

After shutting down Indian Ford plant, union and management keep workers in the dark

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Over 2,600 workers who mounted a five-week strike earlier this year against Ford's plan to shut the Chennai car assembly plant in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have been completely abandoned by the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU).

The largely young, militant workers struck and occupied the plant to preserve their jobs. For its part, the CFEU explicitly accepted the global automaker's decision to close the plant and did nothing more than negotiate for a slightly larger severance package. Workers rejected this surrender and struck in defiance of the CFEU.

The major union confederations isolated the struggle, and the CFEU shut it down on July 2. CFEU officials herded the economically distressed workers back into the plant to fulfill management's quota before the plant was closed. Management dismissed most workers and used a small number to complete production before the final sports utility vehicle rolled off the assembly line on July 20. Management has brought in a handful of workers to manufacture some parts, after which the plant will be permanently closed in an "orderly way."

The closure of the Chennai Ford plant is part of mass layoffs and plant closures the Ford Motor Company management is implementing as a part of its global restructuring drive. With the help of the pro-capitalist unions in Europe and around the world, the US-based automaker is pitting workers against each other to extract profits and shift to the production of electric vehicles. This includes the bidding war the unions in Germany and Spain have thrown workers into, which resulted in huge wage cuts and longer hours for Ford workers in Valencia, Spain, and the planned closure of Ford's Saarlouis plant in Germany.

The company claimed it would pay wages to all workers until August 31, but as management told *The*

Hindu daily, "this is subject to the union and employees' continued support as and when required by the company/supervisors throughout July and August. We look forward to the union's support in concluding the severance negotiations successfully well before the August deadline."

As of this writing, there has been no communication from the CFEU leadership about what if anything it is discussing with the management. It is not even clear whether permanent workers, contract workers and trainees will receive the same amount of whatever severance package is being negotiated between the CFEU, management and the Tamil Nadu state government.

Ramesh, a Chennai worker who participated in the online call with German and US workers sponsored by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), told the WSWS, "Until now there has been no update from union leaders. Everything is being kept hidden from us. We are totally in the dark. The workers are now dispersed to their native places. The union leaders never informed or discussed any of the developments or decisions they have been imposing on us."

When Ford announced in September 2021 its plans to halt production in India and close its two plants in Chennai and Sanand, Gujarat, this shocked workers, many of whom are sole bread winners for their families. At the time, 43-year-old Murugan, who worked at the plant for 21 years, told *The NEWS Minute* website, "The mean age in our plant (labourers) is 35. Most of the men who work here have children in high school (11th, 12th), younger children in primary and homemaker wives. They have dedicated their careers to Ford and this plant and now feel abandoned."

The closure of the Chennai plant will destroy 4,000

jobs directly and as many as 40,000 in ancillary industries. While the Chennai plant is scheduled for closure, the Sanand plant in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat has been sold to Tata Motors, which announced plans to assemble electric vehicles at the plant.

Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker in the US and socialist candidate for the president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), denounced the plant closing and called on Ford workers to unite internationally to defend jobs. He told the WSWS, "Ford workers here in the US need to recognize the attack on our Indian brothers as an attack on all of us in the working class. They demonstrated their willingness to fight, and their union demonstrated its willingness to concede in no different a fashion than the UAW or any other trade union around the world.

"In my recent tour of factories in Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Virginia, I've seen the social devastation wrought by the shutdown of factories by global corporations like GM and Ford. Neighborhoods are destroyed, school systems collapse, and lives are lost—all for the profits of big business.

"We need to organize internationally if we are going to mount a successful fight against multinational companies like Ford. It is up to all of us to recognize that fact and act on it by building rank-and-file committees on every shop floor. In every country, workers should coordinate their struggles through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees."

Under Ford's "Global Redesign" project, the company is in the process of ending assembly operations in India, Brazil and Russia. It has cut 12,000 jobs already and has announced further mass layoffs. The company has either sold or closed six plants located in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Russia and the Czech Republic in the last three years alone.

A couple of days after the Chennai plant closure, a senior bureaucrat in the Tamil-chauvinist DMK party-led Tamil Nadu state government issued a warning to local police officials telling them to be on alert for any collective resistance by Ford workers against the plant closure.

Calling for suppression of any such action, the letter stated that "junior workers of Ford company (1500) are

disappointed with severance package and may continue agitation demanding job only. Due to these agitations by workers, some untoward incidents may happen as company is going to be closed by July 31. ... [The] necessary steps should be taken with vigilance to prevent these incidents."

This letter reflected the stark reality that despite all of its posturing of being for the "common man," the DMK, which the Stalinist CPM is allied with and promotes as a friend of the working class, will ruthlessly crush any worker agitations against plant closure. Ford management knows the whole government apparatus, including the police and the courts, is on its side. In June, management warned the striking workers if they did not end their occupation and return to work, their strike would be declared "illegal."

The DMK government and Ford management feel emboldened not only by the treachery of the CFEU but, more importantly, the Stalinist CITU (Center of Indian Trade Unions) and AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) and the Maoist-controlled LTUC union federations. Although they have considerable presence in the Nagar industrial zone, both Stalinist union federations have deliberately isolated the struggle of Ford workers.

This bitter experience has convinced several workers who took part in the strike and held discussions with the WSWS of the need for workers to form rank-and-file committees in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions and to fight for a global counteroffensive by the working class.



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