Union in India organises hunger strike to block industrial action by Volkswagen workers

Deepal Jayasekera
23 January 2018

The trade union at German automaker Volkswagen's manufacturing plant in Chakan, near Pune in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, has organised a hunger strike by workers. While there is no doubt immense self-sacrifice and heroism among the workers, the union has called the protest to prevent a broader mobilisation of the working class against poverty wages and the company's demands to tie pay increases to higher productivity.

The fast-unto-death organised by the Volkswagen Employees Union (VEU) involves 11 out of about 3,200 workers attached to the plant. They have been on a hunger strike since January 8 to demand improved wages and oppose the company's new pay scheme. Hundreds of other Volkswagen workers are also sitting with the hunger strikers but the union has instructed them not to disrupt production. "We have urged our members not to stop work," VEU president Tushar Mhase told the media.

"For the last 14 months," Mhase said, "we have not received any raises. We have held several rounds of talks with the management, but they have not yielded any fruitful solution. Hence, we have resorted to hunger strike." Having kept the lid on any industrial action during dozens of rounds of talks with the transnational corporation, the union has now called this impotent protest to dissipate workers' anger.

Workers have not received any wage hike since December 2016, when the last wage revision expired. But refusing to increase hourly wages, the company is trying to impose its new remuneration scheme, which includes a "performance-related" wage component. According to that scheme, while 80 percent of the salary will be base pay the other 20 per cent will be tied to performance. This piecework scheme is designed to force workers to choose between ever-greater speedup and exploitation or falling wages.

Volkswagen wants to implement this system, which unions in many other countries have already accepted, in order to ramp up production at its low-wage India plant. VW increased production at its Chakan plant to over 150,000 vehicles in 2017, up over 20 per cent from 2016, and the sixth straight annual increase. This was achieved while the company denied workers any pay increases. Now VW wants to ramp up the production from 500 to 550 cars per day.

The factory is the only German-owned auto plant in India, and produces VW's Polo, Ameo and Vento models and the Skoda Rapid for domestic and overseas markets.

Speaking to the media, a company spokesman blamed the union for not accepting a "firm proposal" made by the management "regarding a new wage agreement" and "resorting to an unlawful strike to pressure management to accept their demands."

For its part, the union has sought to reassure the company that it is ready to collaborate to meet the company's production targets.

The VEU has close ties with IndustriAll Global Union (IAGU), which includes the American AFL-CIO and the German IG Metall union, which have long histories of corporatist relations with the auto corporations, including in the case of IGM of seats on VW's board of directors.

The VEU joined the IAGU affiliates and other auto unions from Chennai, Bengaluru and Pune in a workshop of Automotive and Rubber Unions in India held in Pune on September 13-15, 2016. Held under the

© World Socialist Web Site

slogan of “strengthening union power,” it included corporate representatives from Volkswagen, Daimler, BMW and Skoda auto companies, according to the IAGU web site. The auto bosses there “interacted with union representatives on the prevailing scenario of social dialogue in their companies and had a frank discussion of challenges and opportunities for effective cooperation between unions and management,” the web site claimed.

The site noted, “[a]ll participating union representatives also visited the Volkswagen plant at Chakan in Pune and interacted with executives and workers on social dialogue practices in the factory.”

Founded in 2012, the IAGU has a record of collaboration with big business corporations at the expense of workers’ jobs, working conditions, safety and other basic rights, while upholding the geo-political interests of American and German imperialism. IAGU founding president Berthold Huber, who held the post until October 2016, served on Volkswagen’s supervisory board executive committee until November 2015.

Conditions faced by Volkswagen workers in Pune are similar to what their brothers and sisters at auto plants in India and internationally confront. Workers at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki assembly plant at Manesar, near Gurgaon, in the northern Indian state of Haryana, have been subjected to a company-government joint vendetta because of a series of militant struggles, including strikes and factory occupations beginning in mid-2011 against slave labour conditions.

The company and federal and state authorities railroaded 13 workers to life in prison on trumped up murder charges, stemming from the death of a human resource manager after a company-staged provocation. The frame-up was carried out with the full collaboration of the main bourgeois parties—the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the opposition Congress Party. Its aim was to send a message to all Indian workers: the same brutal fate awaits you if you dare to challenge the cheap labour and sweatshop regime at the heart of Prime Minister Modi’s “Make in India” scheme to attract foreign investors.

In opposition to the treachery of the major unions, particularly those affiliated to India’s main Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI), which have systematically isolated the embattled workers, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International launched an international campaign to defeat the frame-up against Maruti Suzuki workers.

To fight the global auto giants and the corporate-controlled governments that serve them, autoworkers must break from the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions, form new organizations of struggle controlled by rank-and-file workers, and coordinate their struggles on an international scale.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site