

Victimized Indian autoworker speaks in support of Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* is receiving growing support from workers in India and around the world. The Inquest has been called to uncover the social, economic, and political forces behind the criminal policies of mass infection and death pursued by the ruling elites of almost every country, and document workers' experiences during the pandemic.

In response to the campaign Indian supporters of the WSWs have mounted to publicize the Inquest, Balakrishnan, a victimized auto parts worker, has spoken out strongly in favour of it. He was formerly employed at a Motherson Automotive Technologies and Engineering (MATE) plant in the Sriperumbudur and Oragadam industrial belt, which is located on the outskirts of Chennai, Tamil Nadu's capital and principal city.

Discussing his bitter experience at the Motherson plant, Balakrishnan provided a vivid picture of how Indian big business is placing "profit before workers' lives." He also exposed the hypocrisy of the Narendra Modi-led central government's claims to be fighting the pandemic.

Balakrishnan and 48 other Motherson workers who had been in the forefront of organising a 140-day strike for wage hikes and better working conditions were arbitrarily dismissed from their jobs in 2020. Balakrishnan is now doing painting work for a living, earning just 300 rupees (\$US4) per day.

He described the impossible choice he faced when he was employed at the plant. "If I went to work I would face the risk of coronavirus infection and death. But if I stayed home without any income my family (of a wife

and four children) and I would face the risk of starvation deaths," he said.

Balakrishnan detailed conditions inside the Motherson factory. "On the shop floor, social distance was never taken care of," he said. "It was the same situation in the company canteen. If anything was done, it was at the company gate, where workers were strictly told to wear masks, and they had to buy the mask and wear it.

"Coronavirus infections and related deaths of workers in the company are completely hidden by the management. I know of an incident where a worker got infected. He informed the management and was told to get treatment and the company would pay for it. But he was ordered not to reveal this to his fellow workers at Motherson, as it would create 'fear and panic' among the workers."

He explained how the other factories in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial belt also grossly violated the official COVID-19 protocols, counting on government officials to look the other way as they do with other health and safety violations.

"The industries are running with 100 percent capacity mostly in violation of COVID-19 protocols and the company buses used to transport workers in and out of the industrial area are also running at more than 100 percent capacity," he recalled. "The authorities turn a blind eye to that. I never hear an incident where the industrialists were fined for these violations.

"All industries in Sriperumbudur and Oragadam, including Motherson, were allowed to continue production during lockdown time. Even during the initial lockdown in March-April, 2020 when a countrywide lock down was implemented, Motherson

never stopped production. Workers were brought-in by company buses in violation of COVID-19 protocols. The Tamil Nadu state government turned a blind eye to these violations.”

The dismissed Motherson worker scoffed at the deceptive speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, state Chief Ministers like Tamil Nadu’s M.K. Stalin, and their minions.

“Seriously, there is no government enforced social distancing,” he stated. “Their anti-COVID speeches are all hollow statements. They allowed 100 percent seating in public transport services, opened restaurants, cinema theatres, churches and temples. Even during the peak coronavirus surges, when the authorities announced certain restrictions, they too were not implemented with the seriousness that they warranted.

“While government officials demagogically declaim about the need to wear masks, they refuse to carry out mass testing, as it involves huge sums of money to pay for medical staff and medical equipment. So, they simply drop the idea and blame the people for not maintaining COVID-19 protocols.

“The corporations and the governments are only concerned about accumulating profit, not the well-being and safety of the people. They show up on TV channels and talk about the need for wearing face masks, keeping social distance, and washing hands frequently with sanitizer. Yet even these basic protocols are not maintained by them.

“For instance, the authorities don’t provide free masks to people. When they fine people 200 rupees for not wearing a mask, even at that point, the authorities don’t give them a mask. It shows they are interested only in collecting money, not the safety of people. For most people, especially poor people spending for masks is not so easy as they live hand-to-mouth.

“When it comes to frequent cleaning of hands with soaps or sanitisers, for poor working people it is another burden of spending money that they cannot afford.”

Declaring his full agreement with the WSWs’s call for the Workers’ Inquest, Balakrishnan said: “There is no party, whether in government or the opposition, that is concerned about the safety of the people. All of them must be held responsible for the mass infections and deaths that could have been prevented.

“These irresponsible criminal actions of the

governments continue for a third year as the new Omicron variant begins to devastate hundreds of thousands of people on a daily basis.

“There is no safety for working people under this government and the capitalist system. Workers are being used like ‘use-and-throw’ products for their profit interests. The corporates are handing out handsome donations to political parties, especially to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and in turn they serve the interests of the corporates.

“There is only one solution for the working people and that is to get rid of the present profit-motivated system and fight to establish a workers government that is run by the workers themselves in the interests of the workers.”



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