

Indian Ford workers mount protests for jobs in defiance of union-management severance deal

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Over 400 of the 2,600 workers who were employed at Ford's Chennai assembly plant prior to its permanent closure nearly three months ago are continuing to mount protests against the "final settlement" severance package unilaterally imposed on them by company and union officials. The workers have been completely abandoned by the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU) and are taking independent action to demand their jobs back or the provision of comparable jobs. Most are the sole or the main bread winners for their families.

Ford shuttered its plant in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu after the last sport utility vehicle rolled off the assembly line on July 20.

On September 5, the US-based transnational automaker announced a "final" severance package providing what it claimed was the equivalent of 130 days' "gross pay" for each year of service. This was in the form of an ultimatum. The workers had until September 23 to accept this or else Ford could, as the *Hindu Business Line* reported, "retrench employees and pay the statutory minimum of 15 days for each completed year of service."

At the time, CFEU officials, having long abandoned even any nominal opposition to the closure of the plant, claimed to be fighting for 215 days' pay for each year of service. However, on September 20, without any consultation with rank-and-file workers, let alone their approval, the union accepted Ford's offer of 140 days for each year of service or 75 days less than its supposed original demand.

Ford management claims that the monetary compensation ranges from Rs. 3.5 million (\$42,000) to a maximum of around Rs. 8.7 million (\$106,000). The company claims this translates to an average of about 62 months of salary for each employee. It is silent on what the median payment is—a very significant issue, as there are many younger, low seniority workers. Moreover, the workers will lose close to one-third of any severance pay they receive to taxes.

Angered by such treachery, on September 26, more than

200 workers gathered at Valluvarkottam near Chennai under the banner of the Chennai Ford Workers Rights Group (CFWRG). They have formed the CFWRG on their own initiative in response to the union's suppression of the struggle they waged against the closure of the plant and imposition of a Ford-dictated severance package.

The CFEU betrayed the workers by suddenly calling off a five-week strike the workers mounted, again on their own initiative, against the impending closure. After short-circuiting the strike on July 2, the CFEU let the company use a small number of workers to produce a final batch of vehicles. Having no work or income, the majority of the previously striking workers returned to their home towns and villages.

Because of their isolation, some of the most militant workers, who are now leading members of the CFWRG, turned towards the Maoist-oriented Left Trade Union Centre (LTUC) for advice and support.

The LTUC styles itself as more militant than many unions, including those affiliated with the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is politically allied with Tamil Nadu's right-wing ethno-nationalist DMK government. However, in practice the LTUC functions much the same, urging workers to appeal to segments of the bourgeois political apparatus such as the state labour commission or the courts.

It recommended that the Ford workers submit a petition demanding their jobs to the Tamil Nadu state Chief Minister M.K. Stalin during a public appearance September 30. Stalin was the central speaker at the opening ceremony of a factory not far from Maraimalai Nagar where the Ford Chennai assembly plant is located.

The LTUC gave workers this advice despite knowing full well that Stalin and his whole DMK party government, including the state Labour Department, have been working closely with Ford management to facilitate the plant's closure since the automaker made its closing announcement

over a year ago. The DMK, like India's far-right Narendra Modi-led BJP government, sees the suppression of worker discontent and "orderly" imposition of job cuts and plant closures as vital to attracting investments.

When around 50 to 75 workers tried to submit their grievance petition to the Chief Minister, police and other officials intervened to prevent them from approaching him. After workers learned that Stalin's motorcade would be returning from the ceremony on one of the well-known main roads, they blocked that road in a mass sit-in protest, shouting, "We want jobs, we want jobs."

A short while later, a large contingent of police deployed to provide security to Chief Minister Stalin pounced on the workers and arrested them. The police then detained them at a community hall. After a few hours, the workers were released without the police filing any charges against them.

Some of the workers who participated in the protest spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Rajesh, a worker who is a member of the CFWRG, said, "We lost all hope in the CFEU and the government. When we blocked the road and protested, Stalin didn't even notice us when he was going back to Chennai that way."

He continued, saying: "I agree that forming a rank-and-file committee to unite workers in this whole industrial belt, especially with the 40,000 ancillary industry workers who are losing their jobs because of Ford plant closure, is necessary. I also agree we should join hands with Ford workers in other countries who are facing the same attack. I will talk to other workers in the meeting regarding this."

Another worker, Ramapandian, who is 31 years old, said that due to massive rank-and-file worker pressure, the CFEU was compelled to hold a vote on what they had negotiated with the Ford management in secret.

He continued, "More than 400 of us voted for job security. But the union didn't take any steps regarding that. So, to fight for our jobs, we formed the CFWRG, which has not fully taken shape yet. This group of workers who are still resisting accepting severance pay instead of their jobs organized a protest and sought guidance from advocate K. Bharathi who is associated with LTUC. But we still have not received any proper organizational or political guidance from them."

The CFEU is playing such a rotten role that some of the workers accepted severance and left, thus diminishing the number of striking workers. However, the majority of the workers continue to hold out and voice their opposition to the loss of their relatively well-paying steady jobs.

While the workers were implacably opposed to the closing of the plant from the beginning, the CFEU accepted the plant closure as inevitable. In addition, none of the big trade union federations, including the Stalinist CITU and AITUC and the

Maoist LTUC, have extended any concrete aid to these workers despite having a sizable presence across the state. This is particularly the case in and around the Chennai region, which has been dubbed the "Detroit of Asia" because of its role as an auto-production hub.

Predictably, the DMK-led Tamil Nadu government, which the Stalinist parties promote as "progressive," has completely sided with Ford management.

The Chennai Ford workers have passed through critical experiences over the past year in the fight against the plant closure, which is part of a broader "global restructuring" that threatens tens of thousands of jobs directly and indirectly.

Workers in Saarlouis, Germany, who in July participated in a discussion hosted by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) with their Indian co-workers, are facing the same threat to their jobs because of the treacherous role being played by the IG Metall union. The meeting was also addressed by Will Lehman, the rank-and-file Mack Trucks workers from the US and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers who has placed the fight to unify workers across borders against the global automakers at the center of his campaign.

Many of the workers who have been in discussion with the WSWs reporters in Chennai agreed that to take their struggle forward they have to establish new organizations of struggle.

One of the leading workers in the CFWRG commented to the WSWs, "I think that the building of a rank-and-file committee of Chennai Ford workers is the way forward for us. We want to talk with Ford workers of other countries, including in Germany and Spain, and join hands with them. I am going to bring this up when I talk to the other CFWRG members—about the need to create a rank-and-file committee of Chennai Ford workers and arm it with a socialist program."



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