

Suicide attempt by Renault Nissan worker reveals brutal conditions in India's free trade zones

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A recent suicide attempt by a worker at Renault Nissan India's manufacturing plant in Oragadam Special Economic Zone (SEZ), 50 km from Chennai, has once again highlighted the brutal and inhuman conditions facing autoworkers in India.

The August 17 incident occurred with virtually no comment by the regional and national corporate-controlled media. It came to light only after *Thozhilalar koodam* (Workers Forum, tnlabour.in), an English-Tamil bilingual website with ties to Maoist-led organizations, reported the suicide attempt on September 3.

Renault Nissan is a leading global auto company and the second-largest car manufacturer in India. It was formed in the 1999 as an alliance of France-based Renault and Japan-based Nissan and employs nearly 450,000 workers globally. Renault Nissan is the leading plug-in electric car manufacturer in the world. The company began its Indian operations in Oragadam in 2010.

The Oragadam plant manufactures 480,000 cars per year and markets them in India and 106 countries around the world. The plant employs more than 10,000 workers, including regular, contract and apprentice workers.

Following a heated argument with the supervisor over his application for leave, an assembly shop floor worker in the plant attempted to poison himself by consuming soap oil. The supervisor not only refused to grant the worker's request for leave but also verbally abused him. The helpless worker, extremely frustrated by supervisor's response, attempted to kill himself.

The immediate intervention by co-workers, who witnessed the incident, saved the worker's life. They rushed him to the nearest Global Hospital where, after two days of treatment, he was discharged and has recovered.

The next day, the angry workers in the plant stopped

production for 20 minutes to protest the supervisor's refusal to grant leave to their co-worker and demand that the supervisor be disciplined for driving the worker to suicide.

The denial of leave was not the act of just a particularly sadistic supervisor but is the common practice of Renault Nissan and other global automakers in India to maximize the exploitation of workers and corporate profits. Though plant workers are eligible for casual leave with pay, each leave application has to be approved by the floor supervisor. In most cases supervisors deny leave, forcing workers to forgo time off or to go on "unapproved" leave facing a cut in one-day wages. Every month hundreds of workers lose pay for taking such leaves.

The victimized worker had reportedly already lost two days wages amounting to 2,000 rupees (US \$31.27) for his earlier such "unapproved" leave. The loss of these meagre wages is devastating for impoverished workers. Because the worker could not afford another pay cut, he challenged the supervisor.

In an earlier incident at the same Renault Nissan plant, which highlighted the lack of basic safety measures, Thiyagarajan Mahalingam, a 29-year-old junior engineer in the factory's maintenance department, was crushed to death on January 6 by a hydraulic press he was inspecting in the engine assembly section.

Sweatshop conditions are commonplace throughout the country's factories and are encouraged by successive central and state governments to attract foreign investment. Since coming to power in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has escalated the attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class in the name of Modi's "Make in India" campaign.

The sharpest expression of this ruling class offensive is

the witch-hunt against the Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in Manesar, Gurgaon in northern India Haryana state. Last March, 13 Maruti Suzuki workers were sentenced to life imprisonment on trumped-up murder charges in a brutal display of class justice aimed at intimidating and silencing workers and crushing the rising resistance to exploitation.

Twelve of the 13 imprisoned workers were leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed by workers in a rebellion against the company and the government-sanctioned stooge union. The July 2012 frame-up followed more than a year of militant strikes and protests against brutal conditions in the plant, including the lack of leave, arduous production quotas and the hated contract labour system, which prevail across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—a huge auto manufacturing centre that has sprung up on the outskirts of Indian capital Delhi.

India's main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and their affiliated union federations—the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) respectively—have systematically isolated the embattled Maruti Suzuki workers, thereby facilitating the company-government vendetta against them.

In Sriperumbudur, Oragadam and other nearby SEZs, many global auto and electronics corporations and auto parts companies extract vast profits with conditions similar to Maruti Suzuki. The Stalinist CITU and Maoist-linked unions are active in these SEZs and seek to restrict workers to a narrow trade unionist and nationalist outlook while boosting illusions in the Congress Party, the traditional party of the Indian ruling class, which also played the central role in the state persecution of the Maruti Suzuki workers.



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