

Indian workers discuss need to build rank-and-file committees to fight auto bosses

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Inspired by the struggle that the striking Volvo truck assembly workers in Dublin, Virginia are mounting against the transnational automaker and the pro-company United Auto Workers (UAW), several Indian auto workers have spoken with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the need to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, to assert their class interests.

The recent WSWs report about the martyred Maruti Suzuki worker Jiyalal has also figured in the discussions. So too has the fight to secure the freedom of the eleven surviving Maruti Suzuki Manesar car assembly plant workers jailed for life on frame-up murder charges for opposing a brutal work regime and precarious contract labour jobs.

WSWS reporters conveyed to the workers the contents of the June 14 open letter the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) sent to the UAW, “What is your strategy for victory,” and the workers subsequently used Google Translate to translate the letter into their native Tamil. The letter advances a series of demands based on what the workers actually need, not what the company claims it can afford, and insists that a fight to broaden the Volvo workers’ struggle to ensure victory is essential.

“We are demanding that a line be drawn in the sand, that this strike result in a clear victory for workers,” the VWRFC letter states. “If they are informed about our struggle, workers throughout the country and indeed around the world will understand that it is in the interests of all workers. They will understand that this is a strike not only for us, but for the future. A successful struggle here at Volvo will strengthen every autoworker, and in fact the entire working class.

“If you are not prepared to carry out such a fight, then get out. The rank-and-file will elect a bargaining and strike committee of its own that is prepared to carry out the struggle that is required.”

The Indian workers expressed their appreciation for the struggle waged by the VWRFC to advance the independent interests of the Volvo workers in opposition to the corrupt UAW, and said they felt politically clarified about the purpose of a rank-and-file committee and why the VWRFC insists workers confront a war on two fronts. The first front consists of the giant transnational corporation Volvo, which is scouring the globe for the largest profits, while the second is the UAW, which functions as a junior partner of Volvo management and works to impose the company’s concessions demands on the workers.

The autoworkers also said that establishing international links between workers, as called for by the recently established International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, makes a lot of sense given that autoworkers in every country confront transnational corporations.

The workers who spoke with the WSWs reporters included several

Renault-Nissan auto and Royal Enfield motorcycle workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and a 26-year-old Maruti Suzuki contract worker.

Around 5,000 Renault Nissan workers recently forced management to suspend operations for five days because of unsafe working conditions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. At least six of their colleagues have died and hundreds of others have been infected. In the nearby Hyundai auto plant, 12 workers have died, and hundreds have been infected.

The DMK—the regional party that recently came to power in Tamil Nadu in an electoral alliance with the two main Stalinist parties, the CPM and the CPI—has continued the disastrous pandemic policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national government, placing autoworkers’ health and lives in peril.

With the backing of the courts, the Tamil Nadu and all other state governments have ordered export and “continuous process industries,” which includes non-essential auto production, to continue operating. This is despite numerous major COVID-19 outbreaks in industrial plants across India.

The Renault-Nissan workers showed our reporters a letter in Tamil sent by management to the leadership of the local union, the Renault Nissan India Thozhilalar Sangam (RNITS), which bluntly stated that the company cannot implement even the inadequate government-mandated minimal social distancing measures at the plant. The union leadership concealed this information from the workers.

In addition to unsafe working conditions, the workers complained about low wages and the lack of a pay increase for the past 3 years. They also denounced the increasingly bureaucratic attitude of the RNITS towards the rank and file. RNITS is affiliated to the United Labour Federation (ULF).

Below are the sentiments and comments expressed by the Indian auto workers to the WSWs reporters. Names have been changed to protect them from company retaliation.

The Renault-Nissan workers said, “We completely support the campaign to free the remaining 11 framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers. In our company, at least 6 workers have died, and more than 1,000 workers have tested positive due to unsafe working conditions. Our union, the United Labour Federation (ULF), has neither spoken about the death of Jiyalal, nor the need to free the 13 victimised Maruti Suzuki workers.

“As you summarised the political lessons of betrayals of autoworkers strikes by the trade unions in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial zone (known as the Detroit of India), we understood that it is the trade union federations such as the CITU, AICCTU, and the LTUC in Tamil Nadu and also our own union, the

United Labour Federation (ULF), that have worked systematically to isolate these struggles. It is necessary to mobilize workers broadly to fight the corporations and also these union bureaucracies.

