

Indian autoworkers strike against unsafe working conditions in pandemic

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Strikes and protests by auto workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu against unsafe working conditions have forced several companies, including the Indian affiliates of transnationals like Ford, to temporarily shut down production. Dozens of workers have died and many more have been infected with the coronavirus, which is surging throughout India like a tsunami. Anger is mounting among workers against the murderous joint efforts of the companies and India's central and state governments to force them to work, risking their own and their loved ones' lives to make profits for the giant auto corporations.

Popular anger over India's ruinous mishandling of the pandemic forced the newly-elected Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led Tamil Nadu state government to declare a lockdown last month. However, the DMK, a close partner of the Congress Party and its Indian Stalinist allies, gave the green light for all major industrial facilities to continue operating at full tilt. This mercenary decision underscores their alignment with the Indian central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has prioritized profits over human lives, pursuing a "herd immunity" policy throughout the pandemic.

Aiming to lift even the current limited lockdown so to remove any barrier to profit extraction by the transnational corporations and their Indian partners and clients, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin issued a video message on June 1, cynically declaring: "We cannot keep extending the lockdown and there has to be a full stop to this soon. It is only in people's hands."

The working class, on the other hand, has been demanding that industries follow scientific lockdown policies. After protests, walkouts and threatened strikes over the lack of COVID-19 safety measures halted

production at Hyundai and Renault-Nissan last month, workers at several other corporations followed suit.

A boycott of lunch by nearly 950 workers on May 27 at the Ford India Private Ltd. plant in Chennai, demanding coronavirus protection measures, forced the company to shut down production for two days, on May 28 and 29. Ford India workers requested the company treat them as front-line COVID-19 fighters, since they are risking their lives during the pandemic. And, if they die due to COVID-19, they insisted their families should be paid a compensation of 5 million rupees (\$US68,357).

The Ford workers have also demanded that management cover workers' full medical expenses if they are infected with COVID-19, and that the plant be closed during the COVID-19 lockdown period, with paid leave for workers. Over 230 workers have been infected by the virus at the Chennai, Tamil Nadu Ford plant, and at least two workers have died.

Confronted with worker unrest against the spread of the virus, hydraulic cylinder maker Wipro Enterprises Pvt. Ltd. declared a three-day shutdown beginning on May 28. The union at the plant, which is affiliated to the United Labour Federation (ULF), has sought the intervention of the Madras High Court against the company and the Tamil Nadu government's order allowing certain industrial units to function during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is an attempt to divert workers' opposition away from the preparation and launching of industrial action. Last week, the same court rejected a similar motion brought by a Maoist-led union at Renault-Nissan, declaring "[W]hile the health of workers is paramount, if industries go down there will be no place for them to work."

Eicher Motors, a two-wheeler maker that manufactures Bullet and other motorbikes, announced a

three-day shutdown beginning May 27. Because of worker unrest over unsafe conditions due to COVID-19, Japanese two-wheeler company India Yamaha Motor had previously decided to shut its two plants from May 15 to May 31. Royal Enfield, another two-wheeler maker, suspended operations for three days, starting on May 27, at its plants in Thiruvottiyur, Vallam Vadagal and Oragadam. The company had shut down its plants citing the nationwide surge in COVID-19 infections between May 13 and 16.

The strikes and plant shutdowns across Tamil Nadu come as plants across India are forced to shut down by growing worker anger, parts supply problems, and COVID-19 deaths. Major Indian auto plants that have shut down last month include Toyota Kirloskar Motors at its Bidadi plant near Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka; MG Motor India's Halol plant; and Mahindra at its plants in three cities in Maharashtra, Chakan, Nashik and Mumbai.

Rising infections and deaths among workers in auto and other industries are the outcome of the murderous herd immunity policies carried out by the Modi government and state governments across India, including Tamil Nadu's DMK government and its AIADMK predecessor. As COVID-19 cases rose exponentially from early March on, Modi refused to implement a lockdown to break the chain of viral transmission, infamously declaring in an April 20 speech to the nation that he would "save the country from lockdown," not the deadly virus. State governments, for their part, have, at most, implemented partial lockdowns, while allowing the globally-connected auto and auto parts industries to operate. This paved the way for more workers' infections and deaths.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin's remarks demanding "a full stop" to the current lockdown demonstrate that the sole concern of his government and that of the entire Indian ruling elite is to safeguard investor profit, not protect workers' lives and well-being from the disastrous COVID-19 pandemic. These selfish class interests determine the policy of the pro-business governments of all political colorations across India.

With India recording 127,000 fresh COVID-19 cases and 2,795 deaths in the last 24 hours, forcing industries to operate and schools to reopen can only lead to a

further catastrophe. Tamil Nadu has recorded 26,513 new COVID-19 cases and 490 deaths. Meanwhile, the southwestern state of Karnataka recorded 14,304 fresh cases and 464 deaths. Other major Indian cities have recorded new mass infections in the last 24 hours: 2,467 in Chennai, 1,032 in Kolkata, 831 in Mumbai and 623 in Delhi.

India's twin Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI) and their affiliated trade unions bear political responsibility for the suffering of workers and toilers in Tamil Nadu during the pandemic. They joined a DMK-led electoral alliance that also included the big-business Congress party for the state assembly elections held in April, helping the rightwing DMK project itself as "worker-friendly" and a proponent of "social justice." The Stalinists are now supporting the DMK government as it allows industries to function even amid this spring's deadly surge of the coronavirus across India.

The defence of workers' lives and their basic social and democratic rights against the policies of the Modi government and the bourgeois ruling elite requires a political and organizational break from the Stalinist parties and their affiliated unions. Workers need their own, independent rank-and-file committees. To fight the global pandemic and the ruling elite's murderous policies, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has launched the call for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The struggle against the pandemic is a global struggle against world capitalism, a system that has proven incapable of containing the virus, because all socioeconomic life is subordinated to the pursuit of investor profit. It is a struggle of the international working class for socialist policies on a global scale to prioritize the lives and social needs of working people over the predatory profit interests of the corporate and financial elites.



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