Indian Ford workers continue sit-down strike against planned plant closure

Yuan Darwin, Nandhakumar
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More than 1,500 autoworkers at the Ford Motors assembly plant near Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, have continued a strike against the plant's closure for more than a week. Workers are occupying the plant, completely halting the production of cars.

The strike was initiated by younger rank-and-file workers who comprise the majority of the workforce. Although about 500 mostly older workers have not joined the occupation fearing the loss of severance pay due to management retaliation, they have supported the strike by refusing to cross the picket lines. The job action has disrupted the company's plans to complete more than 1,400 cars before the plant's closure set for the end of this month. "If we finish making the cars, then there is no connection between the management and us, and we won't be able to demand anything," one anonymous worker told ThePrint.

Before the strike, workers held protests inside and outside the factory demanding severance pay be given prior to the closure of the plant. A huge contingent of police was rushed to the factory to intimidate the protesting workers. However, workers continued their protest and later launched an indefinite strike, defying police intimidation.

The Chennai Ford strike is a part of global upsurge of the class struggle in defense of jobs, decent wages and better working and living conditions against the attempts by governments and corporations to impose harsh austerity measures. Workers and youth in Sri Lanka have been engaged in mass protests and strikes for the last two months demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government over skyrocketing prices and shortages of essential goods.

In May 2021, as the Delta COVID-19 variant ripped through India, workers at the Chennai Ford plant waged sit-down strikes and protests with their brothers and sisters at other Tamil Nadu auto plants owned by the Korean-based Hyundai Motors and French-Japanese Renault-Nissan. They demanded health protections against COVID-19, following the deaths of more than 25 workers and hundreds of infections in the plants. This rebellion compelled the automakers to shut down their plants for five days. However, they rapidly moved to restart production, with the assistance of the unions.

The following September, Ford announced it would end its operations in India, closing the Chennai plant and another in Gujarat. The closure directly threatens 4,000 jobs. However, the closure of the Chennai factory alone will indirectly affect around 40,000 jobs in total because the factory jobs are linked to many ancillary units which employ unorganized workers. Ford has had production in India since the mid-1990s but has accumulated more than $2 billion in losses over the past 10 years.

The company's exit from India is part of vigorous global restructuring in the auto industry, underway before the pandemic but greatly accelerated since. Auto companies are announcing multibillion-dollar investments in electric vehicles (EV) manufacturing. To pay for this, Wall Street is exerting enormous pressure for labor costs to be slashed. An article in *Bloomberg* reported that Ford was planning to spend an additional $10–$20 billion to accelerate the shift to EVs over the next five to 10 years. The cost of this transition will be paid for with an as yet ambiguously defined "reorganization" plan.

Compared to the traditional internal combustion vehicle, an electric vehicle requires far fewer moving parts and a smaller workforce to manufacture. Widespread job destruction is on the agenda, while the company plans to add an even lower tier of ultra low-paid production workers at its new EV battery factories.

For the moment, Ford's Gujarat plant has been taken over by Tata Motors without any cuts to jobs. Chennai workers have been mobilizing for months to demand the same job security. The factory employed 2,700 permanent workers and 600 contract workers. Many workers have even taken home loans to settle down in Chennai, which is why the news of the plant shutting down came as a great shock to them.

Management is trying to suppress opposition to the closure by offering compensation packages. One worker told the Indo-Asian News Service, "Ford management has offered 85 days' pay for every completed year of service. Also, a fixed sum of 42,500 rupees (US $545) for every completed year of service. Earlier they had offered 75 days of salary and a fixed sum of 20,000 rupees (US $258) for every completed year of service."

Prakash, a 32-year-old permanent worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Due to this plant closure, our entire family

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is in a crisis situation. We had taken out many loans, including home loans, and now we don't know how we will pay them back. My entire family, including my children who are studying in school, need to relocate now back to our village due to lack of financial support. The government in India, both state and federal, are acting as tools of the big corporations."

The strike and plant occupation was launched on May 31, but the production line at Ford's Chennai car plant actually came to a halt the day before, when workers claimed they were asked to sign an agreement that prohibited them from holding any protests. "I shall not engage in any activity which disrupts production (including a sit-down strike, go-slow strike, etc.) or be a part of any unauthorised gatherings within the plant premises," read the "employee undertaking."

The unions at Ford's Chennai are opposed to a broader mobilization of autoworkers around India or internationally against plant closures. They do not want to do anything that might frighten off the multinational corporations from setting up shop in India. The unions are now claiming to support the strike initiative taken by workers. However, they have not taken up workers' demands related to job security. Instead, they are focusing entirely on improved severance compensation for the workers. The capitalist press, echoing the unions, is reporting that the strike is solely about severance pay.

The Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU) has restricted all industrial action to limited protests, mainly confining workers to toothless appeals to the Tamil Nadu government and the company. The DMK-led state government of Tamil Nadu, as its predecessor AIDDMK and right-wing, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is also in power at the federal level, is fully committed to defending the profit interests of local and foreign investors, including global auto giants like Ford, against Indian workers.

To fight the closures and also the deadly pandemic, Ford workers in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat need to turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout the auto industry in India, the United States and internationally. To conduct such a struggle, they need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file action committees, which are controlled by the workers themselves and are independent of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions and the capitalist parties with which the unions are aligned.

"Our unions have not set up any democratic discussion so far with the entire workforce," a Ford striker, Prakash, told the WSWS. "Rather, from the beginning they were actively involved in convincing the young and militant workers to withdraw their main demand, that is, for job security. I can see clearly that unions are isolating us so as to accept the demands of management.

"I agree with your proposal that this struggle must be expanded, mobilising workers in nearby industrial zones and elsewhere in India and breaking with trade unions. I am ready to discuss further with you about the formation of rank-and-file committees."

Ramapandian, 31, from the Theni district of Tamil Nadu said, "Ford corporation has earned billions of dollars throughout the globe and has built new plants everywhere by exploiting us. Now, we are simply thrown away claiming that they had losses in recent years.

"To be frank, this struggle was not actually called by our union. But rather, it was organized by young militant employees who form the majority of the workforce. Young workers have been demanding job security as the main demand. But the unions, which are acting in the interests of a privileged few, and also some older workers have been suppressing our voices from the beginning, pushing us towards some low range settlement package. I completely agree that our union has no clear program and for the need to break with these unions."

Ramesh, a permanent worker, said, "As we began our strike, more than 100 police were mobilised immediately with the request of management. As the strike has continued for more than a week, more and more state forces are mobilised to intimidate us. We are aware that these actions are done with the complete guidance and knowledge of the DMK state government which is acting as agents of the corporations.

"Our union should have asked for proper financial records because Ford management is claiming losses. The minutes of conciliatory discussions between union leaders and management at labour department offices were not openly reported. Union leaders are trying to hide and distort the real information, and the rank-and-file workers are getting angrier by the day over the union's attitude. I understand the need for a democratic discussion among workers as an important step to carry forward the struggle and the need to form rank-and-file committees to unite with workers in other industries."

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