India: Maoist-led union alliance betrays Sanmina workers

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India's Maoist-controlled Left Trade Union Congress (LTUC) last month capitulated to Sanmina-SCI management demands and shut down a 17-day strike of the company's workers in Oragadam, a manufacturing hub outside Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital.

The Sanmina workers walked out on strike on March 3 to demand a pay rise and reinstatement of six dismissed workers and eight others suspended over their involvement in earlier struggles and for opposing a management Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS).

The LTUC ended all industrial action after a meeting with the Assistant Labour Commissioner at Irunkkatukottai on March 19 and ordered strikers to resume work on March 23. The union dropped its wage claim, opposition to the VRS and abandoned the six dismissed workers. Sanmina management only "agreed" to take back three of the eight suspended workers, with the remaining five subjected to an "internal inquiry."

The Sanmina plant in Oragadam produces medical and non-medical electronic equipment for a range of national and international customers. The US-owned Sanmina, in fact, is one of the world's largest independent manufacturers of printed circuit boards and related computer hardware, with nearly 80 manufacturing sites around the world.

Sanmina-SCI is the Indian subsidiary of the global company and notorious for its low wages and brutal working conditions. The Oragadam plant currently employs about 1,200 workers, including up to 400 temporary trainees under the government's National Employment Enhancement Mission. In 2008, the monthly salary for permanent workers was 6,000 rupees ($US78), 12 years later it is only 22,000 rupees, which is very low compared to similar industries in the area.

From the outset, the LTUC leadership, fearful that the Sanmina strike could become a spearhead of a broader working-class mobilisation in the Oragadam-Sriperumbudur Industrial Zone, worked to weaken and isolate Sanmina workers, thus paving the way for their defeat. Senior union officials failed to organise a single demonstration or rally of the strikers, let alone call on workers in the numerous other plants in the area.

The union insisted that strikers' demands could be realised through talks with management, the state government's labour officials and slavish appeals to Tamil Nadu's right-wing AIADMK government.

From 2010 Sanmina workers have been involved in repeated strikes and protests for pay rises, improved working conditions and permanent jobs for contract workers. These struggles, which have been under the control of a range of pro-capitalist Stalinist and Congress party union federations, have all been betrayed.

From 2010 to 2015, the Sanmina workers were aligned to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM; from 2015 to 2017 to the Congress Party's Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC); and from 2017 to late 2019, the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), which is affiliated to Maoist Communist Party of India—Marxist-Leninist-Liberation (CPI-ML-Liberation).

In late 2019 the Sanmina workers were under the domination of the LTUC. Last month's betrayal further demonstrates that the LTUC, a split-off from the AICCTU, is no different from any of the other union federations. All serve as industrial police for big business.

The LTUC is led by Maoist demagogue S.

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Kumaraswamy, a former AICCTU national president and CPI-ML-Liberation leader.

Kumaraswamy established the new union federation after making a politically unexplained split from CPI-ML-Liberation, calling his splinter group the "Communist Party" and linking the Sanmina workers union to the LTUC.

The LTUC also took over the AICCTU's coverage of workers at the Motherson Automotive Technologies & Engineering (MATE) factory in Sriperumbudur and in January 2020 it betrayed a 140-day strike at that plant. Both union federations worked to isolate the striking Motherson workers.

The LTUC signed a sellout agreement with MATE management, ordering the strikers to return to work without wining any of their demands and leaving 79 victimised workers out of a job.

The reactionary policies and sordid maneuvers of the AICCTU and LTUC flow from the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the CPI-ML-Liberation, which is also in an alliance with the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the CPM and CPI.

During last year's national parliamentary elections the CPM and the CPI formed an electoral alliance with the big-business Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK). In Bihar state, CPI-ML-Liberation established an electoral bloc with the Congress Party and pledged to help it form an alternative state government. During the 2019 national elections all three Stalinist parties also made clear that were ready to support a national government led by the Congress Party.

WSWS correspondents spoke with several Sanmina workers during their 17-day strike, discussing the treacherous role of all the Maoist and Stalinist formations and the necessity to build a section of the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), in India.

Arun, a permanent Sanmina-SCI worker, said: "In 2011 we launched a strike under CITU affiliation but were sold out. Soundarajan, a CITU and CPM leader who was involved in our strike, finally betrayed us and became MLA [a member of state assembly] in alliance with AIADMK. Now he and his party pretend to oppose AIADMK. The LTUC's break from AICCTU was not explained to us. I feel these splits are for their own benefits, not for workers."

Gothandaraman, 32, said: "I've been working for this company for more than 11 years but my salary is just 23,000 rupees. There is no respect in this company for workers—it's like a military dictatorship in the industry. Lunch time is just half an hour and the interval break is just three minutes. We live under very difficult conditions but I refuse to accept this."

Gothandaraman asked about the possibility of uniting workers internationally. WSWS correspondents explained the objective basis for a united movement of the international working class, pointing out how workers globally are facing similar attacks at the hands of transnational corporations.

He commented: "I agree that the social crisis is international in character and faced by the vast majority of people, including workers, farmers, and students who are involved in numerous strikes. I agree these strikes must be united against capitalist government."

A decade of bitter industrial struggles by the Sanmina workers strikes and their latest betrayal demonstrates that workers can only go forward by making a complete break from all the Stalinist-Maoist controlled unions.

What is required is the building of genuinely independent rank-and-file committees in India and the mobilisation of workers to defend their jobs, wages and basic democratic rights on a socialist and internationalist program. To lead these struggles, a section of the ICFI in India is needed.

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