

Workers around the world must defend striking Indian Toyota workers from repressive government measures

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Workers in India and around the world must come to the defence of the Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) workers in the city of Bengaluru in southern India, who are defying a Karnataka state government back-to-work order and threats of mass arrests and firings. The TKM workers are opposing Toyota's attempt to increase production by 25 percent and defying the government's attempt to criminalize their struggle.

Over 3,000 workers 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 to management. The following day, the management locked the workers out of the sprawling 432-acre TKM complex. 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 suspended 39 workers for alleged "acts of misconduct," even though the facility was closed at the time. Since the state government's issuing of a back-to-work order on November 18, TKM has suspended another 20 workers, bringing the total number of victimised workers to 60. Although the union indicated its readiness to obey the order, the strikers rejected its terms and continue to defy it.

Fearful of the growing support for the monthlong strike by members of the TKM Employees Union (TKMEU) at Bidadi plants near Bengaluru (former Bangalore), the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government led by Chief Minister

B.S. Yediyurappa is increasing its repressive measures against the strike.

On December 10, while thousands of TKM workers staged protests alongside farmers in Bengaluru, the state police demolished a makeshift tent set up by striking TKM workers to stage their protest opposite TKM premises. Indian farmers have carried out continuous protests throughout the country since November 26 against the new farm laws proposed by the BJP national government of ultra-right Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which will allow dominance of large agribusiness over small farmers.

On December 8, the state's Chief Secretary TM Vijay Bhaskar instructed the Ramangara district administration, where the plants are located, to "take stern motion towards individuals stopping employees of the Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) from coming into the manufacturing facility." The move followed a closed-door meeting between Yediyurappa and TKM officials.

According to CNBC TV 18, the Consul General of Japan in Bengaluru Akiko Sugita held discussions with the state's principal secretary, Gaurav Gupta, on December 1 regarding the strike during a meeting with a broader agenda focused on Japanese investment opportunities in the state. Akiko Sugita told the media, "We exchanged our views about the current situation at the TKM Plant and told Mr. Gupta that we were closely watching the development of the situation. We have no official statement from the Government of Japan, but the Consulate General of Japan in Bengaluru has been closely watching the development of the situation at the TKM Plant and hope that a peaceful resolution will be found through active dialogue among the stakeholders

as soon as possible.”

The central concern of government authorities is that the growing opposition in the Indian working class is jeopardizing their attempts to use the coronavirus pandemic to carry out pro-business reforms aimed at encouraging investment in the country by major multinational corporations.

Yesterday Toyota workers held an “Umbrella protest” opposite the TKM premises in defiance of both the government order and management’s demand that individual workers sign agreements accepting the production increase and swearing off any further disruptions to the company’s operations.

Though the TKM claimed that about 700 employees have offered to return to work by accepting the agreement demanded by the company, it was reported that only 470 employees returned to work on December 8.

A striking Toyota worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The company tried to deceive the workers and the public by giving an exaggerated number of workers returning to work, but the reality is only a tiny percentage of workers have returned to work. The management also told those workers who were prepared to accept the company’s agreement to come to the factory with packed suitcases if necessary to work and live inside the plant during the strike, and that they would be provided food and an accommodation to stay. All six gates of the TMK are being monitored by union members to watch for the entry of scabs. Our striking workers stand firm in solidarity.”

He added , “We are encouraged by our two days joint protests with farmers in Bengaluru. The protest procession was to march from the Bengaluru railway station towards Vidhana Soudha [the seat of the state legislature of Karnataka] and the next day towards Raj Bhavan [the governor’s residence], but police stopped us near Freedom Park on both occasions before we reached the final destination. In a new development of solidarity, both farmers and workers formed an ‘Aikya Samiti’ [United Forum] for coordination of joint struggles in the coming period.”

While the joint protests with farmers show the huge support for the strike, the Stalinists which control the major trade unions in India, including the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of Indian Trade Unions, and the Joint Committee of Trade

Unions (JCTU), have only mouthed support for the strike while doing nothing to mobilize workers to defend the strikers. The attempt to isolate the strike raises the danger that the government and the company will redouble their crackdown, including conducting mass arrests of strike leaders.

However, there is immense potential to make this strike the spearhead for a broader offensive by the Indian working class against both terrible working conditions and the right-wing BJP. Only two weeks ago, tens of millions of Indian workers and farmers took part in a nationwide general strike opposing the austerity measures of the Modi administration.

Moreover, the strike takes place amidst a global wave of strikes and protests spanning from France and Greece to Nigeria and Latin America, spurred on in particular by mass anger over the response of national governments to the coronavirus pandemic as well as the growing danger of dictatorship. Autoworkers in the United States, who have learned of the TKM strike from the WSWS, support their struggle and have expressed a desire for a united counteroffensive against the auto companies.



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