

# The Indian elections and the fight to free the Maruti Suzuki class war prisoners

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India's national election campaign, which officially began in early March, concludes today with the counting of the votes cast in seven regional phases held between April 11 and May 19.

Completely blacked out from the election campaign has been any discussion of the plight of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers who have been jailed for life on frame-up murder charges as the result of a conspiracy involving the Japanese-owned automaker, the police, courts, and India's principal political parties.

The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers exemplifies the brutal state of class relations in what the Indian elite and Western media hail as the "world's most populous democracy."

Three decades of neoliberal, "pro-investor" reforms have transformed India into one of the world's most unequal societies. The benefits of capitalist expansion and the fire sale of public assets have been appropriated by a tiny ruling elite, epitomized by India's newly-minted crop of 120 billionaires. They and the rest of India's top 1 percent monopolize 51.5 percent of the country's wealth, while the bottom 60 percent owns just 4.7 percent.

India's corporate media celebrates the conspicuous consumption of India's ultra-rich. They gushed last December when India's richest man, Mukesh Ambani, threw a \$100 million party to fête the marriage of his daughter to the scion of the billionaire Piramal family. Of the two-hundred-million Indians who go to bed hungry each night, the 38 percent of children under five who are stunted, and the hundreds of millions of workers and toilers who live under the threat that any misfortune—from the loss of a job to a family illness—could push them into the social abyss, the media, by contrast, has little or nothing to say.

Workers in India's auto and other globally-connected industries receive wages on average only a quarter of those in China, a point that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi invariably hammers home when courting foreign investors as part of his government's "Make in India" campaign.

It is because the Maruti Suzuki workers challenged the

sweatshop exploitation on which Indian and global capital are gorging that they have been the target of a monstrous frame up. Twelve of the 13 were the elected officers of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), an independent union that workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana, car assembly plant formed in a rebellion against a government-recognized company-stooge union.

In 2011–12, the MSWU and its predecessor organization led a series of militant strikes and plant occupations, uniting permanent, contract and trainee workers in challenging low wages, a brutal work regimen, and precarious employment. As a result, the Manesar plant became 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.

On July 18, 2012, just four months after the MSWU had won legal recognition, the company provoked a violent altercation on the factory floor. In the midst of this altercation, a fire mysteriously broke out, which led to the death, due to smoke inhalation, of the only management employee who was sympathetic to the workers.

This became the pretext for a legal vendetta against the militant workers organized in the MSWU, and for the purge of some 2,400 workers from their jobs at the Manesar plant. Hundreds of workers were arrested and 150 charged. Whilst they were under arrest, the workers were subjected to physical abuse by police tantamount to torture.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has provided a detailed exposure of the frame-up as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International's campaign to mobilize workers in India and around the world in defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers (see: "The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers—Part 1: A travesty of justice"). It has also published numerous other articles reviewing the key facts of the case.

These include:

- At trial, the defense demonstrated that the police had connived with the company to fabricate evidence against the workers.

- The police failed to conduct rudimentary forensic tests on what they claimed were key pieces of evidence.
- The fire was the crux of the prosecution's case, yet it failed to present any evidence connecting any of the workers to the lighting of the fire.
- The trial judge barred any workers who witnessed the events of July 18, 2011, but were not charged, from testifying on the blanket claim they would be biased.
- The trial judge repeatedly mangled the law to shift the burden of proof from the state to the workers, and in his judgment supplied arguments to try to cover up holes and other inconsistencies in the prosecution case.

Revealing the political motivations that have animated the frame-up, politicians, the prosecution and other state representatives have repeatedly demanded that an example be made of the Maruti Suzuki workers, so as to reassure investors that the Indian state will stamp out worker opposition. In arguing at the workers' March 13, 2017, sentencing hearing that they should be condemned to death by hanging, Special Prosecutor Anurag Hooda declared: "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."

That Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress Party, till recently the bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, would not want to call attention to the class justice meted out to the Maruti Suzuki workers is only natural. The legal witch hunt targeting the Maruti Suzuki workers was initiated by Haryana's Congress state government and supported by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance that held power in New Delhi till May 2014. When the governments in both Haryana and the Center passed into the hands of the BJP, the frame-up moved forward seamlessly.

But no less determined to imprison the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers in a wall of silence are the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—their Left Front electoral alliance, and their respective trade union affiliates, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC).

This has been true for years. The Stalinists failed to speak out against the March 2017 frame-up convictions and sentencing of the Maruti Suzuki workers for weeks, and having made a token show of support quickly abandoned any and all efforts to publicize their case and rally the working class in their defence.

The Stalinists feign opposition to the neo-liberal agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie—austerity, contract labour, privatization, deregulation etc. But in reality they have

played a pivotal role in implementing this agenda, both by supporting a succession of right-wing Indian governments, most of them Congress-led, and by implementing what they themselves call "pro-investor" policies wherever they have formed the state government.

Last January they called a two-day all India strike to protest the BJP government's economic policies, along with the other unions, including the Congress Party union federation, the INTUC. Ten of millions of workers joined the strike, seeking a means to fight. But for the Stalinists it was a sordid maneuver aimed at furthering their campaign to politically derail the growing resistance of the working class, by harnessing it to the drive of a section of the bourgeoisie to replace the BJP with a "secular democratic" government—that is, with a big business government committed to "pro-market" reforms and the Indo-US anti-China military-strategic alliance.

The real attitude of the CPM, CPI, CITU and AITUC to the working class' opposition to domestic and global capital's drive to intensify exploitation is epitomized in their callous and criminal abandonment of the Maruti Suzuki class war prisoners.

Not only do the Stalinists fear the militant example of the MSWU, they recognize that any campaign to mobilize the working class in defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers, linking the struggle to win their freedom to the fight against poverty wages and contract labour, would explode their political partnership with the Congress Party and their cozy relations with the employers. Exposure of the frame-up would also put the lie to their claim that the courts and other institutions of the Indian Republic constitute a "democratic" bulwark against the Hindu-supremacist BJP.

However, the attempts of the Stalinists and the rest of the Indian political establishment to "disappear" the Maruti Suzuki workers will not succeed.

Rather their defence will come to be seen by the tens of millions of workers across India and around the world now coming into struggle—from the Sri Lankan plantation workers who last December struck in defiance of the unions, to the Mexican Matamoros workers, the Yellow Vest protesters in France, and US teachers—as a necessary element in the struggle to unify the working class and develop an international counteroffensive against austerity and war.



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