Four years since the life imprisonment of 13 Maruti Suzuki workers

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Thursday marked the fourth anniversary of the monstrous life sentences handed out to 13 innocent Maruti Suzuki workers on March 18, 2017. The vindictive ruling was the culmination of a witchhunt and legal frame-up of the workers by the police, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and state Congress Party governments, and the courts for the sole "crime" of leading the fight of the ruthlessly exploited workforce for better conditions and wages against the Japanese-owned multinational automaker.

Twelve of the 13 sentenced workers comprise the entire original leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), a union established by the workers in a bitter struggle against a corrupt pro-company, government-backed union.

The draconian sentences were handed down by a partisan state court, where the presiding judge shamelessly ignored crudely fabricated police "evidence" against these workers and gaping holes in the prosecution's arguments. In a brazenly pro-company ruling, the judge justified the lack of any testimony from workers during the trial on the grounds that they would only have followed the line of the MSWU or would have been intimidated by it.

Meanwhile, Maruti Suzuki managers were allowed to testify and their version of events was treated as the gospel truth. As the *World Socialist Web Site* observed in its detailed five-part series analysing the court case, "Judge Goyal's judgment was not based on a genuine weighing of the evidence. Rather, it was constructed to arrive at a predetermined outcome—the outcome demanded by the Indian ruling elite."

The 13 workers—Ram Meher, Sandeep Dhillon, Ram Bilas, Sarabjeet Singh, Pawan Kumar Dahiya, Sohan Kumar, Ajmer Singh, Suresh Kumar, Amarjeet, Dhanraj Bambi, Pradeep Gujjar, Yogesh and Jiyalal—played leading roles in the year-long militant struggle that began in 2011 for the formation of their own independent union in opposition to the company-imposed stooge union at the Maruti Suzuki auto manufacturing plant in Manesar. They were first arrested almost nine years ago following a management-orchestrated provocation at the plant in July 2012.

As the COVID-19 pandemic erupted last spring, over 2,300 prisoners in various prisons in Haryana were paroled temporarily and allowed to go home. The Maruti Suzuki 13 were also temporarily released, but now the state government is asking prisoners to return to their cells, claiming that the pandemic is under control. In fact, new daily infections have been consistently over 25,000 over the past week.

According to reports received from former Maruti Suzuki workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the trials and tribulations these workers have gone through have exacted a terrible toll.

One of the workers, Pawan Kumar, was tragically killed after being electrocuted while on parole at his family home. Two others are suffering from serious illness. Ajmer, who was the legal advisor of the MSWU prior to his incarceration, is battling cancer, and Jiyalal, who was the "chief accused," has a brain tumour.

For many of these families, the young workers were the sole breadwinners. In a strong display of solidarity, former and current Maruti Suzuki workers have raised hundreds of thousands of rupees every year to support all the families of the imprisoned workers.

During the almost five years between the arrest and detention and the March 18, 2017 sentencing of the Maruti Suzuki workers, the Indian government and judicial authorities, including Haryana's Congress Party chief minister, repeatedly urged that the workers be subjected to exemplary punishment to reassure investors. The Hindu-supremacist BJP government that came to power in 2014 at the national level was as strident as the previous Congress Party government in trying to make an example out of the workers.

From the outset, the Stalinist-led trade union CITU and AITUC federations, the trade union arms of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the older but smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) refused to mount any meaningful and sustained action to free the victimized workers.

Despite having a considerable presence in the Gurgaon-Manesar manufacturing belt where the Maruti Suzuki plant is located, the unions refused to organize any determined action to free these courageous workers. The last public action they organized in support of the jailed workers was in April 2017, and this was only conducted due to their fear of losing all credibility in the eyes of militant industrial workers.

Today, neither the Stalinist trade unions nor their parent political parties bother to even mention the ongoing plight of the imprisoned Maruti Suzuki workers. Yet the CPM's English-language daily, *People's Democracy*, was forced to acknowledge that the fate of these workers has been invoked by other employers to intimidate their own workforces.

