

“The union is certainly not on our side”

Indian autoworker speaks about life in the “Detroit of South Asia”

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Selvam, a 32-year-old autoworker, (name withheld due to possible retribution by the company and union) employed at a prominent auto supplier situated in the outskirts of Chennai, South India recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his daily life and working conditions in Maraimalai Nagar, an industrial hub for local and global companies.

Chennai, the capital of the state of Tamilnadu has seen an increased concentration of workers in and around its city limits due to over two decades of economic deregulation that is “investor-friendly,” attracting global IT, electronic and automobile investors to the city as well as jobseekers. Thus the 60 km long industrial belt circumventing the city is touted by the Indian elite as its Automotive Corridor or its version of Detroit in its heydays.

According to the ministry of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME), based on predictions for the year 2015-16, Chennai alone produces over 40 percent of the country’s auto parts and vehicles with a capacity to produce 1,280,000 cars and about 350,000 commercial vehicles each year.

Despite a constant increase in productivity levels and profit margins for the companies, the industrial workers in Chennai work and live in shocking slave-like conditions.

A reflection of the growing resistance to these conditions was the struggle by workers at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar, who attempted to form an independent union in opposition to the official company-controlled union. In retaliation the company staged a provocation in July 2012 that led to the frame-up of 148 workers on murder charges. The attack on the workers involved the highest levels of the state as well as management and local government authorities. For their part the official unions, including the Stalinist-dominated All India Trades Union Congress, sought to isolate the Maruti Suzuki workers in order to forestall a broader movement of the Indian working class against sweatshop conditions.

The court proceedings themselves were a travesty, with the judge barring eyewitness testimony by Maruti Suzuki workers and relying solely on the version of events concocted by management. As a result, last year an Indian court sentenced 13 Maruti Suzuki workers to life in prison, including top officers

of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union.

In response to the brutal frame-up, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* have launched a worldwide campaign to defend these brave workers, including a petition demanding their release.

WSWS: How long have you been working and living in Chennai?

Selvam: I am originally from rural Nagapattinam and my family had been always farmers. But my parents heard that new companies in Chennai were looking for recruits and suggested that I get training at the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in my hometown. I came to Chennai in 2008 after completing my ITI certificate looking for work. I started as a temporary contact worker in the factory that same year, and only became permanent in 2016. **WSWS:** Temporary or casual jobs make up to 40 percent of the entire Indian labour force, and that is a conservative figure that dates back to 2012. Some independent studies suggest that between 70-90 percent of the contract and casual workforce do not even have a written contract. Could you explain what it’s like in your factory?

Selvam: The factory has 5 levels to its temporary program, they require a minimum of 6 years of training before you can become a permanent operator in the 7th year. You go through the stages of being an apprentice, initial, intermediate and special trainee and eventually an operator.

WSWS: According to government statistics about 70 percent of the labour force is not entitled to social security benefits. Could you describe your time as a contract worker in the auto industry?

Selvam: I got paid an annual net salary of Rs. 24,000 (US\$274) during my first two years, increasing to Rs. 66,000 (US\$1,029) by the seventh year. By 2015, I should have been permanent, with an annual salary of Rs. 2.10 lakh (US\$3,273) in my first year as an operator. But the company initially refused to give us permanent positions, not just for me but also for 40 other workers, who joined the company around the same time.

WSWS: And this was in the backdrop of the ongoing Maruti-

Suzuki workers' management-state frame-up and purge in Manesar, Haryana that started in August 2012 when workers started challenging sweatshop conditions, poverty wages and the widespread use of contract labour.

Selvam: In 2015, according to the factory protocols, I became eligible for a permanent workplace. The management refused to confirm our jobs on a permanent basis stating company losses over the previous financial years. They only agreed to confirm our permanent positions by September 2016 following union negotiations.

WSWS: What was the role of the union in that process?

Selvam: It was a very frustrating and difficult two years. Temporary workers don't have any representation at all through the union, though we form the majority of the workforce at the company. We have about 1,000 workers in total, but only 200 workers have permanent jobs. About 500 workers are still temporary workers, who have been with the company between 0 to 7 years and 300 more workers on a casual daily payroll. Workers issues are usually handled at a snail's pace and the factory union is affiliated to the Congress Party-affiliated Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC).

There is a lot of anger towards the union and its leaders, perhaps even more than towards management, because any demand, such as an increase in wages or confirmation of permanent jobs, is handled through the union, and the union is certainly not on our side.

WSWS: With only a pittance as a wage for years and possibly parents to support back home, how do you manage in an expensive city like Chennai?

Selvam: It is tough. Actually my parents still support me with substantial payments, such as when I wanted to purchase a motorbike to avoid a long daily walk from my shared apartment to work. I could not afford it myself. I share an approximately 1,000 square foot unfurnished apartment in the outskirts with five other workers from the factory. Together we pay Rs. 5,000 (US\$93) per month as rent. We cannot afford to buy furniture as we had to pay a deposit of Rs.50,000(US\$780). Each of us keeps our belongings along with our sleeping mats at each corner of the bedroom or living room.

WSWS: What about other costs apart from accommodation? Unemployment and underemployment is rampant and only three out of four families in India claim to have a fixed wage income.

Selvam: The cost of living comes up to about Rs. 3,000 (US\$45) including rent, bills such as electricity, mobile phone, petrol for the bike, canned water, cable TV and food. During my temporary years, the salary did not even make ends meet. Whenever, I attempted to save some money for a rainy day, it cost me my health. I would try to sleep through the day whenever I had night shifts to save spending for lunch. Whenever I did that, I was left with no energy during work and I began to lose weight, so I stopped doing it, because I was

afraid of falling seriously ill.

I managed only by borrowing money from my roommates. My life is comparatively affordable, compared to workers, who strain hard to send money back home, even if it is for just Rs. 500 or Rs. 1,000 (US\$7 to 15). As per company contract, we are not allowed to take up a second job during our temporary years. Some workers still take the risk and work at another factory. They work through day and night shifts, so that they can support a younger sibling with his or her education or a single parent with next to no income.

WSWS: Having received poverty wages for years under conditions where you had no access to minimum workers' rights, what is your working day like?

Selvam: We work six days a week from Monday to Saturday, eight hours a day. Often we are asked also to work on Sundays, when the production quota is high. On the other hand, we are forced to take compensatory leave, when the production is low. We are sometimes made to work for weeks continuously with no breaks. Besides, we are only allowed a maximum of three instances of late arrival in a month. A fourth late arrival, even by a minute, would mean a half a day's pay cut or standing at the factory gates for two hours until the supervisor arrives at work at 8 a.m.

Security guards inside the factory constantly monitor us. We are also watched during our visits to the toilet. If someone leaves five minutes early before the siren rings to wash hands for lunch, he gets stopped by a security guard or receives a warning letter.

If someone is found using a mobile device, he is fined for Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000 (US\$7-15), which for us a heavy penalty—that is more than a day's wage. In addition to the monitoring inside the factory, we are also checked thoroughly as we exit the factory. This makes us feel demeaned at the end of the workday. We are treated like rogues and cheaters in our own factory, even after working for so many years at the same place. But we stay quiet, as we don't have any support from the union if we get into a dispute with the management.

WSWS: What you seem to be describing is a brutal work regime and sweatshop conditions that are prevalent across industrial hubs in India and internationally.

Selvam: Yes, that's why I think the Maruti-Suzuki developments in India seem to have struck a nerve, and why I find the ICFI's campaign to expose and defend the framed-up worker's at the Maruti-Suzuki plant in Manesar to be so important.



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