

India: Motherson autoworkers outraged by Maoist-led union's shutting down of 11-day strike

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Anger is developing among workers at the Motherson Automotive Technologies and Engineering (MATE) plant in Sriperumbudur, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, over the betrayal of their 11-day strike by the Maoist-led Left Trade Union Center (LTUC). On August 14, the LTUC called off the strike, which was limited to permanent workers, and ordered them to return to work, according to an agreement it reached with Motherson management in the presence of the Assistant Commissioner of Labour (ACL) the previous day. The decision was implemented arbitrarily without the union presenting the agreement to the workers, let alone their voting on it and approving the ending of the strike.

MATE employs more than 1,600 workers, including over 300 permanent workers, 450 contract workers, 224 trainees and 350 government-sponsored NEEM workers. MATE is the polymer division of Motherson Sumi Systems Ltd (MSSL), whose mother company formed a joint venture with Japanese-based Sumitomo Wiring Systems. Motherson operates in 42 countries outside India and employs over 135,000 workers.

Although the Motherson workers raised eleven demands when they launched their strike August 3, the LTUC leadership reduced them to one single issue in negotiations with management: that the company provide edible, worm-free food to all workers, including night-shift workers, who were only given a “cake” and banana. At the conclusion of negotiations, management agreed to provide food for nightshift workers, while insisting workers on dayshift and general shift were already receiving decent food. At the union's request, MATE management also “agreed” not to take any disciplinary action against workers who went on strike.

The strikers' original eleven demands included tea and toilet breaks, hygienic toilet facilities, withdrawal of disciplinary action against workers who have been victimized for demanding decent food, and 30-minute breaks

for night shift workers after four hours on the job. They also demanded 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 pick-up bus facilities for workers traveling from distant places like Arakkonam, Walaja, Chengalpattu and Seiyaru. The LTUC agreed to end the strike, by abandoning all those demands.

When workers returned to the plant, they were furious to learn that even the demands the union claimed management had “agreed” to were not being honored by the company. The nightshift was abolished for the workers who joined strike and they were integrated into the first and second shifts. The non-permanent workers, including contract workers and trainees, who remained on the nightshift were not provided food. Workers also saw the casual workers, who were recruited as scabs by management during the strike period, were still working there. On their return-to-work, the strikers were also arbitrarily moved around to different departments.

Consequently, workers felt let down not just by management, but also by the Maoist LTUC leadership, which was in a hurry from day one of the strike to wind it up and send the workers back to work. Workers posted angry messages on social media denouncing the LTUC leadership and its betrayal of the strike. One worker said: “Leader! Where are our 11 demands? When we returned to work on August 14, it seemed to me nothing has changed at the plant. We have submitted 11 demands to the management. Out of these how many demands were agreed by the management and put its signature for? Tell us, leader?!”

“During the 11 days strike we came along behind you wherever you wanted us to come. But why did you call off the strike without consulting the workers? It was at the initiative of the workers you called for the strike. But now even without winning the single most demand—decent food

for all—you told the workers to return to work?”

Another worker asked: “Tell us, leader! In how many days the management has agreed to implement all the 11 demands?”

The workers who raised these questions were bullied by the LTUC leadership, which told them that they are not allowed to question the leadership and are “free” to leave the union. One worker was summarily removed from the LTUC’s WhatsApp group on the instruction of LTUC head S. Kumaraswamy. These undemocratic actions have further intensified tensions between the union leadership and rank-and-file workers. There is a growing mood of militancy among MATE workers and some workers have expressed their readiness to resume strike action to win their demands.

The Maoist LTUC felt obliged to call the August 3 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 at Motherson’s Sriperumbudur plant, 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 49 workers who were suspended and later fired following a rigged inquiry.

On August 18, five days after the sellout agreement was signed between the company and LTUC, a union delegation responded to mounting anger among militant workers by holding talks with management to “complain” about its failure to fulfill its written promises. Ramana, the chief management representative in the tripartite talks, told the union delegates that the company can provide only *tiffin* (a snack or light tea time meal) for nightshift workers either at 10 PM when they are about to start their shift or at 5:30 AM as they are about to leave work. The company representative added that cake and banana would also be provided at 1:30 AM, together with tea at various inbetween times. The union delegates felt compelled to reject this offer for fear that workers would not accept it, and instead reiterated their demand for a full and decent meal around 2:30 AM as workers would feel hungry at that time.

Union delegates also raised the failure of the management to fulfill other “agreed” demands, including the ending of disciplinary action against striking workers and the provision of tea breaks for workers. They also pointed to the placing of returning strikers in different departments as part of a “job rotation” scheme. However, MATE management postponed any discussion on these issues to a future round of talks.

Analyzing the MATE workers’ strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on August 11: “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 the 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 [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] and CPI [Communist Party of India], it shares their vehement opposition to broadening the struggle and, like them, seeks to divert workers into futile appeals for government, Labour Department support.”

The latest betrayal carried out by the Maoist LTUC vindicates the warnings made by the WSWS. Like all the trade unions, the LTUC has proven incapable of fighting for even the workers’ most basic demands. To take their struggle forward, Motherson workers should establish a rank-and-file strike committee to broaden their struggle, including by mobilizing the contract and trainee workers, and arm it with a socialist program. A precondition for this struggle is a political and organisational break from the unions and their affiliated parties, including the Stalinist CPM and CPI, and the Maoists.

The strongest allies of Motherson workers are autoworkers and industrial workers across India and internationally, who are joining a global upsurge of workers’ struggles to fight for better wages and working conditions, and to defend jobs. A Motherson workers’ rank-and-file committee should issue a special appeal to autoworkers in the United States, Europe, and throughout India’s auto sector to unify their struggles in an international counter-offensive against the globally mobile corporations.



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