

# With unions' consent, Indian automakers ramp up production amid raging pandemic

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Despite at least 21 deaths and thousands of coronavirus infections among autoworkers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu just in the past couple of months, the state's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party government has mandated that auto production be carried out essentially at full capacity. The government has declared that "any company which exports or supplies to export-oriented industries will be allowed to operate at full capacity as cases have come down."

This policy is entirely in line with that of India's far-right, pro-big business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP government is openly encouraging nonessential industries to operate without making even the most elementary health and safety provisions for workers. The Modi government is shamelessly presiding over an unmitigated health and social catastrophe, with more than 400,000 COVID-19 deaths and more than 30 million infections, according to the official gross undercount, and widespread hunger for hundreds of millions.

The DMK government has declared the auto industry an essential "public utility service." This in effect makes autoworkers "frontline workers," as essential for the functioning of society as healthcare, electricity, and water workers.

While utilizing this political subterfuge to force workers into unsafe work environments, the DMK government has issued so-called COVID-19 safety guidelines, such as social distancing, that companies are supposed to implement in their plants. These guidelines are ineffectual and indeed spurious. They are meant to provide a cover for the government's mercenary policy of prioritizing the profit interests of the transnational automakers that successive Tamil

Nadu governments have attracted with promises of cheap labour and tax breaks over workers' health and lives.

Despite the government having formally classified them as "essential" workers, its safety measures do not mandate that autoworkers be given priority access to vaccinations. Only 25 percent of the approximately 23,500 autoworkers who work for the three largest multinational automakers—Renault-Nissan, Hyundai, and Ford—active in the "Detroit" of India, an industrial cluster located within 170 km from Chennai, have received one dose.

A noted journalist, Sudarshan Varadhan, reported in a Reuters article entitled "India auto hub lets car plants run at full capacity despite few vaccinations" that about 4 percent of the COVID-19 cases in the Kanchipuram and Chengalpattu districts, where the car plants are located, was accounted for by autoworkers. According to Microsoft Bing map statistics, the infection rate for the two districts is about 6 percent for the general population. However, Varadhan reported 3,768 infections at the three companies' plants. This works out to an astounding 16 percent infection rate among the 23,413 autoworkers.

The two Stalinist parties, the older but smaller Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), were in an electoral alliance with the DMK during the recent state assembly elections. They are continuing to promote the reactionary DMK as a friend of the "people." Their trade union apparatuses, the CITU and the AITUC, along with the Maoist AICCTU, which all maintain a sizable presence in Tamil Nadu's auto sector, support keeping the auto plants open.

In late May, rank-and-file workers at the Korean-headquartered Hyundai motors, US Ford motors and

French-Japanese Renault-Nissan launched a sit-down strike and protests following hundreds of infections in the plants. This rebellion compelled the automakers to shut down their plants for 5 days. However, they rapidly moved to restart production.

The Maoist-led Renault Nissan India Thozhilalar Sangam (RNITS) along with the unions at Hyundai and Ford have refused to mount any sustained action to shut down the plants until COVID-19 is brought under control and all workers fully vaccinated. The RNITS merely appealed to the Madras High Court, the state's highest judicial body, after the plants reopened following the 5-day shutdown in May.

The union asked the court to order a halt to production, complaining that the company was flouting social distancing norms. It also argued that the poor quality of company-provided health care benefits was unnecessarily risking workers' lives. This convoluted argument implies that had the company provided better health care coverage, the RNITS would have countenanced workers risking their lives for the profit interests of Renault Nissan.

The company told the court that "it was impossible to increase the distance between workers beyond 2 or 3 feet at some workstations." The DMK government lined up behind the company, telling the court that the nature of auto assembly posed "challenges in maintaining social distancing." In other words, workers' lives should be sacrificed to produce nonessential vehicles so as to guarantee Renault-Nissan's profits, and rich dividends for investors.

In an earlier ruling on a previous RNITS motion, a two-judge High Court panel cynically stated that "[while] the health of workers is paramount, if industries go down there will be no place for them to work." For the judges, ordering the company to halt production until the pandemic is brought under control and pay full wages and benefits to the workers during the closure was, of course, totally out of the question.

In mid-June, the court ordered the Tamil Nadu government to have its inspectors visit the Renault-Nissan plant, but not the plants belonging to Hyundai and Ford, observing that the unions at these plants had not raised any objections. Underscoring the court's indifference to workers' health, it stipulated that the inspection should take place in July, thereby ensuring that many more workers would be infected before any

action was taken.

Prior to the court ruling, the RNITS had already reached a "peace deal" with the company, citing Renault-Nissan management's acceptance of a minor slowdown in production speed. As the union explained to the press, what this means is that "after three cars on the conveyor belt [are assembled], one slot will be empty so that a worker need not move to the next workstation to complete his work." According to the union, this utterly inadequate measure can be accepted as a substitute for the most rudimentary social distancing norms.

The union general secretary, Moorthy, also claimed that management has agreed to provide a job to a family member of each of the workers who have died from COVID-19. It has also pledged to increase the compensation to families from 100,000 Rupees to 200,000 rupees (approximately \$2,675.)

These developments underscore once again that autoworkers can advance their interests only through their own independent action. They cannot depend upon either the RNITS union or the courts to protect their health and well-being. This awareness is propelling the Renault-Nissan and other Indian autoworkers to consider an alternative strategy, as shown by the recent discussions held by a group of workers with the WSWS about forming rank-and-file committees. Indian autoworkers should follow the example of striking Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, who formed a rank-and-file committee, recognizing that to assert their class interests they must wage a two-front battle against the transnational Volvo and the pro-company United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

To successfully fight against the giant transnational corporations that dominate the auto industry, a socialist strategy that unites the workers internationally is essential. Indian autoworkers can play a critical role in developing this movement by supporting the construction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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