

India: Stalinist unions suppress Tamil Nadu auto strikes, promise “industrial peace”

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Although none of the workers’ principal demands have been met, unions aligned with India’s main Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, have shut down a series of militant strikes, involving several thousand autoworkers in Oragadam, a manufacturing hub on the outskirts of Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

The strikes against motorcycle manufacturers Yamaha Motor India and Royal Enfield and parts producer Myoung Shin India Automotive (MSI) erupted in September, and despite all three continuing for at least two months, the Stalinists kept them apart.

Rather than organize a joint struggle and make the strikes the spearhead of a broader working-class mobilization against poverty wages, precarious employment, and brutal working conditions, the CPM-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) urged workers to expend their energy making appeals to Tamil Nadu’s right-wing government, its District Labour Commissioner, and the courts.

The strikes’ outcome is further proof that the CPM-affiliated CITU serves as an industrial police force for big business, containing and suppressing working class opposition. As part of the sell-out agreements under which the strikes were called off, the CITU has pledged to promote “industrial peace” and prevent sit-down strikes, a tactic the Yamaha workers employed in launching their strike and that resulted in clashes with police.

The strikes mainly involved workers aged 30 or less. They were part of what is a growing wave of struggles by workers and the rural poor across India, fuelled by opposition to chronic poverty and economic insecurity, rampant social inequality, and environmental devastation. In courting investors, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi routinely boasts that India’s average industrial wage is less than a quarter that in China.

The strike against Yamaha involved some 800

permanent workers. It began September 21 and ended on November 14, after the CITU and its local affiliate, the Yamaha Motor Workers Union, negotiated an agreement that CPM and CITU leader A. Soundararajan termed a “great victory.” In fact, the agreement meets neither of the workers’ principal demands: immediate reinstatement of two victimized workers and union recognition. The two workers whom the company fired for union activism are now under suspension pending further company enquiries, meaning they could still be dismissed. The CITU also accepted that the Yamaha workers will lose their pay for the entire period that they were on strike, although this is not standard practice in Indian labour disputes.

As part of the back-to-work agreement, the CITU provided Yamaha with assurances that it will “maintain industrial peace,” oppose sit-down strikes, and refrain from making “any adverse remarks” in public about the company and its treatment of its employees.

After 83 days the CITU ended the strike mounted by the 150 permanent workers at the South Korea-based MSI’s Oragadam plant on November 29 on like terms. The twenty-two workers the company had targeted for disciplinary action have not been fully reinstated. Management will continue to review their conduct, with their ultimate fate to be determined in consultation with the Labour Commissioner. Workers will receive no wage increase beyond that previously offered by MSI and no compensation whatsoever for the wages they lost while on strike.

The strike at Royal Enfield’s two plants in Oragadam and its environs ended on November 12 under a Royal Enfield Employees Union-endorsed agreement that fails to fulfil the workers’ demands for a wage increase, union recognition, and the reinstatement of dozens of recently laid-off “trainee” employees. Like most, if not all, Indian auto companies, Royal Enfield makes widespread use of low-paid trainee and contract workers to boost profits and

split the workforce. Under the back-to-work agreement, the layoffs of more than fifty trainees will stand, with only those who had completed three years of training reinstated.

The Royal Enfield Employees Union is not directly affiliated with the CITU. Rather it belongs to the Working Peoples Trade Union Council (WPTUC) led by one Kuchelar, a pro-Stalinist union official. As a leader of the Madras Labour Union, Kuchelar was instrumental in betraying worker opposition to the closure of the B&C Mill, a giant textile facility in Chennai.

In line with the policy of the CPM and CITU national leaderships, the local Stalinist union and party leaders have kept the Oragadam workers entirely in the dark about the fate of the victimized workers at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, Haryana. Working hand-in-glove, the Indian state and the Japanese automaker purged the plant's 2,500-strong workforce and orchestrated the imprisonment for life on frame-up charges of 13 Maruti Suzuki workers—including the entire leadership of the newly formed Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU)—after the Manesar plant emerged in 2011-12 as a centre of working-class resistance.

There is great sympathy and support for the Maruti Suzuki workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and wherever workers have been alerted to their plight. But the Stalinists have callously abandoned them. This is both because the ruling-class conspiracy against the Maruti Suzuki workers—involving as it does the BJP and Congress Party leaderships, the courts and police—exposes the utter bankruptcy of the CPM and CITU's claims that workers can advance their interests through appeals to capitalist governments and courts, and because any struggle to mobilize the working class against the frame-up would bring the Stalinists into headlong conflict with their allies in the political establishment.

The Stalinists posture as "left" and wave red flags on May Day. But for decades they have functioned as an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment. This is epitomized by their propping up of a series of governments at the Centre, most of them Congress Party-led, that have implemented neoliberal policies, aimed at making India a cheap-labour haven for global capitalist, and forged an Indo-US military-strategic partnership.

Acutely aware of the mounting popular anger against the Hindu supremacist BJP and the social devastation caused by more than a quarter-century of pro-market "reform," the Stalinists are redoubling their efforts to politically derail the working class and harness it to the

drive of a faction of the bourgeoisie to replace Modi's BJP government with an alternate right-wing regime after the national elections to be held in April-May 2019.

This reactionary political agenda governed the Stalinists' conduct, or to put it more accurately misleadership and sabotage, of the Tamil Nadu auto strikes. Moreover, it found overt expression when the CITU convened an "all-party meeting" on October 30, at which the Stalinists paraded various opposition party leaders before the strikers and claimed that they were joining forces to pressure Tamil Nadu's AIADMK government to intervene with the auto companies on the workers' behalf.

Among their invitees, the Stalinists gave particular prominence to leaders of the DMK and its trade union affiliate, the Labour Progressive Front. A right-wing Tamil Nadu-based party that has previously served as a junior partner in BJP-led governments, the DMK is currently one of the Congress Party's closest allies. It is also almost certain to be a formal electoral ally of the CPM and its Left Front. On November 13, just two weeks after the CITU "all party" meeting, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury met with DMK chief M.K. Stalin. At the meeting's conclusion, Yechury declared, "We have decided today that in Tamil Nadu, we will be with the DMK in the forthcoming elections."

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