

Hyundai and Renault-Nissan forced to shut Indian plants due to worker unrest over lack of COVID-19 protections

Yuan Darwin
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After rank-and-file workers staged a sit-down strike Monday to protest the lack of COVID-19 protections, management at a Hyundai Motors plant in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu announced a five-day suspension of operations, starting Tuesday. The autoworkers were protesting the dangerous working conditions at the plant, where 150 are currently being treated for COVID-19 symptoms, according to a union official. Ten Hyundai Motors India workers have already perished from the virus.

Five thousand workers at Renault-Nissan's car plant, also located in the Sriperumbudur-Oragaram industrial belt, were set to follow the example of their Hyundai colleagues by walking off the job Wednesday. At least five Renault-Nissan workers have lost their lives to the virus. Well aware that social tensions are at the boiling point and that the protest movement could spread like wildfire, Renault-Nissan management subverted the job action by announcing a five-day suspension of plant operations until May 30.

The Renault-Nissan workers said that their demands for COVID-19 protections had been ignored. CNBC TV18 reported that the workers' main complaints are a lack of medical insurance, management's insistence on running the plant at full capacity—making social distancing impossible—and cramped canteens.

Prior to the shutdown, Renault-Nissan had demanded that workers maintain a backbreaking pace of 27 jobs per hour on line 1 and 40 jobs per hour on line 2. With 95 percent of the workers 40 and younger yet to be vaccinated, management's decision to keep the factory operating at full tilt has allowed the virus to run rampant through the plant.

The Tamil Nadu autoworkers' job action underscores that it is the global working class that is the main source of opposition to the ruling elite's criminal "open economy" policy, which prioritizes capitalist profit over saving workers' lives. In spring 2020, autoworkers in Canada and the United States, and other industrial workers in Italy and Spain, carried out work stoppages in open rebellion against the corporatist trade unions, which, like the employers, were desperate to keep production running. These job actions saved countless thousands of lives, forcing the ruling elites in North America and Europe to impose temporary shutdowns that they otherwise had no intention of ever implementing.

Likewise, the eruption of working-class anger over the callous

indifference displayed by the Indian ruling elite towards workers' lives testifies to the deep and widespread opposition to the "profits before lives" response to COVID-19 pursued by the Indian government at all levels. India is currently the world epicentre of the pandemic, with well over 4,000 official daily deaths now being recorded. The true depth of the crisis is far worse, with credible estimates suggesting that tens of thousands are dying every day.

Narendra Modi's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government bears chief responsibility for this catastrophe. It has insisted on keeping the economy open at all costs and is refusing to provide social support to the hundreds of millions thrust into destitution by the limited lockdown measures imposed by some state governments. Last month, as daily infections approached 300,000 and official daily deaths climbed past 3,000, Modi declared it was necessary to "save India from lockdown," not to save the Indian people from the deadly virus.

However, the opposition parties defend the interests of corporate India no less ruthlessly. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was recently elected to the state government as the lead party of an electoral alliance including the Congress Party, till recently the ruling class's preferred party of national government, and the twin Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI).

The DMK regime, like its AIADMK predecessor, which was a close ally of Modi and his BJP, has maintained a policy of allowing factories and other industrial worksites to continue operating as if there were no pandemic. Although the DMK government officially unveiled a statewide lockdown after coming to power, it granted massive exemptions for industrial worksites and factories. Speaking much like Modi, DMK chairman and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin remarked, "Lockdowns cannot be the solution, as we also realize that it impacts economic growth."

In the face of this brutal class-war agenda, the job actions by the Hyundai and Renault Nissan workers are only the most prominent examples of mounting working-class anger. At MRF Tyres Ltd., in Puducherry, a Union Territory adjacent to Tamil Nadu, workers mounted strikes last week to demand justice and compensation for two workers who had died from COVID-19, and for the immediate shutdown of the company's plants. More than 300 workers at Caparo India, an auto parts company, took strike action against

unsafe working conditions and the death of an unknown number of workers at its plants. The strike, which began on May 15, was sabotaged by the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions federation on May 21.