During sentencing argument, the state prosecutor Anurag Hooda called upon the judge to pitilessly hand out death sentences to the 13 workers. Acting more as a shameless agent of international

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capital than as a judicial official, Hooda openly stated that any worker opposition has to be ruthlessly suppressed to maintain India's reputation as a cheap labour haven for international capital.

Said Hooda, "Our industrial growth has dipped, FDI (foreign direct investment) has dried up." He continued, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi is calling for Make in India, but such incidents are a stain on our image."

While the judge ultimately rejected the death sentence and instead imposed life imprisonment, the state government continues to this day to appeal the decision in a bid to have the workers executed.

The Maruti Suzuki workers' struggles emerged in 2011 from bitter grievances and anger against the sweatshop working conditions, contract labour and constant management abuse at the auto plant. The subsequent widespread rebellion included actions such as strikes, plant occupations and spirited resistance against violent police crackdowns.

Finally, in March 2012, the workers successfully compelled the company and the state government to grant formal recognition to the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) as the sole legitimate representative of workers at the plant.

Soon afterwards, the MSWU presented the management with a charter of demands that included the complete abolition of the hated system of contract labour. Management refused to negotiate.

Then, on July 18, 2012, the company administration, still smarting from the workers' unrelenting defiance, provoked a dispute inside the plant. A supervisor hurled vulgar caste-based abuse at the Dalit (formerly termed "untouchables") worker Jiyalal. During the melee triggered by this provocation, a mysterious fire broke out which led to the death by smoke asphyxiation of the human resources manager Avanish Kumar Dev.

Seizing upon Avanish Dev's death, management worked hand in glove with the then Congress Party-led state government and mounted a ferocious witchhunt over the next several months.

Hundreds of workers were rounded up in a police dragnet, and the management took this opportunity to dismiss 546 permanent and around 1,800 contract workers. Among the detained were 148 workers, who were tortured by the police and languished in jail for over three years for crimes they did not commit.

In a tacit admission that this vicious witchhunt had no legal basis, the court felt compelled to release 117 workers, either because no evidence was presented against them or because their arrests were carried out on the basis of lists supplied by the company. The state government continues to appeal these acquittals, demanding that the workers be charged.

Eventually 13 workers were convicted of murder and 18 others of lesser charges.

Avanish Dev, despite being a senior manager at the company, was deeply resented by other managers for his sympathy towards the workers. He assisted the workers in registering their newly formed MSWU with the Haryana state authorities back in 2012.

The Stalinist parties bear the greatest responsibility for the defeat and isolation of these courageous workers. Both the CPM and the CPI now consider themselves as strident guardians of the Indian bourgeois "constitutional order" and participate in this political cesspool with great gusto.

They constantly exhort the workers they formally represent to lend political support to the bourgeois Congress Party, presenting this deadly enemy of the Indian working class as a progressive alternative to the Hindu-supremacist BJP government led by the authoritarian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The fate of the Maruti Suzuki workers testifies to the fact that Congress is not a "progressive" alternative, since it was the Congress Party Haryana state government that took the lead in violently smashing the MSWU and witchhunting its leaders.

The day after the sentencing was announced in March 2017, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) launched a global campaign to mobilize the international working class to demand the release of the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers.

The objective conditions for the intensification of this campaign four years on exist with the dramatic upsurge in working class struggles in India and internationally over recent months. In the face of a new wave of pro-investor reforms by the Modi government, including the gutting of labour laws and the expansion of the use of contract labour, a series of militant strikes and protests by autoworkers and other sections of industrial workers have erupted, like the three-month strike by over 3,000 workers at the Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TMK) plant near Bengaluru.

In India and around the world, protests have also erupted among all sections of workers in response to the criminal indifference shown by the ruling elites of every country to workers' lives amid the deadly coronavirus pandemic.

To beat back the threat of state repression and fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and safe workplaces, and to take up a struggle against the insatiable drive for corporate profits by multinationals like Maruti Suzuki, workers entering into struggle in India and around the globe should demand the freedom of the 12 surviving Maruti Suzuki class war prisoners!

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