

# Toyota workers in India continue strike, defy state back-to-work order

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Over 3,000 workers at two Toyota Kirloskar Motor Private Limited (TKM)-owned car assembly plants in Bidadi, India, 50 kms from Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), are continuing their strike in defiance of a back-to-work order issued by the Karnataka state government on Wednesday. Striking workers have been locked out since November 10 in an attempt to break a sit-in-strike launched by workers the previous day against the suspension of a union leader.

Three days after locking out the workers, Toyota escalated its witch hunt, suspending another 39 workers for supposed “acts of misconduct,” even though the facility has been closed. Workers have refused to return to work until management lifts the suspension of all 40 workers.

On Tuesday, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister C. N. Ashwath Narayan, a member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), announced his decision to “prohibit” the ongoing strike and end the lockdown following a meeting with officials from the company, the TKM Employees Union (TKMEU) and the state government. Making it clear his strikebreaking order was driven by the ruling class’s aim of developing India as a more attractive cheap-labor platform than China, Narayan said, “The whole world is looking at India as an alternative to China, and countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are eager to set up shop in Karnataka. Under such a situation, there should not be any talk of strikes and lockouts.”

The TKM auto plants are 89 percent owned by the Japanese auto giant Toyota Motor Corporation, while Kirloskar Group, an Indian conglomerate, owns the remaining 11 percent. The sprawling 432-acre industrial complex in Bidadi employs 6,500 hourly and salaried workers and has an annual capacity of 310,000 vehicles. Workers produce the MPV (Multi-Purpose Vehicle) Innova, the Fortuner SUV and Corolla and Camry passenger cars for the Indian market.

The present conflict began when TKMEU Treasurer Umesh Gowda Alur went to management on November 9 to relay workers’ complaints over the unbearable speedup on the assembly line. This led to a heated argument after which management suspended Alur. Workers responded by launching a sit-down strike to demand Alur’s return and an end to the oppressive working conditions.

A striking worker told the WSW: “Toyota continues to brutally exploit workers at its manufacturing plants. In 2014, when workers went on strike, management declared a lockout and suspended 32 workers. When it lifted the lockout, management insisted the suspended workers would not be taken back until they went through a series of disciplinary inquiries. After the inquiries, it only reinstated 12 workers three years later. The fate of seven workers is still pending. The remaining suspended workers decided to leave the company.”

The worker then described conditions in the plant. “The management treats union leaders badly and gives them no respect. When it reopened the plants last June, it employed fewer workers to follow the COVID-19 safety rules. That meant fewer workers were responsible to meet the same production quotas that existed with the full capacity of workers. We used to produce an Innova car in every 3 minutes but now we are being told to do the same in 2.5 minutes.”

These conditions are similar to what workers face at the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant at Manesar, in the northern Indian state of Haryana. In 2011-12, they launched a year-long struggle to break with the company stooge union and improve their conditions. Maruti Suzuki management and the Congress Party-led Haryana state government responded by launch a joint vendetta to crush the rebellion, destroy the newly formed Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) and demonstrate to global investors that no resistance to industrial slavery would be tolerated. In March 2017, 13 militant workers, including the entire leadership of the MSWU, were sentenced to life imprisonment on trumped-up murder charges.

“Supervisors on the floor have to give you permission to go to the bathroom,” the Toyota worker continued. “As soon as they let you go, they start counting the time until you return to your position. The time is calculated, and it is deducted from your salary.” If workers do not meet their production targets, he added, they do not get their pay.

Striking TKM workers are camping outside the factory after management announced it was locking out workers and told them to vacate the premises. Workers are continuing their strike and denouncing management’s efforts to intimidate them.

In a cynical attempt to justify the lockout, management told the media that it was to protect workers against the spread of

the coronavirus. “As a part of the sit-in strike, the team members were unlawfully staying on the company’s premises and compromising COVID-19 guidelines, thereby leading to a potentially dangerous situation in the factory. This led TKM authorities to declare a lockout for unionized employees bearing in mind the safety and well-being of its employees.”

In fact, TKM management has been oblivious to the safety of workers. The plants were reopened on May 26, after being shut for 55 days under the Modi government’s lockdown measures. Although management claimed it was enforcing new safety protocols, two workers tested positive on June 7 and 16 respectively, forcing the plants to close again.

When they reopened on June 19, it was with a “reduced workforce” and with office staff working from home. Since then, virtually every day a dozen workers are infected due to workers being crammed together on the assembly line. By October 28, at least 565 workers at the complex tested positive and two had died. So, any suggestion that management expelled striking workers from the plant to protect them from the virus is a patent lie. Like the state government, management’s true aim is to break the strike and force workers to surrender.

According to media sources, the holiday season has been prosperous for the company, which has seen a rise in sales over last month, up 52 percent between September and October. This is still 1.87 percent below last October’s sales. Under those conditions, the company is determined to resume production as soon as possible to cash in on higher holiday sales no matter what the cost to workers from the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

TKM management has resumed talks with TKMEU with the aim of ending the strike and restarting production. The back-to-work order is also being used by management to force them back to work.

It is not clear yet whether TKMEU officials will cave in to management and the government’s demands and quickly end the strike. In any case, neither the TKMEU nor any of the other unions has a program to fight the corporate onslaught, which is supported by all of the capitalist parties, from the BJP and Congress to the two principal Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the smaller, older Communist Party of India (CPI).

Rather than mobilizing auto and other workers throughout Karnataka and the rest of the country, TKMEU officials are appealing to management and government officials. TKMEU President Prasanna Kumar Chekkere told *Business Line*, “The workload is very heavy. We are not given leave even for personal emergencies. We want them to consider our requests on humanitarian grounds.” He said the union has also written to the Labor Department seeking redress for workers’ grievances.

The TKMEU has called a meeting of striking workers for this morning at the protest site outside the plants to announce its decision on the strike. Given its past record, it is likely the union will capitulate to the state government’s order. In April

2014, the TKMEU worked quickly to end a one-month strike after a similar order by the state government, then led by the Congress party. A deal was reached that did not meet a single demand of the workers.

The state repression of autoworkers and other sections of the working class poses the need for an independent political strategy for Indian workers. Like other global auto giants, Toyota is using the pandemic to accelerate the restructuring of its international operations, slash jobs and reduce labor costs. To fight the global corporations, autoworkers need an international strategy and must coordinate their struggles across borders.

The Indian trade unions are mostly tied to the various capitalist parties, including the Stalinists, and are tied to the national framework. Like the nationalist unions around the world, they have responded to globalization by suppressing working-class opposition and voluntarily accepting reductions in labor costs in order to attract foreign investment.

To take forward their struggle, workers need new organizations, including action committees controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves, and a new socialist political strategy. The lockout should be transformed into a strike of regular, contract and apprentice workers at the Toyota plants and a broader mobilization of the working class throughout every industry and the public sector.

The fight against multinational corporations like Toyota requires the unification of Indian workers with their class brothers and sisters in Australia, Japan, the US and Europe in a common fight to defend jobs and living standards and oppose the capitalist system.



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