

Karnataka chief minister plots with company to smash strike by Indian Toyota workers

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The month-long strike by over 3,000 Toyota workers at two Bidadi plants in the southern Indian state of Karnataka is in imminent danger. Karnataka Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa held a closed-door meeting with company management and senior officials in his government yesterday to press for an end to the strike, including by deploying repressive state measures if necessary.

Yediyurappa ordered the chief secretary in his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government to “take necessary steps to restore normalcy at Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM).” Chief Secretary TM Vijay Bhaskar will convene a meeting with senior officials today to announce what the “necessary steps” will consist of.

In an article previewing the meeting in the *Economic Times*, a source familiar with the plot to smash the workers’ resistance explained that the government could prosecute workers for obstructing manufacturing activity at the plant. “Once the government issues sanction for prosecution, the management would give a brief window for employees to report at work. Those who defy the government order and abstain from work will face summary dismissal,” the source continued.

Over 3,000 strikers at two TKM plants launched a sit-in strike November 9 over the dismissal of a union leader who had sought to convey workers’ grievances over speedup to management. One day later, management locked the workers out of the sprawling 432-acre complex located about 50 kilometres from Bengaluru. TKM, which is 89 percent owned by Japanese car giant Toyota and 11 percent by Indian conglomerate Kirloskar, is demanding a 25 percent production increase to keep the Bidadi facility globally competitive. This would force autoworkers to produce 100,000 vehicles per month instead of the current target of 80,000.

Three days after the strike began, management intensified its provocations by disciplining 39 workers for

alleged “acts of misconduct,” even though the facility was closed at the time. The state government then intervened to issue a back-to-work order that requires workers to sign an undertaking accepting the increased production target and pledging not to engage in activities detrimental to the company’s interests. Although the union indicated its readiness to accept the order, the strikers rejected its terms and continue to defy it. (See: “Toyota workers in India continue strike, defy state back-to-work order”).

The comments of government ministers who attended Monday’s meeting made clear that they are fully on the side of the company and the corporate elite as a whole, which wants a swift end to the strike lest it trigger a broader eruption of working-class anger over miserable working conditions. “There is no way we can allow the strike to continue as it will harm the families of a number of workers as well as hurt Karnataka’s image as an industry friendly state,” Labour Minister Shivaram Hebbar told the *Economic Times*.

Fraudulently claiming that “Karnataka is a peaceful state, and free from industrial unrest,” the labour minister stressed the priority given by the BJP state government to investors’ interests. “Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa does not want our state to acquire a negative image outside because of this strike,” he said. “The very purpose of recent changes to labour laws was to get more investment.”

This is a reference to the ruthless drive of the Indian ruling elite, spearheaded by the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to compete with China as a cheap-labour platform for global corporations and investors. To this end, Modi has initiated an across-the-board onslaught on labour protections and business regulations in what he has termed a “quantum leap” in pro-investor reforms.

Indicating that the company got everything it wanted from Monday’s meeting, TKM vice chairman Vikram

Kirloskar described the meeting as “excellent.”

The deployment of the full force of state power against the strikers enjoys the backing of the entire ruling elite. Well aware of mounting opposition among workers to glaring levels of social inequality and poverty wages, along with the authorities’ criminal mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, the corporate executives and super-rich want to send a message to other sections of workers by brutally suppressing the strike. As the Karnataka Employers’ Association put it in a recent letter to Yediyurappa, appealing for him to intervene to crush the “illegal agitation,” the Toyota strike threatens to spread and “vitiate ... industrial relations in the entire area.”

TKM employs some 6,500 workers, including 3,460 unionized assembly line workers. The remainder is made up of supervisors and office staff. The labour minister claimed that 700 workers have signed pledges to uphold company “self-discipline” and have returned to work based on an agreement to meet the new production targets. However, management admitted that assembly lines were operating at less than 10 percent capacity as of December 3.

Speaking to the WWS, a striking worker said, “The TKM management keep insisting on workers giving pledges before entering the plant and to this effect they sent out messages through WhatsApp and posts. Management is also now engaged in dividing tactics.” These include attempts to entice workers into accepting the new production targets by offering some of them the prospect of salary increases early next year. “There is a big difference of 15,000 rupees (about \$200), a sudden jump, in the salary scale,” the worker explained.

The employer’s ability to weaken the strike through such methods is the result of the dead end into which the strikers have been led by the TKM Employees Union (TKMEU), which has isolated the Toyota workers’ struggle. The Stalinist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions, and the Joint Committee of Trade Unions (JCTU), which they politically lead, have mouthed support for the Toyota workers struggle, but have done nothing to mobilize the working class in their defence in the face of the escalating corporate-state assault.

The TKM workers’ strike can succeed only if it is immediately broadened to include all auto and industrial workers throughout the Bengaluru region and beyond. The workers are not only engaged in battle against a particularly ruthless employer, but the entire ruling elite and its state apparatus, which are determined to force the

strikers back into the plants to work under conditions akin to slave labour to boost corporate profits. The mass mobilization of the working class in a political struggle against the ruling class’s onslaught on working conditions and workers’ rights is the only viable way to resist the threats by the state government to prosecute workers and smash the strike.

The conditions in India for such a struggle are extremely favourable. Less than two weeks ago, tens of millions of workers took part in a nationwide general strike to protest the Modi government’s austerity measures and the gutting of labour regulations. Farmers are engaged in a mass movement against the deregulation of agriculture so as to strengthen the grip of vast agribusiness concerns. An appeal from autoworkers for workers and impoverished rural toilers across India to join and support their struggle would be met with great enthusiasm.

To fight for this program, striking TKM workers must establish their own independent organizations, rank-and-file action committees, to take control of the strike into their own hands. These committees should establish links with workers at all other industrial facilities in the region, issue appeals for solidarity strike action, and call for a general strike by all workers to force the state government to retract its bullying threats against the TKM strikers.

The struggle against multinational giants like Toyota and the attempt by India’s ruling elite to offer up workers as cheap labour requires above all an international socialist strategy. Striking workers must strive to unify their struggles with their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Europe, and Japan, who confront the same attacks on their wages and working conditions by the same corporations and ruling elites who are no less ruthless in their insatiable pursuit of profit.



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