

Union shuts down strike against impending closure of Ford India assembly plant

Yuan Darwin, Martina Inessa
7 July 2022

The strike 1,500 militant, mainly young workers have mounted against the plans of the transnational Ford Motor Co. to close its assembly plant on the outskirts of Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, has been suppressed and betrayed by the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU).

Working in collusion with Ford management and Tamil Nadu's DMK government, the CFEU called off the five-week-long strike on July 2, without any discussion with, let alone vote by, the striking workers.

Under an agreement reached with Ford behind the workers' backs, the union completely abandoned the workers' demand for job security. Underscoring its opposition to the workers' struggle, the union has agreed that Ford can slash the severance pay of any worker who henceforth engages in job action or seeks to impede production at the plant before its planned permanent closure at the end of this month.

Although the union has done the company's bidding, Ford has not restarted the plant's second shift, meaning 1,300 of the 2,638 permanent workers are now without work and wages. It is expected Ford will maintain one-shift production until it ceases production on July 31. This will allow it to keep many of the younger, more militant workers who initiated the strike on May 30, independently of the CFEU, out of the factory until it is shuttered.

In the months immediately following last September's closure, Ford got rid of a thousand contract workers at the assembly plant piecemeal. When workers at ancillary auto parts plants are included, the closure of the plant is predicted to lead to the loss of some 40,000 jobs, most of them in the Sriperumbudur industrial belt outside Chennai.

However, the unions, including those led by the Stalinists and Maoists which have a sizeable presence in Tamil Nadu, have mounted no struggle against the impending closure of the Ford factory nor sought to unite the Ford workers with their class brothers and sisters at the feeder plants.

Similarly, the Stalinist-led labour federations, the CITU and AITUC, did nothing to mobilize workers in support of

the strike at the Ford India plant, thereby facilitating the CFEU's efforts to isolate and end the strike.

The Ford workers at the Chennai plant showed great militancy, repeatedly defying threats from management and the police. Faced with a fait accompli, the CFEU sanctioned the strike, but from the beginning it refused to raise the workers' demand for job security, focusing instead entirely on urging management to provide a few more crumbs in severance pay.

The CFEU continuously worked to isolate the strike, demoralize the workers and finally end the strike by signing the orders of management dictated in the form of an agreement made before the Assistant Labour Commissioner in Chennai. Having signed the agreement without consulting striking workers, the CFEU did not even put it up for any democratic discussion and vote by workers and just ordered them to return to work. The agreement says that for those workers who continue the protest, the severance package would be reduced to its initial offer, i.e., 87 days of base wages per year worked, and it also points to the union's agreement with the advice of the Labour Commissioner to avoid any protest or sitdown strikes until production is completed.

Contrary to the union's claims that management has agreed to increase the severance package from its later offer of 115 days to 121 days of base wages per year worked, the agreement says nothing concretely about the compensation. It says only that exact severance packages will be decided later through mutual discussions between the management and the union. The agreement also says nothing about management's earlier offer on continuation of current medical insurance until March 2024.

While workers were demanding job assurance, since that is their only means of livelihood, the management with the help of the union have now pressured the workers to continue production in order to complete the remaining cars and to accept its proposed settlement package. These moves by Ford India management to crush a strike by the militant young workers who fought for more than a month and had

completely halted car production was attainable only through the treachery of the unions, who isolated the workers' militant job action. This includes not just the officially-recognized CFEU in the Ford Chennai plant but also the complete silence of the Stalinist-led union federations—the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), and also the Maoist-led LTUC (Left Trade Union Congress) which have a substantial presence, especially in Sriperumbudur Maraimalai Nagar industrial areas. 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, including in the auxiliary and supplier industries of Ford plants in India.

This again proves the warnings given by the WSWs during the course of the strike about the role of unions in the era of globalised production. On June 28, at an online meeting with striking Ford workers in Chennai who were interested in forming rank-and-file committees, Jerry White, WSWs Labor Editor explained the international significance of the struggle of Chennai Ford workers and pointed out that Ford is also threatening to close its plant in Saarlouis, Germany. Unions like IG Metall have rejected any real struggle to defend the jobs, living standards and working conditions of more than 5,000 workers at the plant, thereby guaranteeing the orderly winding down of production. He emphasized that the allies of workers at Ford Chennai and Ford Saarlouis are workers all over the world who are resisting corporate and government attacks everywhere and they can only defend their jobs through a rebellion against Ford's co-managers in the trade union bureaucracy and by organizing themselves independently and establishing international collaboration through rank-and-file committees, uniting Ford workers in Valencia (Spain), Cologne (Germany), Craiova (Romania), Turkey, the US, etc.

Saman Gunadasa, Assistant Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, explained how the Sri Lankan workers have shut down nearly the entire country during general strikes on April 28, May 6 and 10, demanding the resignation of the Rajapakse government. He pointed out specifically about the criminal role of unions, saying that the unions are preventing the working class from mobilising its industrial and political power and developing it into a challenge to capitalist rule. He then emphasized the urgent need to break free of the political and organizational control of the pro-capitalist trade unions and build rank-and-file committees as genuine fighting organizations of the working class.

Ramesh, who participated in this important meeting,

commented later on the union's suppression of the strike: "I came to know that the strike was called off by the union only a few hours later through my colleague. The union never asked our opinion about the agreement it signed with management, nor was any discussion held about calling off the strike. These actions were taken arbitrarily by union leaders themselves. Your [WSWS] analysis is fully vindicated. Union, management and government are acting together against the interests of workers and cheating us."

Ram, a permanent worker said: "The majority of workers still demand job security. It is our union that had said it's a useless and unattainable demand. But now, to restart production, it is trying to convince workers that those who still demand a job can go through legal means using the courts once the production target is completed, after July 31. It's clear the union leadership is acting on behalf of management.

"I agree that there is a need to join hands with Ford workers in Germany, Spain and other countries, breaking with unions so as to challenge the Ford corporation."

The workers either in India or in Germany or in Spain or anywhere in the world must draw the lessons from past years. Ford workers can only achieve their rights by linking with workers internationally in a network of fighting action committees and to fight against the capitalists, to place their corporations under public ownership and to reorganize the world economy based on a socialist programme that places social needs over private profit. So, we urge Ford workers across the world to form their own rank-and-file committees to join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), independent of the treacherous trade unions in order to protect their jobs and working conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact