

Victimized Indian autoworker and leader of fight to free framed-up workers speaks to WSWS:

Jailing the Maruti Suzuki workers for life “is meant to encourage the capitalists to further enslave the working class”

Our reporters
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Jitender Dhankhar—a victimized Maruti Suzuki worker and leader of the fight to free the 13 of his former co-workers at the Manesar car assembly plant who have been jailed for life on frame-up charges—has provided the following interview to the World Socialist Web Site.

Yesterday marked exactly two years since a court in the northern Indian state of Haryana condemned the 13, including the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), to spend the rest of their lives in the hell-hole that is India’s penal system. [See: “Two years since Indian court condemned autoworkers to life-in-prison in monstrous frame-up”]

The MSWU was formed as an independent union in a bitter struggle against a government-recognized stooge union that connived in the workers’ brutal exploitation.

Jitender is a member of the Provisional Committee of the MSWU, which the workers formed after the July-August 2012 arrest and jailing of the MSWU leadership and the company’s firing, with government support, of all 2,400 workers at the Manesar plant. He is in charge of legal affairs for the MSWU Provisional Committee.

The interview was conducted in Hindi and by email.

Jitender: Comrades, as you know, on 18 March 2017, the Gurgaon Court passed the verdict on the Maruti workers and MSWU leaders in relation to the incident of 18 July 2012. One hundred seventeen workers out of 147 were released by the court and 31 were declared guilty and punished. Thirteen union militants, including all 12 members of the MSWU leadership, were sentenced to life imprisonment on trumped-up murder charges. This was done despite the fact that the trial court could not find any evidence that implicated them in the death of Human Resources manager Awanish Kumar Dev, or who started the fire.

There is a lot of discontent among the workers about the life

sentences handed out to our 13 comrades. The whole working class is quite unhappy with the judgement.

In this circumstance, where attacks on the working class are becoming ever more severe, punishing the Maruti Suzuki workers with life imprisonment is an attempt to encourage the capitalist and imperialist forces to further enslave the working class.

The brave struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers had been giving a new hope to the working class. But the 18 July 2012 incident set back the struggle of Maruti Suzuki workers and their fight to unionize.

Because of the way in which the Maruti Suzuki workers, permanent and contract, rose-up united, with great strength and energy, the capitalists got frightened. That is why they concocted the July 18 incident and got life imprisonment handed out to the 13 workers. They wanted to send a message that the capitalists will go to any extent, including using the courts and jail, to keep workers from exercising their democratic rights.

WSWS: Please describe the latest developments on the legal front. Are there appeals pending for any of the imprisoned workers in the sessions court or at the Indian Supreme Court?

Jitender: Three of our comrades petitioned for bail in the Chandigarh High Court, pending the outcome of their appeal of their murder convictions. But this was rejected. It was rejected on the basis that investors in this country will be discouraged, so they should not be given bail. Now our lawyer is going to file for bail for these comrades in the Supreme Court. The date for this is still not set.

WSWS: The WSWS has established a steering committee of rank-and-file workers, including teachers, autoworkers and Amazon workers in the US to unite their struggles with all other workers internationally. What appeal would you make to other workers in India and internationally to support the

struggle to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers?

Jitender: Comrades, with respect to the rank-and-file steering committee of workers formed by the WSWS, workers in India and around the world should fight together. I believe that this is correct. I would say that in contemporary times, capitalism cannot be overcome by workers in any one country. This is because just like workers in any one company cannot fight their bosses alone, similarly workers in one country cannot face capitalism alone. Just as the capitalists are united across the world, so too we must form an organization of all the world's workers. This is the call of the hour.

WSWS: What lessons have you learnt from your own struggle and what would you say to your working-class brothers and sisters in other countries about these lessons?

Jitender: We got to learn a lot of lessons from the struggle of the Maruti-Suzuki workers. This struggle completely changed our lives. Previously, when we used to work in the company, we were divided by caste, regionalism and religion. In this way we were supporting the capitalist structure. We used to consider the politicians, police and courts as a path to provide justice to the poor and workers. But during the whole struggle their real faces got exposed. We saw that they are standing with the capitalist bosses and united on the basis of class. Then we too came to realize that we are one united working class and started to strengthen our own organization and even today these efforts are continuing.

I would also like to take this opportunity to call upon workers internationally, through the WSWS, to come to the aid and defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers and other Indian workers who are defending themselves from the savage repression meted out by the Indian political establishment at the behest of transnational corporations and investors.

WSWS: Please describe the conditions that the 13 workers are enduring in prison. Given that they were tortured by the police after they were rounded up in 2012, how are they holding up? Are they allowed to meet regularly with visitors, especially family members and coworkers?

Jitender: Being in prison and away from your family is very difficult. They are doing the best they can under the circumstances. Nevertheless, I shall tell you about the specific situation of these 13 comrades who are behind the bars and facing life sentences, since every comrade wants to know about it.

When they were arrested by the Haryana police, after the July 18, 2012 incident, they were beaten up badly, like what the army does to those whom it suspects of being terrorists. When these comrades were presented to the court, some of them could not even walk properly because their wounds had not healed even after many days. Even today a few of our comrades are still facing problems. The police acted like this on the dictates of the Maruti Suzuki management.

But when these comrades were put in jail, they did not face as many issues as we feared because the prison administration

knew that they were not professional criminals. They were given jobs in the jail which require some trust on the part of the prison management. So today, our comrades are working in different places in prison, and one of our comrades, Amarjeet, has become a jail orderly.

Another comrade, Ajmer, has been awarded a good-singer prize in a cultural program in jail. All this has eased their lives in prison a little. Friends and families can visit the imprisoned workers, but the rule is that only persons whose names have been preapproved are allowed to visit and there is a maximum limit of 10 approved visitors.

WSWS: For the families of these workers, their imprisoned loved ones were often the sole wage-earner. How are the family members coping with this hardship?

Jitender: Regarding those of our comrades who are suffering from life imprisonment in jail, we salute their families from our heart. These families have suffered so much. Yet, they have participated enthusiastically in the struggle. They have been hit by lathis (police batons) by the police, even went to jail. This happened in 2013. When a *dharna* (sit-down protest) was going on in the town of Kaithal, the Haryana Industry Minister, Randeep Singh Surjewala of the Congress Party, got the protesters beaten up by the police, who then threw 100 people in jail.

Despite this, we still didn't accept defeat. In the march from Kaithal to Delhi, which is 350 miles, Maruti Suzuki workers and the families of those comrades who were in jail walked together. We took out a big rally in New Delhi and thus informed the people of Haryana how the capitalists are ensnaring the workers in bogus criminal cases and sending them to jail. After this, people came to know the truth about the Maruti Suzuki workers.

As a result, the people understood and agreed that the 18 July incident was a conspiracy by the Maruti Suzuki management. Our 13 comrades got respect in society and even today in the whole area these people are remembered and discussed. Even today, as a result of all this, the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union is known as a militant and fighting organization in the whole area.



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