

Union imposes sell-out contract on Renault-Nissan India workers through sham vote

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The Renault Nissan India Thozhilalar Sangam (RNITS) trade union has announced that wage-cutting “long-term agreements” have been ratified by the 3,500-strong permanent workforce at the transnational automaker’s car assembly plant on the outskirts of Chennai, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The union claims that 2,333 workers voted in favour of two successive three-year agreements—covering a six-year period from April 2019 through March 2025—and 781 against.

Whatever the truth in these numbers, the ratification vote was an anti-democratic sham and the “negotiations” that the RNITS and its parent body, the United Labour Federation (ULF), conducted with management utterly fraudulent.

Many workers voted under duress and another 400 abstained, many because they thought the process illegitimate.

As the recently formed Renault-Nissan Rank-and-File Committee-Chennai explained in a statement, “RNITS and the ULF allowed the company to drag on negotiations for four years. ... Yet union officials sought to pressure us into voting on the proposed agreement after having just 24 hours, and in most cases far less, to apprise ourselves of the few contract details we were given and evaluate them.

“No meetings were organized so that we workers could ask questions of our supposed union ‘representatives’ about the proposed contract and its implications.

“Nor were we given time to discuss the proposed contract amongst ourselves.”

Working in close concert with management, RNITS and the ULF effectively ambushed the workers. For years, the workers were kept in the dark about the state of negotiations on a successor agreement to that which

expired on March 31, 2018. Then in late December, without any forewarning and just before the plant was scheduled to temporarily close for more than a week, the union announced it had negotiated two successive three-year contracts and immediately proceeded to a “ratification” vote.

All the workers were provided by way of information about the two contracts was a single sheet of paper. Moreover, what details were provided were presented in a manner that was difficult to understand. So difficult, that workers in contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* provided significantly different interpretations of the agreement’s overall impact on their pay.

At the bottom of the union handout, workers were asked to check whether they accepted it or not, meaning that it doubled as the ballot-paper for the ratification vote.

Although the union claimed workers were voting on two successive contracts, they were asked to vote on them *en bloc*, as if they were one.

Stranger still, the first of the two agreements is dated as beginning on April 1, 2019, but the previous agreement expired at the end of March 2018. The workers have been provided no valid explanation for this discrepancy, which suggests that they are being cheated out of a year’s worth of wage and benefit increases.

Three points, however, are manifestly evident.

First, over the course of the seven years from March 31, 2018 through March 31, 2025 workers will suffer a significant real terms pay cut, due to inflation.

Second, the contracts are so structured that much of the workers’ compensation is in the form of “incentives,” “bonuses” and “gifts” that the company can more readily reduce, even eliminate, and are not

counted toward pensions.

Third, the RNITS officials are handsomely rewarding themselves for imposing this sellout agreement. In tiny print at the bottom of the union handout, it is stated that a sum of Rs. 15,000 will be extracted from each of the 3,520 permanent workers for “legal fees” that the union supposedly incurred during the almost three-year-long arbitration process in which it ensnared the workers. This totals a gargantuan sum of Rs. 52.8 million (US \$644,000). It is in addition to previous sums collected from the workers in the name of court costs and attorney fees that were pocketed by the head of the ULF “labour federation,” an attorney by the name of Prakash.

Just as it has refused to provide workers with full details, let alone copies, of the agreement they cooked up with management, so the RNITS has provided no detailed breakdown of what the Rs. 52.8 million was spent on.

Workers formed the Renault-Nissan Rank-and-File Committee-Chennai because they recognized that the unions were working hand in glove with management. Rather than mobilize the workers for struggle, oppose the efforts of the company to pit permanent and contract workers against each other, and forge ties of fighting class solidarity with other autoworkers in the Chennai area, across India and internationally, the RNITS and ULF repeatedly browbeat the Renault-Nissan workers. Acting like management lackeys, they told them that if they struck or engaged in any job action they would be subject to Renault-Nissan reprisals and victimization.

As part of their backstabbing of the workers, the RNITS and ULF have refused to come to the defence of three militant workers who have been singled out by the management for supposedly leaking information about the negotiations to “outside” entities. Neither the names of the targeted workers nor the content of the warning letters they have received have been made known to other workers by the union. However a Renault-Nissan worker informed the WSWS that the names of two of the workers are Rajasekar and Shiva.

If the RNITS and ULF leaders ultimately acted in such a flagrantly anti-democratic and illegitimate manner to push through their sellout agreement, it was because they were frightened by the growing opposition among rank-and-file workers.

Angered by the unions’ refusal to conduct any struggle on their behalf or even provide them with any information on the phony arbitration process, several score workers marched to the ULF office in October, expelled the union officials, and affixed a notice to the office declaring the union permanently shut down.

Through their deceit and skullduggery, the unions have placed the Renault-Nissan workers in a more difficult position. The unions will join management and the government and other legal authorities in declaring that as the workers now have a binding contract, any job action is illegal.

But this must not and will not be the last word. The working class has immense power, insofar as it is organized and mobilized, because it produces all of society’s wealth and constitutes the vast majority. The formation of the Renault-Nissan Rank-and-File Committee-Chennai represents a critical first step in workers breaking free of the pro-management union apparatuses, taking the struggle into their own hands, and developing a new organization of struggle that can reach out to other workers and mobilize the class power of the working class.



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