

Indian auto workers mount militant struggles against bosses' attacks and union betrayals

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Thousands of Indian auto workers have joined militant protests over the past month against job losses, relentless management attacks, and repeated union betrayals, with these actions increasingly taking the form of open fights against the pro-corporate trade unions.

This includes a rebellion on the part of a section of the thousands of workers who lost their jobs when Ford closed its assembly plant in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu with the agreement of the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU).

Workers at Yamaha Motors and Renault-Nissan plants likewise located in Tamil Nadu's Sriperambatur-Oragadam industrial belt have mounted protests in opposition to pro-company unions that have long suppressed worker opposition to low wages, speed-up, and contract-labour and other forms of multi-tier employment.

Meanwhile, victimized workers at Maruti Suzuki's car assembly plant in Manesar in the north Indian state of Haryana are fighting for reinstatement.

The betrayal of Ford workers

Workers at the now shuttered Ford assembly plant in Chennai mounted a months-long militant struggle to oppose its closure and the sellout deal negotiated by the union which capitulated to the company's job cuts. This included a five-week strike initiated by younger workers over the heads of the CFEU based on the refusal of many workers to accept the "final settlement [severance] package" endorsed by the union after the plant was permanently closed in August.

Well into last month, hundreds of the 2,600 permanent Ford workers continued to refuse to accept the "settlement," insisting that their jobs should be restored. They did so despite Ford management's repeated threats that if they failed to sign the "settlement" they would receive only the pittance guaranteed under state labour law.

To press their demand for the restoration of their jobs, workers staged multiple protests. However, under conditions where the labour federations, including the Stalinist-led CITU,

isolated them, most have now signed on to the sellout Ford-CFEU agreement.

Some of the Ford workers mistakenly turned to the Maoist-oriented LTUC for support, but, like the older, more established union federations, it refused to initiate a campaign to mobilise support from the hundreds of thousands of workers in the Sriperambatur-Oragadam industrial belt, including the tens of thousands of auto parts workers directly impacted by the Ford closure.

Instead, the LTUC came up with the pathetic advice that workers hand a petition demanding permanent jobs to the right-wing Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M.K. Stalin. Stalin displayed his open contempt by refusing to even acknowledge their existence.

Some of the most militant Ford workers have maintained contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* and agree that new rank-and-file organizations independent of the corporatist trade unions must be built to prosecute workers' struggles, including the fight for secure, well-paying jobs.

Maruti Suzuki workers

Hundreds of Maruti Suzuki auto workers in Manesar, Haryana who were vindictively fired ten years ago by company management have mounted agitation to get their jobs back. Joined by thousands of other workers working in this industrial belt, they marched to the mini-secretariat in Gurugram, which houses government district administration offices.

This agitation commenced earlier this year in July to mark the tenth anniversary of the July 18, 2012 management-provoked altercation in which workers were beaten by goons and a fire mysteriously erupted that led to death from smoke inhalation of Human Resources Manager Awanish Dev.

Maruti Suzuki, India's largest car maker, then turned to the state police force, who acted as the company's militia to round up hundreds of workers and torture them. Subsequently, 31 workers were convicted of various crimes, including 13

innocent workers who were sentenced to life in prison in 2017 for the “murder” of Dev. Twelve of the thirteen workers jailed for life comprised the entire executive of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, which workers had struggled to build in opposition to a government-recognized, pro-company union.

Management also seized on the July 18 events to carry out a purge, firing 546 permanent and over 1,800 temporary workers, targeted for their militancy.

The workers are demanding that at least the 426 permanent workers who were never charged with any crime be taken back.

One hundred fifty of the workers recently undertook a hastily organized two-day hunger strike to publicise their struggle. The victimized workers have also been battling through the courts since 2016. As one of the workers told *The Hindu*: “The matter has been lingering in the labour court for six years now and the end is not in the sight. It is a very long and tedious process. So, we decided to get united again and hold an agitation to press for reinstatement.”

However, as the experience of Maruti Suzuki workers has demonstrated, working through the existing union structures cannot achieve workers’ demands. Workers in this giant industrial belt need to harness their strength by forming rank-and-file action committees and shut down all production until all their demands are met.

Yamaha workers rebel against company-imposed stooge union

Several hundred Yamaha Motors autoworkers at a plant located in the Sriperumbudur Oragadam-industrial zone, known as the “Detroit of India,” went on a 10-day strike on October 11, 2022. They were rebelling against management’s attempt to impose a stooge union, the Sudhanthiram India Yamaha Motor Thozhilalar Sangam (SIYMTS), which was hurriedly formed by management in the second week of October in close consort with a corrupt trade union leader, Velmurugan.

The workers were demanding recognition of the India Yamaha Motors Thozhilalar Sangam (IYMTS) which was formed in 2018 after a massive 55-day strike. Although Velmurugan was the leader of the IYMTS at its formation, subsequently, in 2019, under his leadership, the union signed a rotten three-year wage deal with management which expired in March 2022. The workers have been working without a contract since then. Although the number of workers, including temporary and contract workers, is around 4,500, only the 1,095 permanent workers are represented by the union.

Velmurugan, having been bribed by the management, agreed to hurriedly form the SIYMTS, which was “registered” as the sole bargaining agent by the company in blatant violation of the law. Velmurugan then negotiated another wage agreement,

which was rejected by the majority of workers. Incensed by this development, a group of workers decided to fight back, while also reviving the demand for IYMTS to affiliate with the Stalinist CITU federation.

The utterly rotten nature of the CITU was revealed when management, along with the deputy labour commissioner, invited the CITU to a conference to end the strike. The CITU called off the strike in exchange for a vague written promise to determine by February 2023 which union, IYMTS or SIYMTS, has majority support.

Renault Nissan workers padlock union federation offices

In another long simmering dispute, on October 12, around 350 permanent workers gathered outside the office of the United Labour Federation, unofficially associated with the Renault-Nissan India Thozhillalar Sangam (RNITS- Renault-Nissan India Workers Union), to demand salary hikes after working without a contract for the past four years. The lawyer who heads the ULF and is the official attorney for RNITS has been using the court for arbitration between the union and management. Several years of futile hearings have not resulted in workers gaining a single rupee in increased wages or satisfaction of any other of their demands.

Some workers ended up padlocking the ULF office and pasted a notice stating that for the past three years, the ULF has made no progress in getting any benefits from the management. Workers said that “this union is of no use for us. So, we workers are frustrated and as we pay dues to the union, we will lock this union office.”

After having undergone such experiences, a group of Renault-Nissan workers have turned to the *World Socialist Web Site*, with which they have been in contact, to form a new organization of struggle, a rank-and-file committee. They are convinced that this is the only way that workers can defend themselves and mount a counteroffensive against the constant management attacks. These workers will soon issue a founding statement for the Renault-Nissan Rank and File Committee and plan to initiate a campaign to build unity among workers at other plants in this pivotal industrial zone and to link up with their brothers and sisters internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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