

India: Motherson autoworkers strike at cross roads

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On Thursday, October 10 at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, the WSWs Autoworker Newsletter is hosting an online meeting to discuss the strategy and perspective needed to win the GM strike. To participate, visit wsws.org/autocall.

The more than one-month long indefinite strike by workers at the Motherson Automotive Technologies & Engineering (MATE)-owned auto parts factory in Sriperumbudur, an industrial hub 40 kilometers from Chennai, the capital of southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is at the cross roads.

Over 500 permanent Motherson autoworkers have been on strike since August 26, demanding the recognition of their newly formed trade union—Chengai Anna Mavatta Jana Nayaga Thozhilalar Sangam—a wage rise and an end to the harsh working conditions.

The Sriperumbudur MATE plant employs over 2,000 workers but only 568 are permanent. Another 1,000 are employed on contract basis and 500 as trainees under a government-sponsored program. MATE workers established the new union in late July in order to fight low wages, brutal working conditions and sub-standard food at the plant's canteen.

Motherson workers, who are facing repressive measures unleashed by the company and the police directed by the All India Anna Dravida Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government, must break the isolation imposed upon them by the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), to which their union is affiliated, and fight for the mobilisation of the widest possible layers of workers. This should start with appealing to contract workers and trainees at the factory to join in a common struggle for a decent wage hike, permanent status for all 2,000 workers and better working conditions. They should also fight to expand their struggle by mobilising the support of their class brothers and sisters in other auto plants and also other sectors of workers in Sriperumbudur and elsewhere

in India and internationally.

Since the beginning of the strike MATE has dismissed 22 trainees and 33 professionals and suspended 15 permanent employees. Further, it has sent out a “Charge sheet cum Show cause Notice” to 200 striking workers. In the morning of September 24 the police arrested over 200 Motherson strikers staging a protest rally in front of Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC) office in Irunkatukotai. They were released the same evening after being detained in a wedding hall in the city.

The AICCTU leaders refused to mobilise contract workers and trainees in a common fight with permanent workers at the MATE factory, let alone appeal for support from auto and other workers in the Sriperumbudur industrial area and other parts of the country. Instead their orientation has been towards appealing to labour department officials in the state government. The AICCTU leaders are directing workers to futile appeals to those officials.

IN the evening of October 1, during tripartite talks, Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC) Human Resources (HR manager, who represented the MATE management, denounced the striking workers declaring, “It was wrong for workers to go on strike. You are on strike to damage the good reputation of the company.”

Management's repressive hand is being further emboldened by the AICCTU, the union federation of the Maoist Communist Party of India—Marxist-Leninist—Liberation (CPM-ML-Liberation). Their refusal to call out contract workers and trainees in support of striking permanent workers and thus to isolate the strike is in line with Motherson management's attempts to divide the workers in the same plant and maintain production using those contract workers.

According to a reliable worker source, the AICCTU expressed its readiness to give up the main demand of the

workers—a wage hike—and order workers back to work in return for MATE revoking all disciplinary actions and reinstating all workers. However this pathetic surrender deal by the AICCTU was flatly rejected by the company, which insisted on conducting inquiries for all “disciplined” workers before they return to work. Its hand strengthened by AICCTU’s move to isolate striking workers, the company is determined to go ahead with its witch-hunt against militant workers aimed at suppressing any opposition to sweatshop working conditions.

It was to impose this treacherous deal that a group of union officials, acting in a pre-planned manner, aggressively sought to block World Socialist Web Site supporters from distributing copies of WSWs articles on the Motherson strike critical of AICCTU’s role.

When WSWs supporters visited striking workers staging a *dharna* (sit-in-protest) in front of the plant on October 1, AICCTU bureaucrats ordered workers who had taken the WSWs print outs to turn the all over to union officials.

In response WSWs supporters accused AICCTU officials of weakening and isolating the Motherson strike by refusing to mobilise the contract workforce at the same plant. One union official tried to justify their role by claiming that it was illegal for contract workers to go on strike. Countering this bogus claim, WSWs reporters pointed out to MATE workers involved in the protest that both permanent and contract workers at Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, near Gurgaon in northern Indian state of Haryana fought in a unite action against sweatshop conditions in 2011. And more than 10,000 contract workers went on indefinite strike several times to fight for permanent status as well as a wage hike at Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Neyveli, 350 kilometers from Chennai.

Above all, the WSWs supporters insisted, the fight for workers fundamental rights cannot be subordinated to the capitalist legal system. MATE ignored labour commissioner’s “advice” and illegally suspended and dismissed striking permanent workers, yet it is legal violations are tolerated by the capitalist authorities.

The ongoing strike action at MATE is part of the growing resurgence of workers struggles globally. Workers globally are increasingly taking up the fight for permanent jobs, decent wages and better working conditions.

The victimisation and sweatshop exploitation of workers along with the increasing use of low paid contract labour is not an isolated phenomenon. Indian autoworkers

are facing massive job and wage cuts and attacks on conditions as employers attempt to impose the impact of the slowing of Indian economy and decline of sales in the auto sector onto the shoulder of workers.

More than 365,000 auto industry jobs—350,000 at auto-parts manufacturers and dealers and 15,000 in vehicle assembly—have been destroyed in India since April in response to falling sales. Some commentators are predicting that about half a million jobs will be slashed in the coming months. This attack is part of an escalating global assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of autoworkers in the US, Canada, Mexico, Europe and Asia.

Like their counterparts internationally, the Indian trade unions are tied to the capitalist system and the nation state and are hostile to any independent mobilisation of the working class. That is why MATE workers and auto workers across India need to build their own action committees, independent of the trade unions, in order to take forward the struggle of decent wages, better working and living conditions and basic democratic rights.

They should also extend their support to General Motors strikers in the US and establish international solidarity and unified action in a common fight against the global auto corporations.

The job insecurity caused by the deepening crisis of Indian and global auto industries has been exploited not only by the companies but also by treacherous trade unions to force the striking workers to return to work without winning their main demand.

Striking MATE workers can only fight the company’s attacks and defend their jobs and improve their conditions by breaking from the Stalinist-controlled, pro-capitalist unions, establishing their own rank-and-file committees, and fighting to mobilise autoworkers throughout India and around the world on a socialist and internationalist program.



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