

Striking Indian Toyota worker speaks on slave labour conditions at Toyota Kirloskar Motor factory outside Bangalore

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In appreciation of the coverage by the *World Socialist Web Site* of their months long strike, a Toyota worker, who did not want his name published due to possible victimization by Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) management, spoke to the WSWS on the slave labor conditions they have faced while working for the company.

Over 3,000 workers from the TMK plant located in Bidadi near the southern Indian city of Bangalore are continuing their strike that began November 9 against speed-up and witch-hunting by management, defying a back-to-work order issued by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Karnataka state government.

The TKM workers began a sit-in strike on November 9, demanding the reinstatement of TKM Employees Union (TKMEU) leader Umesh Gowda Alur, who was suspended for raising with management the workers' mounting anger over unbearable workloads. In an attempt to break the strike, management imposed a lockout the following day.

The BJP-led state government, working in close collaboration with TMK management, issued a back-to-work order on November 18. TKM management has so far victimized up to 71 workers in an attempt to break the strike.

Counting on the state government's active support to arrange some type of compromise to push striking workers back into the factory, TKM management is peddling lies in an attempt to demoralize and divide the striking workers and force them back on the company's terms. Thus, TKM claims over 1,000 striking workers have broken ranks and returned to work. TKM is working aggressively to break the strike, employing over 1,000 contract workers directly on the assembly lines in violation of a basic rule limiting contract employees to a supportive role.

Countering TKM's claims of a mass defections, the striking worker told the WSWS, "It was a false communication issued by the TKM management. There were only a few hundred, around 300 workers, not over 1,000 as deceitfully declared by the TKM.

"On January 12, TKM lifted the lockout, but insisted that returning striking workers give an undertaking that they would accept the speed-up demanded by the management and not to engage in any union activities that disrupt the production process.

"Our union stand," the worker said "is that it was TKM that imposed the lockout in the first place. Hence the right thing would be to call the workers back to work unconditionally when it lifted the lockout. It was TKM that locked us out on November 10 [a day after workers launched a sit-in-strike against management's sacking of union leader, Umesh Gowda Alur, for raising objections to speedup]. Then it lifted the lockout for a very short period, but demanded that those who wanted to return to work should sign the company's undertaking. It is nothing but retaining the lockout.

"When we consulted our lawyer, he also said that it was illegal on the part of the management to demand undertakings from workers when it lifted the lock out. And that TKM should allow workers to return to work and after that it could negotiate with the union over whatever problems remain unresolved."

Pointing to slave labor conditions inside the factory, the worker said, "Under instruction from the management, supervisors at the shop floor refused to relieve workers to go to the bathroom or to drink water. In justifying this inhuman act the management says, 'They can go once in two hours for 10 minutes and they should go only during that time.' The group leaders were told by the management to watch out for those who go out of turn and their salary should be cut."

Giving a picture of conditions on the assembly line conveyor belt he said, "I've worked on the conveyor belt from the beginning. Compared to work on the conveyor belt, the pressure is less for half-line workers. The management often blackmails those who work in half line saying 'undisciplined' workers would be shifted to the conveyor

belt as some type of punishment.

“Among the few hundred striking workers who returned to work following company and management bullying are those working on half line. The management told them that if they did not return to work, on their later return they would be sent to the conveyor belt section.

“The difference between working on the conveyor belt and half line is that a worker on the production line must always be there, as it is continuously running, and he should not move even for a moment from his position.

“But a half-line worker is supplying parts that are needed to quickly repair any fault on the line. If he wants to be relieved, he could do his work faster. He could finish, for example, a four-minute job in three minutes and then go for drinking water or to the bathroom. So that without taking a cut in salary, he could adjust the time.

“But for us on the conveyor belt system, we can be relieved only when a supervisor makes an alternative arrangement. It is like a jail for us on the conveyor belt. Because of this situation workers are reluctant to work on the production line.”

He continued: “We told the management that all striking workers should return to work together with all victimized workers. We would not leave them behind. Previously, in 2015 following a company inquiry, many workers were dismissed. Likewise, now management says it will form a committee and subject all suspended workers to inquiries. The decision to reinstate or dismiss would be determined based on the outcome of the inquiries.”

On the arbitrary salary cut issue he said, “We are entitled for 33 days leave per year. However it is not possible to take all leave in a planned manner. There may be unexpected issues for which a worker may have to take leave, for instance, if a worker falls sick. And who knows who could be impacted by COVID-19?”

Regarding appealing for solidarity actions in support of workers at Toyota and other auto plants in India and globally, he said, “There is a growing enthusiasm among auto sector workers in India. Many of them say they face similar problems—we will indirectly support your struggles and we are also planning for similar strike actions in the near future. As well, that the Toyota Kirloskar workers strike should not stop in Bidadi, but all auto sector workers must plan for a common struggle, that Toyota Kirloskar workers were only the first to take up this fight. Recently several auto workers came from Chennai-based auto companies to Bidadi to declare their solidarity with us.”

He spoke about the “support” expressed by other political parties for the strike, such as Congress. “Nobody has come directly, they would profess their support for our struggle, but they are hollow statements.”

We discussed the experience of Maruti Suzuki autoworkers employed at the company’s car assembly plant at Manesar, near Gurgaon in the northern Indian state of Haryana. These workers have been subjected to a company-government joint vendetta for their series of militant struggles in 2011–12 against slave labor conditions. At the culmination of this joint witch-hunt, 13 Maruti Suzuki workers, including all 12 members of the executive committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the independent union workers formed to defy the company stooge union, were sentenced to life imprisonment in March 2017.

The striking Toyota worker said, “Maruti Suzuki workers have not committed any crime; they were framed up by management and the police. All the Toyota workers in Bidadi want the immediate release of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers imprisoned for life.”

Summarizing the slave labor conditions at TKM, the worker added, “There are three main problems—speedup, denial of permission to workers for nature’s call and salary deductions. These are not clearly conveyed in the main news channels. It would be helpful if the WWSWS could publish an article highlighting these main issues.”

When we asked what message striking Indian Toyota workers want to convey to the international working class through the WWSWS, the worker replied, “We want to convey to the international working class how inhumanely we Toyota workers in India have been treated by the TKM management by refusing to permit us to go for nature’s call, that is to go to toilet or drink water. It is very inhuman that they count the minutes and deductions are made in salary if one goes when he wants. Also, without providing extra manpower, the current workforce was told to produce 100,000 vehicles instead of 80,000 vehicles. In this struggle, that today is marking 80 days, we appeal to international workers to support our just cause.”



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