

Indian autoworkers denounce governments, companies and unions for making them work amid deadly pandemic

Yuan Darwin, Nandhakumar
3 June 2021

With the COVID-19 pandemic raging out of control, Indian auto factories, including plants run by Hyundai Motor, Renault-Nissan, Ford India and Eicher Motors, were forced to idle their operations late last month in the face of strikes and protests among autoworkers over unsafe working conditions. Backed to the hilt by the far-right Modi government and its state counterparts, including the newly-elected DMK government in Tamil Nadu, the automakers have begun reopening their facilities even though infections and deaths remain high.

Hero Motor Corporation Ltd has restarted operations, on a limited scale, at three of its plants in the north Indian states of Haryana and Uttarakhand. Other manufacturers, like Tata Motors and Bajaj Auto Ltd, are continuing with production at limited capacity.

Workers at Renault-Nissan resisted the unsafe reopening and initially refused to return to work. The Madras High Court, in an attempt to avert industrial action, ruled that the Tamil Nadu Government and Directorate of Industrial Safety have to inspect Renault Nissan's plant at Oragadam, on the outskirts of Chennai, to "ensure that it (adheres) to safety protocols." The production speed has also been reduced to 30 cars per hour from 40 cars per hour. These inadequate measures, even if they were implemented to the letter, would not prevent the continued spread of the deadly virus through the workforce, under conditions where Tamil Nadu is officially recording tens of thousands of new infections each day.

The trade unions are working hand in glove with management to reopen the plants. This includes the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) and Left Trade Union Center (LTUC). The CITU and AICCTU are affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Maoist Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) respectively, while the LTUC is a split off from the Maoist AICCTU.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to autoworkers employed in various factories owned by the major global automakers located in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial belt on the outskirts of Chennai.

A worker at the Renault Nissan plant who wished to remain anonymous said it was impossible to maintain safety measures like social distancing during car production. He added, "Law suits by

the unions, interventions by the Madras High Court, and inspection by state government departments are nothing but stage drama, a bogus thing. Industry safety inspectors and judges are on the side of the company."

Expressing his hatred towards the union bureaucrats, he added, "Initially they pretended to fight for us. But now when we question something, they don't even answer and neglect us. For the past three years, we did not have any incentive or wage increase. Earlier I thought only management and governments are against us, but now I realize our union joined them long ago."

He continued, "I have read and heard that the Communists [i.e., various Stalinist parties and unions] had been leading many militant struggles earlier. But now they are corrupt and degenerate. The CITU especially is very clever in presenting struggles as 'victories' despite many workers, including my friends, being victimized and losing their jobs, for example the (2018) Yamaha strike."

The worker added with concern, "I am scared I will be victimized if I speak about all of this although it's true. So how could we make others [fellow workers] aware? How do we awaken them against these injustices?"

The WSWs reporters explained that out of their bitter experience with the pro-capitalist unions workers must draw the conclusion that they must break from them and build new organisations of struggle, independent rank-and-file committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers themselves. We added, "You are not alone. You are not powerless. You are isolated from other workers purposely by the unions and led to defeats."

Pointing out that autoworkers are linked to workers elsewhere in Asia, Europe and North America through global supply chains, we said: "What if Renault Nissan workers throughout the world challenge your management? What if they fight against your victimization? Renault Nissan workers need to unite with fellow workers in Sriperumbudur, elsewhere in India and internationally."

The worker responded, "The global unity of the working class is something new and exciting to me. Please send me your articles and links. I like to read and am excited to share them with my colleagues."

Navinash is a permanent employee at Renault Nissan's Oragadam plant. His comments made clear the critical importance of the demand that workers receive full pay during a shutdown of

nonessential production to bring the pandemic under control.

He explained, “Automobile manufacturing is actually nonessential production and should have been shut down. But the governments, companies and unions have conspired together and made us slaves who can be drained, crushed and killed for their profits. I am coming to work due to financial pressure since my family is in poverty.”

