

India: Chennai Ford workers continue their strike against planned plant closure defying management threats

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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, are continuing their strike against the company's plans to permanently close the plant.

Ford workers are now in their fourth week of job action despite a management ultimatum and the unions' deliberate isolation of their struggle.

They have rejected an augmented management severance package, and are instead fighting for job security

Last September, Ford announced it would end its operations in India, closing the Chennai plant and another in the western state of Gujarat. The closures directly threaten 4,000 jobs. However, the closure of the Chennai factory alone is predicted to cause 40,000 job losses, when ancillary jobs, mainly in auto parts, are taken into account.

The current job action has already disrupted the company's plans to complete more than 1,400 cars before the plant's closure set for the end of this month.

Corporate media like *The Hindu* and *Economic Times*, eagerly echoing management, reported last week that more than 300 workers involved in the strike had reported to duty and that production has resumed. But as we learned from striking workers, in reality, fewer than 40 permanent workers had reported to duty and production has still not yet resumed.

The permanent workers are relatively older and have more to lose if the company were to retaliate by firing workers participating in the job action or otherwise reducing their severance pay entitlement.

As part of its efforts to break the strike, Ford management has also rehired several dozen trainees, who were put out of work by the strikes, as contract workers.

In an attempt to enlist some workers to break the strike, Ford management last week announced an increase in the severance package from its earlier offer of 87 days of base wages per year worked to 110 days, and a second sum equal to the amount earned over 87 days ending in May. Its offer also includes continuation of current medical insurance until March 2024.

Management wants to end the strike so that it can finish production of 1,400 cars on order and permanently close down

the plant. However, the majority of younger workers are still sticking to their demand for job security and continuing their strike.

Ford management has extended the deadline to restart production and for workers to accept its upgraded severance package from the initial June 13 to June 18 and now again to the evening of June 22.

At the same time, Ford management has arrogantly threatened "legal consequences" for workers who do not opt for a severance package and continue the strike beyond its deadline. It has already imposed a "loss of pay" as per Certified Standing Orders from June 14 and threatened that in case of workers' non-cooperation, it will halt the production of the remaining 1,400 cars for export and instead move to immediately close the plant.

For the moment, Ford's Gujarat plant has been taken over by Tata Motors without any cuts to jobs. Chennai Ford workers are also demanding the same type of job security.

Ford India management has been encouraged in its strikebreaking moves by the unions' treacherous isolation of the workers' militant job action. This includes the officially-recognised Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU) and the Stalinist-led union federations—the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Affiliated respectively to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), the CITU and AITUC have a substantial membership in Tamil Nadu as across India.

The current job action was not even called by the CFEU. Rather it was an initiative taken by militant young workers. Although the CFEU later announced its support for the strike, it is not backing the workers' demand for job security and instead is promoting a higher severance package, i.e., forcing workers to sacrifice their jobs for money. The CFEU kept asking the workers to believe in the management, isolating the strikers and diverting them into futile appeals to various authorities, including government labour officials and the right-wing DMK-led Tamil Nadu state government, which was elected to office in May 2021 with the support of the Stalinist parties and

unions.

On June 9 the Stalinist CITU organised a protest demonstration headed by its assistant state secretary S. Kannan, near Maraimalainagar town, claiming to oppose the Ford plant closure. It conspicuously failed to call for any mobilisation of industrial workers in the Sriperumbudur and Maraimalainagar industrial zones, let alone elsewhere in Tamil Nadu or India, in support of the striking Ford workers. Rather it pleaded to the DMK-led state government and labour ministry to intervene to prevent the plant closure.

The demonstration portrayed the plant closure and consequent destruction of jobs as solely a local or regional action by cynically raising the question “Is Chengalpet district an exploitative and a cheap labour zone?” This is in line with the Stalinist attempt to divide workers in Chengalpet district, where the Ford plant is located, from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere, despite the fact that all are facing the same brutal and exploitative conditions and the same big business-government drive to sweat still more profit from workers.

The Stalinists, who for decades have functioned as part of the political establishment, have a long record of suppressing and betraying workers struggles throughout India.

In 2014, while over 4,000 Nokia India workers staged a mass protest against the threatened closing of Nokia’s cell phone manufacturing plant in the Sriperumbudur Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the outskirts of Chennai, the CITU, being hostile to any mobilization of the working class against the brutal exploitation of the transnational corporations in the industrial zone, appealed to caste-based regional political parties, the courts and other anti-working class forces, including then notorious All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) state chief minister, J. Jayalalitha, who had suppressed a strike by the state government employees in 2003 by sacking hundreds of thousands of workers en masse.

In 2010, the CITU similarly betrayed the strikes of 7,000 Foxcon and 3,000 BYD workers who fought for similar demands, including improved wages and working conditions, the regularization of contract workers and union recognition. Both the strikes faced brutal police repression organized by Tamil Nadu’s DMK state government.

The treacherous role of the Stalinist parties, which posture as parties of the working class, and the complete silence of the national-level trade unions and their federations, including both the Stalinist and Maoist-led unions, in the past in the Sriperumbudur and Maraimalainagar industrial zones, have greatly strengthened the hands of Ford management, which stepped up its repressive measures against strikers by issuing an intimidating notice to workers to resume production.

Indian supporters of the ICFI have repeatedly intervened among striking Ford workers, discussing with them the need to form their own rank-and-file committee independent of the unions to lead their struggle and fight for unity with other workers in Tamil Nadu, elsewhere in India and internationally.

As part of that political intervention, a discussion was organized with striking Ford workers and a US-based supporter of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Ramesh, 32, a leading young striker who participated in that discussion, said, “I believe only your organisation is telling the truth and helping workers to organise themselves independently through rank-and-file committees. Our unions are standing aside with their hands tied. They are leading us nowhere. The labour commissioners are openly echoing the voice of Ford management. A police commissioner openly threatened the strikers by questioning us, ‘is 30 months settlement package not enough?’

“Even labour commissioners have threatened us for criticizing the DMK-led state government. I completely agree with you that there is a need to join with workers in supplier industries of Ford, also with Ford Gujarat workers who were earlier involved in militant struggles for job security, and especially with other industrial workers in the Sriperumbudur-Maraimalainagar zone. We cannot and will not accept the settlement package. We will fight till the end for job security. We are ready to form rank-and-file committees. I thank your organisation for guiding young workers like us.”

Illayaraja, 35, a permanent worker from Kallakurichi town in Tamil Nadu, said, “I just got married. My future is totally uncertain and dark since the plant I worked from a young age is now going to be closed. I agree with you that the strike must be expanded through rank-and-file committees. This expansion should have been done earlier in September last year by unions in this zone when the plant was announced to be closed. Demonstrations, protests and roadblocks and mass strikes should have been done on a massive scale, mobilizing huge number of people. But our union consciously isolated our struggles towards so-called collective discussion with management. The union leaders never actually participated in our strike. They simply stand aside. But the management is now threatening us saying it is an ‘illegal strike’ and has now taken away our pay. I agree that only way forward is forming rank-and-file committees to expand our struggle.”

The Ford workers’ strike for job security and basic democratic rights can only be advanced by challenging the capitalist system and all its political agencies. This requires a complete break from the CFEU, all Stalinist-Maoist controlled, pro-capitalist unions and for workers to establish genuinely independent rank-and-file committees that fight to mobilise auto workers in unified action throughout India and around the world on a socialist and internationalist program.



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