

Free the Maruti Suzuki Thirteen!

Two years since Indian court condemned autoworkers to life-in-prison in monstrous frame-up

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Exactly two years ago today, an Indian court condemned thirteen militant workers from Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant, in the north Indian state of Haryana, to life-in-prison on frame-up murder charges.

Twelve of the thirteen comprised the entire executive or, in Indian parlance, Working Committee, of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU).

The Manesar workers had founded the MSWU in 2011-12. They did so in bitter struggle against a pro-company, state-recognized union, and as the outcome of a series of walkouts and sit-down strikes that transformed the Manesar assembly plant into a center of worker resistance across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, a huge manufacturing hub on the outskirts of India's capital and largest city, Delhi.

The only "crime" of the thirteen workers—Ram Meher, Sandeep Dhillon, Ram Bilas, Sarabjeet Singh, Pawan Kumar, Sohan Kumar, Ajmer Singh, Suresh Kumar, Amarjeet, Dhanraj Bambi, Pradeep Gujjar, Yogesh and Jiyalal—was to have spearheaded opposition to the brutal working conditions the Japanese-based transnational has imposed on its workforce. These include poverty wages, speed-up, and precarious contract jobs.

The Maruti Suzuki 13 are the victims of a monstrous frame-up, in which India's largest automaker, the police, the judiciary, the Haryana state government, and India's principal big-business parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Narendra Modi and the Congress Party of Sonia and Rahul Gandhi have all connived.

They have been jailed for life for the murder of a company human resources manager, Awanish Kumar Dev, who died of smoke inhalation during a fire that erupted mysteriously in the midst of a management-provoked, factory-floor altercation on July 18, 2012. Yet not a shred of evidence ties any of the thirteen or any other Maruti Suzuki worker to this fire.

No less damningly, defense counsel demonstrated at trial that the police had fabricated evidence, given false statements, and

illegally colluded with management. So compelling and irrefutable was this evidence, the presiding judge had to entirely exonerate 118 other workers who similarly faced charges of murder and other grave crimes.

But Judge Rajinder Pal Goyal did so only to uphold the frame-up charges against the principal targets of the company-state vendetta: the leaders of the MSWU.

During the almost five years between their arrest and detention and March 2017 conviction and sentencing, Indian government and judicial officials, including Haryana's Chief Minister, repeatedly urged that the Maruti Suzuki workers be subjected to exemplary punishment so as to reassure investors.

Declared special prosecutor Anurag Hooda, "Our industrial growth has dipped, FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] has dried up. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is calling for 'Make in India,' but such incidents are a stain on our image."

In a statement issued March 20, 2017, the International Committee of the Fourth International and *World Socialist Web Site* urged workers around the world to come to the defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers. "The ICFI," the statement explained, "is launching an international defense campaign aimed at mobilizing the industrial and independent political strength of the working class in India, South Asia and around the world to defeat the company-state vendetta against the Maruti Suzuki workers."

Two years on, we redouble this appeal. The Maruti Suzuki 13 are class war prisoners, who have already had to endure six and a half years in the nightmare that is India's penal system. This includes being subjected, following their arrest in 2012, to physical abuse tantamount to torture.

As the ICFI explained in its 2017 statement, the frame-up and jailing of the Maruti Suzuki workers "is the most extreme example of a universal process. In every country giant corporations and their political hirelings are waging a war against the working class... It is not possible for workers in any country to defend themselves outside of uniting with their class

brothers and sisters throughout the world in a common struggle to defend the social and democratic rights of all workers.”

By challenging sweatshop exploitation, the Maruti Suzuki workers were striking a blow for workers not just in India, but around the world. Similarly, their defense must be a vital first step in forging the international unity of autoworkers and all workers that is needed to fight global capital.

The ICFI’s call for an intensification of the campaign to win the immediate freedom of the Maruti Suzuki 13 has been joined by a leader of the MSWU Provisional Committee. The Maruti Suzuki workers established the Provisional Committee following the jailing of the MSWU’s elected leadership, and a government-backed purge that Maruti Suzuki conducted of its Manesar workforce in August 2012, sacking and replacing 2,400 permanent and contract workers.

“I would like to take this opportunity,” MSWU Provisional Committee leader Jitender told the WWSWS this past weekend, “to call upon workers internationally to come to the aid and defense of Maruti Suzuki workers, and other Indian workers who are defending themselves against the savage repression meted out by the Indian political establishment at the behest of transnational corporations and investors.”

Jitender emphasized that workers cannot defeat globally organized transnational corporations without uniting their struggles across state borders. “Just as the capitalists are united across the world, we too must form an organization of all the world’s workers. This is the call of the hour.”

A vital component of international working-class defense is the exposure of the capitalist state apparatus as a weapon for enforcing the exploitation of the working class. As part of the fight to mobilize workers in India and around the world in defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers, the *World Socialist Web Site* has made a detailed analysis of the frame-up based on the court record. It can be found here: “The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers—Part 1: A travesty of justice”).

Key findings include:

The judge upheld the arbitrary exclusion of all workers present at the plant on July 18, 2012 as witnesses, on the claim they would either be biased in favour of the union or too intimidated to give testimony against it;

Police systematically failed to carry out rudimentary forensic tests on what they claimed were key pieces of evidence;

The police and prosecution repeatedly changed key elements of their narrative of the case, including what car parts workers allegedly used as weapons during the factory-floor altercation;

Judge Goyal repeatedly shifted the onus of proof from the state to the workers, and himself supplied arguments and scenarios to try to paper over holes and inconsistencies in the prosecution case.

There is great sympathy for the framed-up and victimized Maruti Suzuki workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt and wherever workers in India and beyond learn of their persecution.

However, they have been callously abandoned by the trade unions and the Indian political parties that posture as left—above all the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and their respective affiliated trade union federations, the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

The Stalinist parties and unions barely reported the conviction and sentencing of the Maruti Suzuki workers, and since early April 2017 have sought to bury them under a wall of silence. This is because they fear the militant example of the Maruti Suzuki workers, and because any serious campaign to rally the working class in their support would disrupt their own cozy relations with the employers and their maneuvers within the political establishment. This includes their publicly stated aim of allying, as they have done repeatedly over the past three decades, with the Congress and various regional and caste-based parties, in forming a right-wing “alternative secular” government to the BJP, following India’s multi-stage April-May election.

However, the past two years have not just provided further proof of the perfidy of the Stalinist parties and unions. In India and around the world, there is a dramatic resurgence of class struggle, as workers challenge endless concessions and austerity. From the autoworkers in Matamoros, Mexico, to the Yellow Vest protests in France, the teacher strikes in the US, and the mass upheaval in Algeria, these struggles are developing as a rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade unions and establishment left parties.

This global working-class upsurge provides the basis for a renewed campaign to win the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki 13. We urge all WWSWS readers to make the facts of the Maruti Suzuki case known to workers and young people around the world; to explain how this frame-up epitomizes contemporary global class relations; and how the defense of these workers can and must become an important means for advancing the struggle for the fighting unity of the working class against capitalist exploitation and war.



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