

India: Vicious attack on Maruti Suzuki trainees highlights plight of migrant workers during COVID-19 lockdown

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A dozen or so young workers employed as trainees at the Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant in the north Indian state of Haryana were viciously attacked on April 8 by 25 to 30 goons who barged unannounced into their residences in the nearby Aliyar village.

Shouting that the workers were spreading the COVID-19 disease, the goons armed with rods, stones and hockey sticks barged into the five-storey building, which contains several one-room apartments where workers reside five to a room.

The Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant came to all-Indian and international prominence in 2011-12 when workers rebelled against a company and government-sponsored union and mounted a series of militant actions, including sit-down strikes, to challenge poverty wages and precarious contract jobs, and win recognition of the newly-founded Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). Subsequently 13 workers, including the entire MSWU leadership, were sentenced to life in prison as result of a monstrous frame-up mounted by India's largest automaker, its principal parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Narendra Modi and the Congress Party, and the courts and police (see: Three years since Indian court ordered 13 framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers jailed for life).

The trainee Maruti Suzuki workers who were attacked in Aliyar this month all hail from the eastern state of Bihar, which is one of the country's most populous and impoverished states. There are large numbers of migrant workers from Bihar in most major cities and industrial areas, including Delhi and the nearby Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, Kolkata and Mumbai.

According to reports that the *World Socialist Web Site* has received from the Provisional Committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the thugs who

attacked the trainees appear to have been acting at the behest of the corrupt village head, a position known in Hindi as *Sarpanch*.

Like tens if not hundreds of millions of domestic migrant workers, the trainees have been stranded, hundreds of kilometres from their home villages, and without any income or sustenance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's precipitous lockdown.

Without any prior warning or planning, Modi announced on the evening of March 24 that just hours later India would be subject to a three-week anti-coronavirus lockdown, which was later extended for a further 19 days through May 3. Overnight, hundreds of millions of day-labourers, trainees, and contract workers found themselves without employment and income (see: Modi places India's 1.3 billion people under lockdown).

Bihari migrant workers, along with Muslim and Dalit workers, have long suffered from derision and discrimination, as India's ruling elite systematically promotes all manner of backwardness and prejudice as a means of diverting mass social discontent and splitting the working class.

The BJP, the RSS and their Hindu supremacist allies have ratcheted up their communalist agitation and violent attacks on minorities, especially Muslims, in the past year as the economy has unravelled.

The attack on the Maruti Suzuki trainees was clearly aimed at fomenting division and confusion among India's workers and toilers who are undergoing extraordinary hardship during the nationwide lockdown. Recklessly and callously, the Modi government made no provision to provide working people with the necessities of life during the lockdown, then announced a pittance in emergency relief that many, if not most, have been unable to access.

Soon after the April 8 attack, Khushiram, a longstanding

member of the MSWU provisional committee, traveled to the trainee workers' residence in Aliyar to show his solidarity and support. Khushiram subsequently sent the WSWs a link to a Hindi video interview conducted by an organization called Workers Unity in which a victimized worker and Khushiram explain and comment upon the goon assault.

Khushiram is seen denouncing this premeditated attack and expressing his suspicion that the village *Sarpanch* and Maruti Suzuki management had joined hands with the aim of breaking solidarity between the permanent, contract workers and trainees employed at the shuttered Manesar plant.

One of the trainees, Krishna Kumar, suffered a head injury so severe that he had to be taken to a hospital, and later to a better-equipped hospital in Gurgaon, a town 20 kilometres (12.5 miles) away.

A week after this video was posted on Facebook, Khushiram received an intimidating phone call from the superintendent of police at the Manesar police station. In a written statement to the WSWs, Khushiram described this call:

“Today I got a call from the Superintendent of Manesar police station. He says a *Sarpanch* around Manesar has filed a complaint against me. So, I have to go to Manesar police station. I have come to know that from Aliyar village (this) action is being initiated against me because of my opinion in the media against the murderous attack on Maruti labourers on April 8 by some bullies.”

Khushiram further observed that the BJP Haryana State government and the Modi government at the Centre are using the police to intimidate, harass and beat up workers during the lockdown.

“It is also known that the ruling party is using the police to do dirty politics even inside the lockdown,” said Khushiram.

The BJP and its Hindu right allies have attempted to deflect blame for the pandemic and its ruinous economic impact onto Muslims and migrant workers, accusing them of carrying and, in the case of the Muslims, deliberately spreading the coronavirus (see: India's BJP and its Hindu-right allies scapegoat Muslims for spread of pandemic).

These vile lies clearly helped instigate the mob attack on the Maruti Suzuki trainees.

Modi's precipitous lockdown has caused massive distress for all sections of working people, but especially the hundreds of millions of day-labourers and migrant workers.

At the outset of the lockdown, millions of migrant workers sought to return to their native villages by foot, because they had no means of feeding themselves and because many had lost their housing along with their jobs. After several days, recognizing that its ruinous actions threatened to spread the pandemic from the cities to its villages, the Modi government suddenly changed course and ordered police to herd the migrants into internal refugee camps. Weeks later, most remain in these makeshift camps, living in cramped quarters with rations provided by NGOs, other charities and only in some cases government authorities.

The fate of the migrant workers, like the Maruti Suzuki trainees, who remained in India's cities is little if any better. Many have spent what little savings they have and are now forced to skip and skimp on meals, even for their children, because even the larger industrial companies have blithely ignored the government's "orders" that they pay workers during the lockdown. A recent *Scrol .in* article on the conditions in the Gurgaon-Manesar agglomeration, where the Manesar Maruti Suzuki plant is located, was titled, “We are trapped: Hunger is on the rise in Haryana's industrial belt.”

Exemplifying the Modi government's failure to provide even the thin-gruel aid it promised working people during the lockdown, the *Hindu* reported over the weekend that the vast majority of India's poorest 800 million people have not received the one kilogram of additional free pulses in April that the government had promised them. Although April is now almost over, the government has doled out just 30,000 tonnes of a promised 196,000 tonnes of pulses.



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