

Renault-Nissan workers in Chennai form India's first rank-and-file autoworkers' committee

Renault-Nissan Workers Rank-and-File Committee-Chennai
21 November 2022

The following statement has been issued by the newly-formed Renault-Nissan autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee at the global auto giant's car assembly plant on the outskirts of Chennai, India's fourth-largest city and the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

An alliance of two of the world's largest automakers, Renault-Nissan employs some 6,000 workers at its Chennai plant. At least half of the workers are designated as contract employees or trainees, meaning they are denied permanent status and paid much lower wages.

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We are a group of workers at the Renault-Nissan auto assembly plant in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial belt in Tamil Nadu. We are convinced that we must build new organizations of working class struggle to defend ourselves against relentless management attacks as well as the repeated betrayals by the trade unions that claim to speak in our name. Our experiences have also convinced us that the trade union federations are isolating and selling out worker struggles, acceding to management demands to impose ever worsening wages and working conditions.

That is why we have come together to form the Renault-Nissan autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee (RNRFC-Chennai). With this committee, the rank and file can take the struggle into our own hands, democratically formulate our demands, and devise the strategy and organize the needed struggle to win them. By building this new organization, we will also be demonstrating to our brother and sister workers in this industrial belt that there is a progressive way forward for all of us to unite and mount a counteroffensive against the attacks of the corporations working in partnership with the state and national governments.

Unlike the unions which are open only to permanent workers, the RNRFC-Chennai aims to forge unbreakable unity among permanent, contract and trainee workers. These arbitrary job classifications have been used by private and public sector employers alike across India to increase worker-exploitation, defeat strikes and otherwise divide us. The RNRFC-Chennai fights for the principle of equal pay for equal work and the

ultimate elimination of all contract and temporary labour.

Brothers and sisters, as you all know, we have been working without a contract since April 2018—that is for an unprecedented four and a half years. This despite the fact that our contracts are normally negotiated for a three-year period.

Both the Renault Nissan India Thozhilalar Sangam (RNITS) and the United Labour Federation (ULF) that RNITS closely partners with have shown their utter bankruptcy by entering into arbitration without any rank-and-file authorization, and continuing to participate in this fraudulent process long after our new contract should have expired in March 2021. This arbitration procedure commenced in the first quarter of 2020. That is almost three years ago! Furthermore, no steps have been taken by the union leadership to organize a struggle for the subsequent three-year contract that is supposed to be in force from April 2021 to March 2024.

By allowing Renault-Nissan, with the assistance of the courts, to endlessly drag out the arbitration/negotiation process and drive workers deeper into poverty, the unions are making it still more difficult for us to mount a strike or take other effective job action.

After the 2018 contract expired, the union presented the Renault-Nissan management with a Charter of Demands (COD). Management responded by offering an insulting Rs. 5,000 (about \$80) per month pay rise in increments spread over three years. Given the rising cost-of-living, this would amount to a massive wage cut. Negotiations dragged on until the end of 2019. Angered by the company's intransigence, all of the permanent workers expressed unanimous sentiment to strike at the end of 2019. Each member even offered to donate up to Rs. 1,000 for a strike fund.

After the union presented the strike notice to the management, the company filed for arbitration at the beginning of 2020. RNITS and ULF then unilaterally decided to participate in management-initiated arbitration. They justified this with the claim that in the event of a strike, the company would victimize rank-and-file workers by dismissing or transferring some of us in spite of the fact that all 3,000 permanent workers were ready to walk out en masse.

Rather than advancing a strategy to defeat Renault-Nissan's threats, the union repeats them to justify its capitulation and collaboration with management.

Like any capitalist employer, Renault-Nissan will act ruthlessly to defend and increase its profits, and enlist the support of the police, courts and right-wing DMK government. But we workers have potentially even more powerful allies in the Sriperambatur-Oragadam industrial belt, across India and internationally—for it is the working class that produces all of society's wealth.

The issues we are fighting for—an end to poverty wages, speed-up and contract labour—are of pivotal importance to all workers. That is why we can and must oppose management threats by appealing for and mobilizing broader working class support.

It is not only the Renault-Nissan workers who are suffering due to the bankrupt strategy and cowardice of the unions. Ford Motors workers have been backstabbed in the most cruel manner by the Chennai Ford Employees Union (CFEU). Over 2,600 workers have now lost their jobs due to the plant's closing. Most of them were the sole breadwinners for their families.

Last July 2, the CFEU, working closely with the Ford management and Tamil Nadu's DMK government, called off a militant five-week-long strike led by young workers that was challenging Ford's "right" to close the plant and throw the workforce onto the scrapheap. The CFEU did this without any consultation with the striking workers, let alone a membership vote.

None of the trade union federations—including the CITU, LTUC and the AITUC, who posture as "leftist"—mobilized genuine support for the Ford workers despite having considerable presence in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial zone. Both the CITU's and the AITUC's parent parties, the CPM and the CPI, actively support the pro-big-business DMK-led Tamil Nadu government.

Over the past decade, numerous struggles have erupted in various industries in this industrial belt and throughout India. Despite the militancy and bravery of workers, the unions have repeatedly isolated these struggles, leading to their defeat. These include struggles by workers at Yamaha, Royal Enfield, Motherson Group (industries) and JBM.

Throughout the world, workers' struggles are being sabotaged by the nationally based, pro-capitalist trade unions. The formation of rank-and-file committees as the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), the organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has explained, "would open a new road for the class struggle, in which trusted representatives of the working class would take the lead and defeat the efforts of the trade union bureaucrats to sabotage every fightback."

In order to successfully fight corporations like Renault-Nissan that operate globally and implement a global strategy,

the workers must develop their own global strategy to link up with auto and other workers, not just in Tamil Nadu, but across India and internationally. Especially important is to establish links with Renault-Nissan workers worldwide. The RNRFC-Chennai supports the ongoing effort of the ICFI to build an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) so that the workers can link up internationally to coordinate their struggles and fight for a better future for all toilers.

The RNRFC issues the following set of initial demands:

- The fruitless four-and-a-half-year negotiations the RNITS and ULF are indulging in with Renault-Nissan management and the courts should be ended immediately. Instead, we should adopt the principle of "no contract, no work." We should prepare and mount an indefinite strike until our demands are met.

- A new negotiating committee should be democratically elected by the rank-and-file workers, so that the most trusted workers can lead the fight for better wages, which have been eroded by massive inflation, and also for safe working conditions.

- There must be no secret negotiations behind the backs of the workers. From now on, whatever is discussed between the management and the newly-elected worker-representatives should be reported promptly and in full by the negotiating committee to the rank-and-file workers.

- Equal pay for all workers, irrespective of classification. Unite all workers across caste and communal lines.

Brothers and sisters, we hope you agree with the perspective outlined in this document. We possess tremendous strength. This was demonstrated when all of us were about to initiate a walkout in the middle of 2020 due to unsafe working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and management, as a result, was forced to shut down the plant for two weeks with pay. We urge you to learn the lessons from our own experiences and help build this new organization of struggle. Please contact us at rnrfc_chennai@yahoo.com or on Facebook at **Rnrfc-chennai**



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact