

India's highest court upholds life sentences for framed-up Pricol workers

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28 February 2018

India's Supreme Court has again demonstrated its inherent, implacable hostility to the working class and its struggles, upholding the life sentences imposed on two Pricol workers—the union militants Manivannan and Ramamurthy—on frame-up murder charges.

Based in Coimbatore in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Pricol is a multinational auto parts manufacturer.

India's highest court announced late last year that it would not even hear an appeal of the convictions of Manivannan and Ramamurthy, although the case against them has all the hallmarks of a crude frame-up. These include gaping holes and inconsistencies in the police/prosecution narrative and the lack of any incriminating forensic evidence.

At the same time, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the company's appeal of the acquittals of seven other Pricol workers on charges of murder and criminal trespass with intention to kill.

Six of these workers were exonerated by the High Court in Dec. 2016 after a lower court had sentenced them, along with Manivannan and Ramamurthy, to double life sentences for the unexplained September 21, 2009 killing of Pricol Human Resources Vice President Roy George.

The seventh was among 19 others whom the first court to hear the case had conceded were innocent of any and all involvement in George's death.

All but one of the 19, including four women workers, were fellow militants at Pricol's Coimbatore operations. The lone non-Pricol worker was S. Kumarasamy, the General-Secretary of the AICCTU, the national union federation to which the two unions formed by the Pricol workers in Coimbatore belong.

There are striking parallels between the struggle and the company-state frame-up of the Pricol workers and the travails of the victimized workers at Maruti Suzuki's car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana.

In both cases the workers encountered ferocious resistance from their employer—a globally-connected auto company—when they sought to challenge poverty wages and brutal working conditions. And in both cases the state has worked hand-in-glove with management to frame up and exact savage legal punishment on those in the leadership of the workers' resistance.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has provided a detailed exposure of the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers and is mounting a campaign to mobilize workers around the world to fight for the immediate release of the 13 workers—including all 12 executive members of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union—who have been unjustly condemned to life imprisonment for the death, by asphyxiation, of Human Resources Manager Avineesh Dev (see: "The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers—Part 1: A travesty of justice").

As in the case of Dev's death, George's murder was used by the company and police to launch a vendetta against workers who had been leading the fight to build new unions. And as with the Maruti Suzuki workers, Indian authorities, including the country's highest court, have connived in the frame-up of the workers, with the aim of intimidating the entire working class and enforcing the sweatshop conditions demanded by Indian and international capital.

Pricol, which began as a family-owned concern in the 1970s, now has six plants in India, including in Manesar, where the victimized Maruti Suzuki workers were employed, producing a wide range of components for cars, trucks, and motorcycles. It also has plants in Brazil and Indonesia, and business offices in the US, Germany, Japan and elsewhere, with a total global workforce of 5,500.

Pricol has justifiably earned a reputation for imposing a backbreaking work regime for minimum pay. In 2007, when the Coimbatore workers began to organize to

challenge management, a worker with 25 years' experience was earning around Rs. 8,600, or just \$215 US per month. Today a worker with a quarter-century of service at Pricol reportedly receives a monthly wage of Rs. 25,000, or \$390, which due to inflation represents only a modest improvement.

Many workers are employed as apprentices or as contract workers, meaning they earn only a fraction of the wages of full-time employees.

Such conditions are the norm across India. Moreover, companies enforce production quotas, attendance and other work rules with heavy fines, suspensions and dismissals. Pricol management is notorious for such practices.

To push back, the Coimbatore workers staged a sustained campaign of militant actions in open revolt against existing unions allied with management, and turned to the AICCTU, a small trade union federation affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. The latter is a Maoist organization that increasingly works in alliance with the main Stalinist parliamentary parties, the CPM and CPI, which were integrated into the bourgeois political establishment decades ago.

In the two years prior to George's murder, Pricol management sought to break the workers' resistance through a campaign of intimidation. Hundreds of workers were terminated and more than 150 fired. The company refused to negotiate with the workers unless they repudiated their new AICCTU-aligned unions, and it transferred top union office-holders to its plant in Uttarakhand, well over a thousand miles away. Management also threatened to close down the plants and worked with police to file criminal charges against workers on more than 40 separate occasions.

The workers responded by intensifying their struggle. This included large rallies, petitions to the government, and "stay-in" strikes where they would occupy the plants for hours at a time. On one occasion when the police tried to enter to violently eject workers on a "stay-in" strike, women workers doused themselves with petrol (gasoline) and kerosene and threatened to set fire to themselves.

The legal case against the Pricol workers cannot withstand serious scrutiny. As it is, convictions have been upheld against just 2 of the 27 persons the police and prosecution argued had entered into a criminal conspiracy to murder George.

The police and prosecution claimed there was CCTV footage showing some of the accused carrying out a

murderous assault on George with metal rods. But when they couldn't produce such footage in court, they claimed the CCTV had in fact malfunctioned.

Eight rods that were supposedly used in the attack were entered as evidence. But none had George's blood on them, nor could they be linked via fingerprints to any of the accused.

The state argued that because George's body had eight wounds, eight rods must have been used and eight persons must have been involved in the attack. Not only is there no basis for such inferences, the post-mortem showed George had suffered just three wounds.

Prosecution witnesses who supposedly witnessed the attack repeatedly failed to identify or correctly identify workers they had implicated in the attack on George.

The police First Information report was tampered with to add the names of additional workers.

The courts dismissed much of the testimony of the one eyewitness, a Pricol official who implicated Manivannan and Ramamurthy, as not credible.

Among the most curious aspects of the case is that an investigating officer was outside the company Human Resources office at the very time in the late morning of September 21, 2009 that the attack is said to have taken place, yet he heard and saw nothing.

Moreover, company officials did not inform him, anyone among the detachment of Armed Reserve Police that had been deployed at the plant for over a year, or the local police office that George and four other company officials had been attacked until the late afternoon—hours after they had been transported to hospital.

The Pricol workers falsely implicated in George's death have suffered greatly, including long terms in jail awaiting the outcome of the legal proceedings against them. The verdict in the first trial was only rendered in 2015, more than six years after they were arrested. During this ordeal one of the framed-up workers committed suicide, as did the wife of another.



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