

Workers at Motherson plant in southern India mount indefinite strike for decent food, better conditions

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Some 220 of the slightly more than 300 permanent workers at the Motherson Automotive Technologies and Engineering (MATE) plant in Sriperumbudur, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, launched an indefinite strike last week. They are demanding improved working conditions, including quality meals and proper tea and toilet breaks.

The workers walked off the job August 3, after rejecting the bogus verbal assurances MATE management gave in talks held at the Assistant Commissioner of Labour (ACL) office in Irungattukottai the day before.

The strikers are demanding edible, worm-free food, including for night shift workers, who have been given tea and biscuits instead of meals. They are also calling for the withdrawal of disciplinary action against workers who have been victimized for demanding better quality food, 30 minute breaks for nightshift workers after four hours on the job, and tea breaks.

In response to India's COVID-19 catastrophe, workers are also fighting for paid leave for COVID-19-infected workers, with the full cost of treatment to be borne by the company; the dropping of disciplinary measures against workers who could not come to work without factory buses and public transport during pandemic lockdowns; and hygienic toilet facilities. They are also demanding pick-up bus facilities for workers traveling from distant places like Arakkonam, Walaja, Chengalpattu and Seiyaru.

The courageous stand taken by the MATE workers is part of a global upsurge of the class struggle that has seen autoworkers, miners and other industrial workers, teachers and transportation workers launch strikes and protests against wage cuts, poor working conditions and the threat of infection by COVID-19. In May, walkouts and protests by autoworkers in Sriperumbudur, and other towns in Tamil Nadu's industrial belt, against the lack of protection from the deadly virus, forced transnational automakers like Hyundai, Ford and Renault-Nissan to temporarily close their plants. Autoworkers in the United States and Europe, led by workers at Volvo Trucks' New River Valley plant in Virginia, have also waged struggles against wage cutting, increases to working hours, and attacks on their benefits.

MATE is the polymer division of Motherson Sumi Systems Ltd (MSSL), which was established in 1986 as a joint venture between Samvardhana Motherson Group (SMG) and Japan-based Sumitomo Wiring Systems. It operates in 42 countries outside India and employs over 135,000 workers. In 2018, it had a turnover of \$US11.7 billion. According to Livemint, Motherson reported a consolidated net profit of 7.14 billion rupees (\$96 million) for the quarter ending March, 31, 2021, a 290 percent increase from a year ago.

The Maoist Left Trade Union Centre (LTUC), which operates at the plant, felt obliged to endorse the permanent workers' strike to maintain a degree of credibility among the rank-and-file. In 2019, the LTUC betrayed a militant, more than four-month-long strike, ordering workers to return to their jobs without winning a single one of their demands. As part of its capitulation to management, the LTUC refused to insist on the reinstatement of 51 workers who were suspended and later fired following a rigged inquiry.

Today, the striking Motherson workers face a war on two fronts. On the one hand, they confront MATE management, which is determined to maintain its brutal work regimen at the plant. In this, MATE has the full backing of Tamil Nadu's new Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) state government, which won election with the support of the mainline Stalinist parties and has pledged to ensure the state's auto sector remains "competitive" for international investors.

On the other front, the Motherson workers find themselves pitted against the leadership of the LTUC. Whilst the Maoist-led LTUC claims to be more militant than the unions led by the Stalinist CPM and CPI, it shares their vehement opposition to broadening the struggle and, like them, seeks to divert workers into futile appeals for government and Labour Department support.

The LTUC leaders have refused to mobilize the entire workforce in the plant to bring production to a grinding halt. This would have required mounting a challenge to the precarious contract-labour system that MATE, like numerous other Indian employers, has used to drive a wedge among the workers the better to exploit them all.

Instead, the union has limited the strike to permanent workers, thereby enabling MATE to continue operating the plant using some 1,200 contract and trainee workers, and it has prevailed on the strikers to limit their demands on the false claim this will make the company more amenable.

The union's sabotage of the Motherson workers' struggle, which has included pressure for a speedy return to work, is placing the strike in grave danger. Seeing no prospect for victory, several dozen workers have reportedly given up and returned to work.

On August 8, the LTUC organized a "solidarity forum" in Sriperumbudur to give the impression to the striking workers that the union is trying to organize solidarity action in their support. This is a lie. The LTUC has made no appeal for joint action to the tens of thousands of workers in Sriperumbudur, let alone to the tens of millions across India who confront similarly harsh working conditions. Those who participated in last Sunday's forum were largely officials from various local Stalinist- and Maoist-led unions.

