

India: Union betrays more than 3-month-long strike by Toyota workers in Bangalore

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10 March 2021

Despite the enormous militancy and courage shown by over 3,000 striking workers attached to two Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) plants near Bengaluru, the capital of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, the more than three-month-long strike against speed-ups and witch-hunts against militant workers by management has ended in defeat. The company successfully engineered a split in the leadership of the TKM Employees Union (TKMEU) to conclude the sell-out earlier this month.

After the company persuaded a faction of the TKMEU executive committee to sign an “undertaking” on company terms, management declared on March 1 that the union had agreed to end the strike. Although the rest of the TKMEU leadership initially rejected the company’s claims and vowed to fight on, the union performed an about-face two days later and ordered workers back to work as of March 4. This meant the three-month strike came to a conclusion without a single demand being won, including the reinstatement of 70 workers who were vindictively suspended by management.

The TKM workers began their sit-in strike November 9 against management’s summary suspension of Umesh Gowda Alur, a TKMEU leader who raised various grievances raised by workers. The workers’ main concern was a gruelling speed-up regime requiring workers to produce a vehicle every two and a half minutes, compared to the previous target of three minutes.

Management reacted by declaring a lockout, claiming that the strike was “illegal.” It imposed a series of lockouts over subsequent months and victimized over 70 striking workers. Despite this, the TKM workers continued their valiant struggle against speed-up and workplace victimization.

The Toyota strike was seen as a threat by the ruling class, which feared that the job action would spark similar protests among other sections of workers, who all confront ruthless attacks on their wages and living conditions.

On November 17, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister C.N. Ashwath Narayan, of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led state government, issued a “prohibit” order on the ongoing strike. Highlighting the Indian ruling class’ broader aim of developing India as a cheap labour platform for global capital capable of competing with China, Narayan justified the back-to-work order by commenting, “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.”

B.C. Prabhakar, the President of the Karnataka Employers’ Association, sent a letter to state Chief Secretary T.M. Vijay Bhaskar in late November to demand repressive measures against the ongoing strike. These included the immediate declaration of a curfew around the premises of TKM, the arrest of troublemakers and the imposition of prohibitions on entering the Bidadi area. The employers’ association president bluntly stated his fear that the strike could “vitiate” industrial relations throughout the entire region, i.e., encourage workers to rebel en masse against brutal exploitation and low wages.

As part of their joint effort to break the Toyota strike, the TKM and the BJP-led state government, in line with demands from the employers as highlighted in Prabhakar’s letter, issued threats of mass firings and arrests. However, they ultimately decided to avoid such an open confrontation due to their fear that it could trigger an explosion of anger among the working class more broadly.

The prospects for the Toyota workers’ struggle to serve as the catalyst for an expansion of strikes and protests by the working class in November were extremely propitious. On November 26, tens of millions of workers throughout the country joined a one-day general strike against the Modi government’s pro-investor economic reforms and associated austerity measures. On the same day, hundreds of thousands of farmers launched an agitation demanding the repeal of the Modi government’s pro-agribusiness farm laws. Pushing Modi’s BJP government into a serious political crisis, tens of thousands of farmers continue to protest on the outskirts of Delhi more than three months on.

The TKM strikers were prevented from giving a lead to this swelling social opposition through a combination of state repression and the strangling of their struggle by the union leadership and its Stalinist-affiliated parties. TKM management, with the full backing of the BJP state government, sought to bully and intimidate workers to return to their jobs and sign an “undertaking of good conduct.” The company insisted that none of the suspended workers would be reinstated until a company-orchestrated “inquiry” against them

was complete. The company subsequently revised its position to allow the TKMEU to sign the “good conduct” undertaking on behalf of the entire workforce.

The employer was able to proceed so arrogantly because the TKMEU systematically isolated the striking autoworkers. They made no effort to broaden the struggle of the TKM strikers throughout Karnataka’s industrial factories, let alone to the millions of industrial workers labouring across India in similarly exploitative conditions. This was because the union’s chief concern was to reach an accommodation with company management that would guarantee its position as the bargaining agent within the plant, not secure the workers’ demands.

Having isolated the determined workers for close to four months, the TKMEU leadership as a whole bears considerable responsibility for creating the conditions in which the joint efforts of TKM management and the state government to foment divisions in the union to sabotage the strike could succeed. On March 1, the four defectors signed an undertaking demanded by the company and submitted it to the state government. This prompted TKM’s March 1 announcement that the strike had been called off.

Gangadhar, the media secretary for the TKMEU, initially contradicted the company statement, declaring, “We have officially not called off the protest. Four executive committee members went to the management and gave an undertaking. ... The executive committee members are those below the office bearers.”

However, the TKMEU rapidly capitulated. In a desperate attempt to save face, the TKMEU stated March 3, “Since the workers and union were firm on not giving any undertaking and since the management issued notice for workers to report for duty without undertaking, the union has advised its members to report for duty as it was a moral victory for the union.”

In an attempt to contain worker anger over its betrayal, the TKMEU made a vague promise to carry out “further protest and strikes.”

Through their three-month-long strike in defiance of the government’s back-to-work order and the company’s threats, TKM workers showed their readiness to fight against the slave labour conditions to which they have been subjected. However, the TKMEU sought throughout to subordinate the workers to fruitless appeals to company management and the institutions of the capitalist state apparatus. The union leadership rejected any attempt to broaden the struggle precisely because social anger in India is at a boiling point and they did not want to risk the TKM strike from triggering a mass worker-led mobilisation that would have rapidly escaped their control.

No appeals were made by the TKMEU for solidarity strikes and protest actions by workers in other industrial facilities. Instead, the TKMEU sowed illusions among the strikers that the leaders of the pro-investor opposition parties, including the Congress Party and Janata Dal (secular), would come to the aid of the striking workers.

Chief political responsibility for the isolation and ultimate betrayal of the TKM strike lies with India’s Stalinist parties. No action to support the TKM strikers was forthcoming from the Joint Committee of Trade Unions (JCTU), which is aligned with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the trade union affiliates of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The JCTU made no call for the mobilisation of workers throughout Bidadi or in other industrial areas of India, even though the TKM strikers enjoyed widespread support. No call was issued to autoworkers engaged in similar class battles, like at Magna Cosma and Motherson in Tamil Nadu, where workers have shown their great militancy by continuing their strikes in the face of harsh repression by the government and companies.

The treacherous role of the Stalinists flows from their policy of politically subordinating the working class to India’s bourgeois opposition parties and the institutions of the capitalist state. Faced with a powerful expression of working class anger at the Modi government in the form of two general strikes during 2020 involving tens of millions of workers, the Stalinist parties endeavoured to tie this opposition to the Congress Party so as to block it from developing into an open challenge to Modi’s right-wing agenda of pro-investor austerity and militarism.

The TKM workers’ bitter experience underscores the need for workers to break politically and organizationally from the unions and Stalinist parties, and form their own independent action committees to take forward their struggle for decent working conditions against the onslaught of the government and companies. Above all, they must adopt a program aimed at uniting workers across India and internationally against the multinational giants like TKM and the capitalist system as a whole.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in the first month of the strike, “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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