

Indian Toyota workers continue month-long strike against speedup

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2 December 2020

Over 3,000 workers at two Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM)-owned car assembly plants in Bidadi, about 50 kilometres from Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), the capital of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, are continuing a four-week-long strike in defiance of the state government's back-to-work order.

The workers have rejected the TKM's demand to produce about 100,000 cars a month, instead of 80,000, in order to boost its global competitiveness and profits.

TKM has a total workforce of 6,500, of which 3,460 are unionised and work on the assembly line. The remaining employees include supervisors and office staff, many of whom are required to work on the assembly line, under Toyota's Genchi Genbutsu (go and see for yourself) philosophy, especially to break strikes.

The workers began a sit-in strike on November 9, demanding the reinstatement of a suspended TKM Employees Union (TKMEU) leader Umesh Gowda Alur. He was victimised for raising with the management the workers' mounting anger over unbearable workloads. The management imposed a lockdown the following day, exploiting COVID-19 social distancing guidelines to throw the workers out of the premises. Seeking to intimidate workers, TKM suspended another 39 for supposed "acts of misconduct," even though the facility had been closed.

Big business is concerned over the strike's possible spread to other sections of workers who face similar conditions. Karnataka Employers Association president B.C. Prabhakar sent a letter to state Chief Secretary T.M. Vijay Bhaskar, demanding repressive measures, including "immediate steps to declare curfew around the premises of TKM, Bidadi," and "stringent action, including the arrest of troublemakers and also to bar them from entering the Bidadi area."

The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Karnataka state government banned the strike, while also demanding an end to the company lockdown from November 18. The company seized on the government's order to force workers back to work under its own speed-up conditions. When that attempt failed due to workers' opposition, TKM imposed a lockdown again on November 23, with the complicity of the state government.

In an interview with the *Times of India*, TKM deputy managing director Raju Ketkale called on the state government "to take appropriate action" against the workers. This was a call for repressive measures to force workers to submit to the company's harsh conditions.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a striking worker said TKM posted two notices on the company gate wall. One prohibits workers taking their mobile phones to the shop floor. The other "said if any worker after returning to work is tested positive to COVID-19, the company will not take responsibility for his treatment and will not grant paid leave for the curing period." This reflects management's callous attitude toward the safety of workers as the coronavirus pandemic spreads throughout the country.

Commenting on the media and government hostility to the strike, the Toyota worker said, "We don't get any support from the main media. If any media men come, first they go and meet the management and publish whatever it says. They edit workers' comments before publishing them. Our union leader went to meet and sought the support of the local MLAs [state legislative assembly members] and MPs [national parliament members], but no one came forward to support our cause."

The worker agreed on the need for an international

mobilisation of workers to confront the globally-connected employers' onslaught against workers. "As you say, not only Toyota workers but millions of workers participated in the November 26 general strike in India. That shows that the vast majority of workers are facing a common problem."

Even before COVID-19, the global auto industry was in crisis. It has never faced such a slump. Over 230,000 workers lost their jobs in July 2019. Then the pandemic intensified the crash. Moody's Investors Service told the media that Indian auto sales would decline at least 30 percent in 2020, following a fall of over 40 percent in the seven months to July.

Maruti Suzuki Chairman RC Bhargava laid out the agenda of the corporate elite at an All India Management Association event. He declared: "India has the capability to become a lower cost country than China if the industry and the government work together." This means that the Indian auto companies must conduct an assault on the jobs, wages and working conditions of workers, backed by brutal government repressive measures.

Bhargava's own company launched a government-backed vendetta against the determined struggle of thousands of workers at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant at Manesar in northern state of Haryana against slave labour conditions in 2011-12. As a result, 13 militant workers, including all 12 executive members of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, an independent union formed by Manesar workers, were sentenced to life imprisonment in March 2017. They were framed up on murder charges.

While TKM workers are confronted with a government-company onslaught, the TKMEU has made no attempt to mobilise the support of other autoworkers. Instead, the union has turned to various parties of the political establishment, which are all committed to defending the profit interests of companies like Toyota.

The TKM workers are involved in a struggle not just against a single ruthless employer, but big business as a whole, its political representatives and the state apparatus. To stop the union leaders isolating their struggle, the TKM strikers must turn to their class brothers and sisters in the auto industry and other sectors throughout India and internationally.

To defeat the deepening attack on jobs, wages and

basic democratic rights and the accompanying state repression, workers need new organisations, including action committees controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves, and a socialist perspective.

The Indian trade unions are mostly tied to the various capitalist parties, including the Stalinist Communist parties, and to the national framework. Like the unions around the world, they have responded to globalisation by suppressing working class opposition in order to attract foreign investment.

The courage and militancy of struggling workers are not sufficient to defeat this offensive by the global corporations, governments and unions. Workers need a socialist strategy to unify their struggles worldwide against the capitalist profit system.



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