“You clarified our doubts about the relationship between trade unions and rank-and-file committees. You cited the example of Volvo workers and also the educators in US. We now understand that rank-and-file committees have an international socialist strategy, where discussions are done by workers in a democratic way. We understood that we have fundamental democratic right to form rank-and-file committees and these committees will break the isolation of workers. We need to unite globally to fight these transnational companies.

“Although all our fellow workers have not yet accepted your perspective completely, they are nevertheless eager to know of the analysis of WSWs. We will share and discuss your articles with our colleagues and be in touch with you.”

Sridharan, who is a contract worker and a machine operator at Royal Enfield company in Tamil Nadu, said, “I completely support the defense campaign to free the 11 Maruti Suzuki workers who are still victimised. I started reading Marxist literature during my college days. Yet I did not join any of the left-wing movements. I was threatened many times by cadres of right-wing Hindu-fascists for criticizing them with my left-wing outlook. Later, I joined TVS Sundaram company in Hosur, Karnataka where I was shocked by the super-exploitation and slave-like conditions prevailing there.

“So, I started to read further about the working class and exploitation explained by Marxism. Subsequently I joined the Royal Enfield motorcycle company. The situation here was even worse. At this time, seeing my left-wing posts, many cadres from various left-wing movements contacted me to join their movements. But I was not convinced by their arguments. Now for the first time, I am really attracted to your argument that the real need is for an internationalist strategy and the ‘international unity of the working class.’ I feel I am learning a lot from you.

“Although our union WPTUC (Working Peoples Trade Union Council led by one Kuchelar, a pro-Stalinist union official) raised the conditions of contract workers initially during the strike in 2018, they never mobilised the 4,000 contract workers out of our Enfield plant’s 5,000 total workforce. Later the union dropped these demands and stopped talking about contract workers altogether.

“During the second wave (of the pandemic) and the subsequent lockdown, many workers who left the city to save their lives, could not return when the factory was hastily reopened. At least 100 contract workers were dismissed from their jobs immediately without any prior notice. Many contract workers are irritated and also dislike the so-called security check-ups. They check our shoes, inner pockets etc. and even the bags and purses of women workers. All this in the name of security.

“I completely agree that these unions are adapting to the divisive and reactionary policies of management and capitalist governments. They will not unite the permanent and contract workers, let alone fight to unite us with our global counterparts.

“I fully support the IWA-RFC proposed by your movement and the Bolshevik policy of uniting the international working class for a future socialist society.”

In late 2018, thousands of workers in Yamaha, MSI and Royal Enfield erupted in a strike in Tamil Nadu. Murugesan, who played a leading role in the Royal Enfield strike, was victimized and spoke about the lessons he has drawn from his experiences:

“I was working in Royal Enfield assembly plant in Oragadam until

2019. I was victimised and transferred to a Gujarat showroom which is 1,500 kilometers (more than 900 miles) away from my home. This was punishment for participating in the 2018 Yamaha, Royal Enfield, MSI struggles. Along with me, 150 of my fellow workers who were also leading the struggle, were either transferred or dismissed. Our union, WPTUC, was unable to reinstate my job at Oragadam where my family still resides. I have lost confidence in legal and trade union struggles which now seem bogus. The decisions taken by union bureaucrats are kept secret and not explained to workers openly.

“I can relate to the great difficulties faced by the 13 victimised Maruti Suzuki workers. I was forced to sign a ‘good conduct agreement’ by the management. They targeted me for my militancy and for showing concern for my fellow workers. I support the campaign to release the 11 remaining Maruti Suzuki workers. Their victimization is a vital lesson to all workers. We have to mobilize the working class internationally. Please share your articles with me as I would like to read more about the IWA-RFC.”

Twenty-six-year-old contract worker Manuj, who is a victim of Mauri Suzuki’s policy of firing contract workers whenever it wishes, spoke to the WSWs. He hails from Sikar, a town about 280 kilometers from the national capital, Delhi. He moved to the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt on the outskirts of Delhi where the Maruti Suzuki plant is located to improve his living conditions. He is now jobless living with his family and a small child. He is experiencing great financial difficulties and it is becoming hard to care for his family.

“I was working as a contract worker at the Maruti Suzuki assembly plant in Manesar, but I was suddenly terminated from my job in February 2021. This was due to the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns. Even now 470 cars are made in 8 hours. Just 7 minutes are given for tea break and only 20 minutes for lunch time which means we are still in the same slave-like conditions that the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) fought against during its formation in 2011-12. Now the MSWU don’t fight for us.

“Your idea of rank-and-file committees is really good and also it is new to me. I will read your articles and also support your campaign to release the 11 Maruti Suzuki workers imprisoned for life.”



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