of the factory gate. State police continue harassing protesting workers, prohibiting them from erecting even a makeshift tent and threatening them with severe consequences if they do not stop their campaign.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to break the workers' protest and force them back on the job under its slave labor regime, Aisin is running the factory using replacement workers. These newly hired workers are housed in a big tent under appalling conditions on the factory grounds. They are forced to work, eat and sleep on site. The company has not provided them with uniforms and required safety gear like special shoes and goggles. Management, to ensure their

complete subjugation, has seized all their documents, including identification.

Aisin workers have shown a real determination to fight. However, they must draw the necessary lessons from the years-long campaign by Maruti Suzuki workers against similar slave labor conditions in the face of a company-government vendetta.

India's main Stalinist organizations, particularly their unions, have played a treacherous role in paving the way for the witchhunt of Maruti Suzuki workers through their systematic isolation of the workers' determined struggle. They are now playing a similar role in relation to Aisin workers. The Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated to the main Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, has issued a statement "strongly" condemning the police attack and the arrest and detention of Aisin workers. It warns BJP-led Haryana state government against "trying to repeat 'Honda' or 'Maruti' in Aisin or elsewhere in the state."

This is empty rhetoric. In fact the Stalinists have assisted the earlier Congress-led and current BJP-led Haryana government, their police, courts and Maruti Suzuki management in launching and carrying through their witch-hunt against workers at the Manesar plant. Workers must reject those treacherous unions and their affiliated parties and decisively break from them politically and organizationally.

In their struggle against slave labor conditions Aisin workers confront a joint assault on the part of company management and the entire bourgeois political establishment, including the BJP government at both the federal and state levels, their police, courts and also labor officials. They must turn to fellow workers in Haryana and elsewhere throughout India, South Asia and internationally who face similar sweatshop conditions and a joint assault on the part of company management and state officials.

Workers must wage a united struggle against slave labor and cheap labor conditions. Such a fight must be directed towards building a new independent political movement of workers based on a socialist program against capitalist rule and for the establishment of a government based on workers and peasants



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