In the absence of any official records of worker deaths, and with regional and national newspapers consciously covering up the extent of the slaughter, workers have begun sharing information on workplace deaths via social media. According to these sources, more than 25 workers have died in recent weeks at various globally connected companies just in Tamil Nadu. The death toll is especially high in the Sriperumbudur-Oragaram industrial area, which is located on the outskirts of Chennai, India's fourth-largest urban agglomeration and Tamil Nadu's capital. The entire region has been dubbed the "Detroit of Asia" because millions of autoworkers are employed there in sweatshop conditions.

In the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt in the northern state of Haryana, Rajesh, one of the current leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union, and various workers forums and blogs, such as the Hindi-language *Mehnatkash* and Workers Unity, report that more than 20 workers have died during the recent surge in COVID-19 infections. These include five workers at Maruti Suzuki's plant in Gurgaon, two workers at a Honda plant and one worker at the Tata Motors facility.

The conditions of brutal exploitation that prevail in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt were exemplified by the monstrous 2012 company-government frame-up of Maruti Suzuki workers. In 2017, 13 militant workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant were sent to jail for life. Their sole "crime" was to have led a year-long struggle, including sit-down strikes and occupations, against a brutal work regime and precarious contract-labour jobs and to build an independent union in opposition to a company-backed, state-sponsored union.

As the anger among workers has grown over the past year over speedup, poverty wages and the lack of COVID-19 protections, the trade unions have worked systematically to isolate and suppress their struggles. The Stalinist-led CITU, Maoist-led AICCTU, and the LTUC in Tamil Nadu have consistently isolated workers' struggles from one another and from the wider urban and rural workforce. Each group of workers has been left to fight their government-backed transnational employer alone.

At Renault-Nissan, the Renault-Nissan India Thozhillalar Sangam (RNITS) trade union, which is currently under the control of the Maoist People's Power group, urged workers last week to focus their efforts on a lawsuit aimed at getting the courts to intervene and order improvements in their working conditions. Providing yet another cynical twist to the ruling elite's "open economy" policy, the two-judge bench at the Madras High Court promptly responded, "[W]hile the health of workers is paramount, if industries go down there will be no place for them to work."

The growing number of unnecessary worker deaths underscores the urgency of an immediate shutdown of nonessential production, including the auto industry, in Tamil Nadu and across India to combat the spread of the disease and save hundreds of thousands of lives. This must be accompanied with full compensation for all workers affected and their families until the pandemic is brought under control.

The billions made by the automakers and other major companies, and the hundreds of billions India's billionaires "earned" this year from the monies the world's central banks poured into the financial markets, must be confiscated to pay for a massive public health program, including free and universal vaccinations and social support for workers, their families, and India's impoverished masses.

To fight for this programme, we urge autoworkers to establish rank-and-file action committees in every plant and at every workplace. These committees must become the political leadership and organisational framework through which workers can unify their struggles in a joint counteroffensive to place the protection of the health and very lives of the population ahead of corporate profits.

The struggle against the pandemic, which is a global phenomenon that knows no boundaries, must be waged on an international basis and as a working-class political struggle. We urge Indian autoworkers and all other workers to lend their support to the construction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which is spearheading a global mobilisation of the working class, the only social force capable of combatting the pandemic and saving lives. What this requires above all is the fight for the socialist transformation of society, which is the only way to prevent globally organized corporations like Renault-Nissan, Hyundai, and Suzuki from pitting workers against each other along national lines to cut labour costs and making massive profits while their workers get sick and die.

We urge all workers across India who agree with this perspective to make plans to attend this Sunday's online meeting "The COVID-19 pandemic in India and the need for a socialist strategy ." It begins at 6 p.m. Indian Standard Time.



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