Some workers also participated, but the LTUC and their Stalinist allies did nothing to mobilize mass worker support for the event.

The Maoist LTUC leadership has directed the militant striking Motherson workers to make fruitless appeals to government officials, including the Assistant Commissioner of Labour (ACL) and Kanchipuram district collector. It is calling on Tamil Nadu's DMK government and its labour department to intervene in the strike against the MATE management. Yet the DMK government is continuing the same anti-worker right-wing policies of its AIADMK predecessor, including insisting that nonessential production must continue at full tilt during the pandemic.

As part of its orientation towards the DMK government, the LTUC has shifted the protest site of the striking workers to outside the ACL office. During the previous strike in 2019, striking workers set up a makeshift tent opposite the company premises. The key consideration in the union's decision to shift the protest site is to prevent the striking workers from engaging with and seeking to mobilize non-striking workers entering the plant, allowing MATE production to continue unhindered.

The LTUC is refusing to call for the reinstatement of 51 permanent workers and 28 trainees who were terminated. The union has also failed to call for a significant pay raise for permanent and contract workers from the poverty-level wages they currently receive.

Unlike in 2019, the LTUC has made a show of calling for permanent jobs for all trainees and contract workers, and equal pay for equal work. However, this is empty rhetoric. The union is doing nothing to mobilize all categories of workers to fight for these pivotal demands.

During the 2019 strike, the LTUC vehemently opposed the *World Socialist Web Site's* criticism of its refusal to mobilize the entire workforce at the plant to halt production and strengthen the strike. Union officials claimed that such action would "risk" contract workers' jobs. The WWS explained at the time, "In fact, the union is not just isolating the striking permanent workers but accepts the contract employment system now used to employ many workers in Tamil Nadu and across India."

Maoist LTUC officials have been extremely hostile to the WWS reporters who visited Sriperumbudur to cover the current strike. They prevented our reporters from interviewing the strikers and taking pictures of the protest.

A union official told the WWS that they would wind up the strike if management agrees to provide decent food to the workers, claiming that this is their chief demand. Several workers then interjected, telling the WWS that there are many more issues that they are fighting for.

One dismissed worker told the WWS: "The union, without drawing lessons from the previous strike, now is going to lead us to another disaster. I asked one of the union officials how many more workers from this strike would be victimized by the company? We are already 51 workers who got suspended and then dismissed.

"Workers working inside the factory have complained to union leader S. Kumarasamy about the increasingly unbearable situation they are facing," the worker continued. "Sensing the growing anger of workers, the union leader asked the workers, 'Can we go on strike?' Workers readily said 'yes.'

"It is also significant that main [LTUC] leaders like S. Kumarasamy and Bharathi did not appear here on the first day of the strike."

The LTUC is a split-off from the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), which is the union federation of the Maoist Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation or CPIML Liberation. The split from the AICCTU and formation of the LTUC

constituted a further shift to the right by the Maoist-Stalinist organizations.

The LTUC aligned itself with the chauvinist "Velka Tamil" (Rise up Tamil) campaigns led by various Tamil nationalist organizations. The Maoist union leaders, in a calculated effort to split the Motherson auto parts workers from their fellow workers across India, directed the strikers to participate in Tamil nationalist agitations during late 2019.

The reactionary policies of the AICCTU and LTUC flow from the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the CPIML Liberation. The CPIML Liberation is an "extended Left Front" ally of the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—that joined an electoral coalition in Tamil Nadu led by the big business DMK for the 2019 Indian parliamentary elections.

Today, as in 2019, all three Stalinist parties—the CPM, CPI and CPIM Liberation—are publicly committed to supporting, in the name of defeating the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party national government, an alternative right-wing regime led by the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government. The AICCTU, its splinter group, the LTUC, and the CPIML Liberation, which orbits the CPM-led Left Front, all accept the subordination of workers' basic interests to auto industry profits, and consequently will not wage any campaign to rally support for the Motherson workers' struggle and make it a spearhead of a working class counteroffensive.

The central lesson of the MATE workers' strike and its betrayal by the unions is that the struggle for permanent jobs, decent wages, improved working conditions and basic democratic rights requires the mobilization of autoworkers across Tamil Nadu and throughout India in independent industrial and political struggle. Indian autoworkers must orient their struggles to their class brothers and sisters internationally, including autoworkers in the United States and Europe, who are fighting the same transnational corporations.

Strikers must initiate a political and organizational break from all the Stalinist-Maoist-controlled, pro-capitalist unions. To take their struggle forward, Motherson workers should establish a rank-and-file strike committee to broaden their struggle and arm it with a socialist programme.



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