Sharing his experience with the unions, he said, “As far as I have seen, the unions here in Sriperumbudur, whatever their affiliations, have never united or even expanded workers’ struggles. When permanent workers are on strike, contract employees are used to break the struggle and vice versa. Our union speaks only about permanent employees. Contract workers are left alone to work and die without any safety or benefits. I cannot tolerate the slave-like conditions faced by the contract workers and it disturbs my conscience. I have immense sympathy for them.

“I say openly that my union has not fought for the safety of me and my fellow workers. In the past two years, there has been a huge increase in the prices of basic commodities, but there is neither an increase in our wages, nor have we received any incentives. Out of my monthly salary of 32,000 rupees (about US \$440), I am spending 24,000 rupees per month for my family loans and living in a poverty-like situation.”

Turning to the impact of the pandemic, he continued, “I cannot believe the lie that these auto plants can be run in a safe manner by following some protocols. As the normal temperature is increasing day by day amid the summer season and there are no cooling facilities on the shop floor, the face masks used by autoworkers get wet quickly. So the virus could easily spread through the sweat and water droplets. Madras High Court’s intervention and claims that plants are now safe are bogus.

“The shutdowns done by these industries are just to let off steam (among the workers), reduce our anger and again let us die in the same dangerous situation. I think the emergency demands proposed by you (to control the pandemic) and the idea of rank and file committees seems to be true and urgently needed at the moment.”

Balakrishnan works at Hyundai Motors’ Sriperumbudur plant and is a member of the Hyundai Motors India Employees Union (HMIEU), which is affiliated to the Stalinist CITU.

He told us, “Before this pandemic, we workers ourselves would arrange for compensation if a worker died due to an accident or other causes, because the compensation given by the company was not enough. But in this situation of a serious upsurge of the virus and with many of my fellow workers having perished, management has not announced any medical insurances or compensations. We are involved in a militant struggle for our safety amid this pandemic. Only due to our united struggle, of both permanent and contract workers, was Hyundai management forced to reduce the number of shifts.

“The DMK government is fully supporting the corporates following the same fraudulent claim that the automobile industry is essential production and saying lockdowns should be relaxed immediately. Due to increased speedup of production and less space between two auto machines, the social distancing is very difficult to follow during automobile production.

“CITU leaders from the beginning have been diverting these issues by claiming ‘each one must play their respective roles,’ and saying management will solve our demands in a systematic manner. The CITU has done nothing to stop the death of workers. Instead, it just exists to consume our dues money. Whether BJP or DMK or CITU, nobody cares about the virus. Instead, their slogan, as I have seen, is always ‘reopen the economy,’ and ‘no work, no pay’. This pandemic and the death of my fellow workers have made me realize that the real unity of the working class is more powerful than anything else.”

Purushothaman is a permanent employee at Hyundai Motors India and a member of the United Union of Hyundai Employees (UUHE), which is not formally affiliated to any national union federation.

He said, “Altogether, 800 employees and their families had tested positive in a month, Hyundai, aiming to extract profits, just let workers die. I was deeply disturbed by the deaths of my fellow workers. The shutdown of our plant for five days is not an offer from government or management, but was fought for by a united struggle of Hyundai workers standing at the plant gate and stopping the company bus, which was bringing the staff for the second shift. We fought in spite of our union differences. The unions fight only for permanent workers, have not expanded their struggles and now we can see millions of people are dead due to this pandemic. The unions have not raised anything about this.

“When the previous AIADMK state government under Edappadi Palaniswamy declared automobile manufacturing essential, the unions were silent and accepted it indirectly. Workers throughout Sriperumbudur were not mobilized in the Nokia strike in 2009 nor the recent Motherson strike.

“In relation to workers’ issues, the court is not neutral but acts as a part of the state. I am well aware of the situation of the Maruti Suzuki workers who were falsely victimized. ‘Workers of the world unite’ is an urgent slogan but its application has been prevented for a long time by organizations falsely claiming to be for the workers.”



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