

Tamil Nadu police arrest hundreds of striking Indian autoworkers

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In recent weeks, thousands of autoworkers from Yamaha Motor India, Royal Enfield and Myoung Shin Automotive (MSA) plants in the Oragadam-Chengalpattu industrial zone have been involved in strikes, occupations and protests to demand union rights, better working conditions and wage rises.

Located southwest of Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital, the zone employs hundreds of thousands of workers. Colloquially known as the “Detroit of Asia,” the area has the majority of India’s 7.6 million autoworkers. Companies located there include Ford, Daimler AG, Renault–Nissan, Komatsu, Mitsubishi and Toyota.

Last Sunday, hundreds of Yamaha and MSA workers held a “human chain” demonstration to support their respective demands and protest against company and police repression. The Yamaha and Enfield plants produce motorcycles while MSA makes auto parts. The demonstration followed a series of struggles.

* On September 21, over 750 Yamaha permanent workers had walked out on strike indefinitely and established an occupation to demand the reinstatement of two workers. The workers were sacked because of their involvement in organising a new union—the Yamaha Motor Thozhilalar Sangham (Yamaha Motor Workers Association)—at the facility. The union is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

Of the nearly 2,500 employed at Yamaha India, 750 are permanent, 1,500 are on contract and around 250 are apprentices. Permanent workers’ monthly salaries range from 13,000 rupees (\$US180) to 18,000 rupees. Contract workers wanted to join the strike, but the union instructed them not to become involved, declaring that their jobs were at risk.

Yamaha India immediately declared the strike “illegal” and took the dispute to the Madras High Court. After the

court ruled that any protest by the workers must be 200 metres from the factory premises, Tamil Nadu police entered the facility on September 26, attacked the striking workers and ejected them from the plant.

On October 3, police conducted early morning raids on the homes of four Yamaha workers, arresting them for allegedly climbing onto mobile towers a week earlier to highlight their demands.

* On September 24, about 1,300 Royal Enfield workers walked out to demand a wage rise and other claims. The company responded by threatening trainees with the sack if they did not return to work. Armed with a court order, the police, on the same day as they attacked the Yamaha strikers, raided the Enfield factory and forcibly removed strikers.

In line with the demands of union officials, Royal Enfield workers ended their strike on September 30. The union claimed to have reached an agreement with the company that there would be no reprisals against the strikers. A new CITU-linked union—the Royal Enfield Employees Union (REEU)—was recently established in the plant, but is not recognised by the company.

Despite the supposed agreement, management cut workers’ salaries for the days they were on strike, disciplined eight employees, and sacked another, over alleged involvement in union activities. The company also refused to allow workers to take their mobile phones into the plant. Nearly 700 permanent workers immediately walked out in protest.

Following union talks with the company, the Enfield strikers returned to work again on October 5, only to face another management provocation. They were told to “apologise” for striking and agree to a “good conduct” undertaking.

Angered by these demands, the workers occupied the plant, only to be attacked by police who arrested about 600 protestors, holding them in a nearby hall until that

evening.

While management and the police were launching their attacks on the Yamaha and Enfield workers, the CITU, acting as an industrial police force, “advised” the workers to “honour” the court orders.

* On September 5, over 500 workers, including 150 permanent employees from MSA, a supplier to Hyundai in Tamil Nadu, began a strike and occupation to demand payment of a long-outstanding wage rise.

On September 27, a number of striking MSA workers were arrested by the police when they planned to picket the South Korean embassy in Chennai. Police detained them in a nearby hall before releasing them in the evening.

Tamil Nadu business chiefs have denounced the wave of industrial action and demanded that the state government crush strikes.

Ar Rm Arun, chairman of the Tamil Nadu branch of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, India’s peak business body, told the *Hindu* newspaper: “MNCs [multinational corporations] are not mandated to be bogged down in any way by such issues. If the environment is not conducive to their business, there are so many choices for them.”

Arun called on the state government to “follow the example of the Singapore prime minister in how he firmly dealt with the striking Singapore Airlines pilots.” This was a reference to former Singapore dictator Lee Kwan Yew’s threats to crush the pilots’ strike in 1980.

Indian big business, global investors, the federal and state governments and the judiciary, working closely with the unions, are determined to suppress any independent eruption of class struggles. The repression of the Maruti Suzuki workers is a case in point.

In 2012, after Maruti Suzuki workers rejected a management-controlled union and formed an independent union, the company worked with police and Indian government authorities to launch a series of provocations. This resulted in the arrest and frame-up of Maruti Suzuki workers and the sentencing of 13 to life imprisonment on bogus murder charges. The CPM and CITU rejected demands for unified national action and then isolated the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers.

While Yamaha, Enfield and MSA workers have demonstrated their determination to fight, the CPM and CITU have repeatedly intervened to prevent unified industrial action.

CITU officials used last Sunday’s protest as another occasion to promote illusions in the Tamil Nadu state

government. CITU district leader Muthu Kumar called on the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a right-wing communalist party, to “find an amicable solution.”

WSWS reporters recently distributed leaflets among the striking workers explaining the necessity for unified national industrial action to take forward their struggle and exposing the CITU’s role.

Numerous Yamaha workers voiced their discontent and blamed the unions for not mobilising contract workers, apprentices and other workers in support of these struggles. Several union bureaucrats intervened and repeatedly demanded that the WSWS reporters leave the area.

Last week, union officials banned workers from speaking to WSWS reporters and, on Sunday, CITU leaders Muthu Kumar and S. Kannan threatened physical violence. Kannan claimed that WSWS reporters were working for the auto companies. Next time, he declared: “CPM comrades will kill you.”

These threats are another indication that the CPM and CITU are acutely nervous about the rising militancy of autoworkers and fear any exposure of their political record and pro-big business line. Notwithstanding their occasional “left” demagoguery, the Indian Stalinists, as demonstrated in the states where they have held power, such as West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, will do whatever is demanded of them by international investors and the Indian capitalist elites.

The authors also recommend:

The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers: A travesty of justice
[5 April 2017].

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