

India: Daikin air conditioning workers target of police assault, frame-up charges

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15 January 2019

Fourteen workers employed by air-conditioning manufacturer Daikin at its production facilities in Rajasthan, India have been arrested in midnight raids on their homes and slapped with frame-up attempted murder charges.

Moreover, police are threatening to arrest hundreds more on trumped-up charges arising from an unprovoked police attack on a workers' rally outside a Daikin factory in Neemrana, Rajasthan on January 8, the first day of last week's 48-hour all-India general strike.

Police have listed a further 17 workers by name and 700 "unnamed" workers in a charge-sheet that accuses them of attempted murder, rioting and numerous other grave crimes.

The persecution of the Daikin workers parallels the Indian state's vendetta against workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly, located some 75 kilometers from Neemrana. Thirteen Maruti Suzuki workers, including all the leaders of the militant Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), have been imprisoned for life on concocted murder charges.

Daikin workers have been targeted for similar treatment for daring to wage a five-year-long struggle to establish their own independent trade union.

As with the Maruti Suzuki workers, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the smaller Communist Party of India (CPI), both of which have large trade union federations, have refused to come to the aid of the long-struggling Daikin workers.

Around midnight on Tuesday, January 8, police violently roused the 14 workers and their families from their sleep and, in front of their distraught families, dragged the men away.

Earlier that day, police and company-hired goons had brutally attacked a rally of 2,000 Daikin workers,

leaving at least 40 of them seriously injured. The only "crime" of the workers was to have tried to hoist the flag of their newly government-recognized Daikin Air Conditioners Mazdoor Union.

Champa, the 23-year-old wife of the arrested Daikin worker Ajay Kumara, described their nightmarish experience to the *Times of India*: "We were both asleep when policemen reeking of liquor barged into our home. They abused and threatened us, before dragging my husband outside without bothering to produce an arrest warrant."

According to a witness who spoke to a fact-finding mission involving representatives from the People's Union of Civil Liberties, company human resources personnel accompanied the police.

The fact-finding mission also notes that none of the 14 now under arrest were named in the police FIR (First Information Report).

These two facts indicate that the workers have been targeted for arrest at the express bidding of the company, just as the Maruti Suzuki workers were, because management viewed them as "troublemakers," or more rightly militants.

The police assault on the Daikin workers has taken place under the Congress Party government that assumed power in Rajasthan last month after defeating the Hindu-supremacist and stridently anti-working class Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in state elections.

Based in Japan, Daikin is the largest air conditioning manufacturer both in India and the world. Its two Indian plants are located in Neemrana, about 120 kilometers southwest of New Delhi, in an area known as the "Japanese industrial zone." Numerous other Japanese industrial giants, including Nissan, Mitsubishi, Mitsui Chemicals and Toyota, operate production facilities there, subjecting workers to

sweatshop conditions with the full support of the government, police and courts.

Police used baton charges, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons in their attack on the January 8 rally. Many of the injured workers had serious head injuries and bone fractures. Among those severely injured were the union president, Rukumudeen, and general-secretary, Daulat Ram.

The 14 arrested workers were produced in front of a court on Thursday, January 10, and—unsurprisingly, given the judiciary’s hostility to worker rights—promptly sent back to prison. Seeking bail, the workers have appealed to a higher court.

So incensed are their fellow workers, they continued to stay away from work last Thursday and Friday, after the all-India strike had ended, halting production at both Daikin plants.

In keeping with the foul anti-Muslim atmosphere the ruling BJP national government has cultivated, the company management warned the workers against electing a Muslim as their union president, claiming it could lead to communal riots.

This has to be taken as a warning that company management, with the complicity of the authorities, could unleash violent Hindu extremists against the Daikin workers in an attempt to suppress their years’ long agitation against brutal working conditions.

The Daikin workers have been bravely and unrelentingly struggling since late 2013 to establish a union to defend themselves against a dictatorial company management. In October 2013, close to 900 Daikin workers went on strike for 41 days demanding the right to form their own union. They also demanded the reinstatement of 125 of their colleagues who had been illegally dismissed for union activities.

Subsequently, the workers continued to mount militant actions, uniting permanent, contract and so called “fixed-term” workers. This ultimately prompted an intervention by the then-BJP state government in 2016 to sponsor “reconciliation talks.”

A tripartite agreement between the workers, the labor department, and company management was signed in Oct. 2016. It included a company promise to reinstate all of the victimized workers and to cease its campaign of harassment.

Needless to say, the company did not live up to any of this, but instead indulged in further victimizations,

charging various workers with “misconduct.” In 2017, Daikin fired a supervisor for refusing to write up a manufactured misconduct charge against a union leader, Yaadram.

Although the workers were finally able to establish and formally register their own trade union in Sept. 2018, the company has adamantly refused to recognize, let alone negotiate with, it.

Under the former BJP Chief Minister Vasundara Raje, Rajasthan spearheaded the push to dismantle national labour laws, enacting state legislation that allows companies in the so-called formal sector to more easily lay off workers and shut down plants. The BJP claimed bringing “flexibility” to the labour market would create jobs.

The new Congress Party state government, as it has already shown with the assault on the Daikin workers, will be just as ruthless in enforcing the diktats of big business.

It was a Congress Party government in the neighbouring state of Haryana that conspired with Maruti Suzuki to purge the entire 2400-strong workforce at the Manesar assembly plant and to initiate the frame-up of the entire leadership of the MSWU.



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