

Samsung India workers' strike continues in face of mounting state repression

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More than 1,500 workers at the South Korean-based Samsung Electronics' facility in Chennai, India, have been on strike for more than ten days. They are demanding union recognition, increased wages, and better working conditions. Their walkout has seriously crippled the factory's production.

However, on September 18, the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), to which the striking Samsung workers' union—the Samsung India Labour Welfare Union—has affiliated, appealed to the pro-investor (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) DMK-led Tamil Nadu government to step in and resolve the strike. This followed three failed rounds of negotiations, since the strike began on September 9, between the labor commissioner and union leaders.

When 1,500 permanent employees out of the 1,700 employed at the plant walked out on strike, management attempted to continue production using 1,000 contract workers as strike breakers. Despite this, production at the plant has been crippled.

The struck plant is one of two Samsung factories in India. It is located at Sunguvachatram near Sriperumbudur, 56 kilometres away from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India. The other plant is located in Noida, a modern industrial city on the outskirts of Delhi, in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

The plant in Sunguvachatram makes products such as televisions, refrigerators, washing machines and air conditioners. It contributes some 30 percent of Samsung's annual \$12 billion revenue in India, a key growth market for the company.

However, the workers who generate these huge profits for Samsung are rewarded with low wages and suffer under dreadfully exploitative working conditions. The strike is the first ever walk-out by Samsung Electronics workers in India since the company established operations in the country in 2007. It follows a series of strikes by more than 30,000 Samsung workers in South Korea starting in July.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government are seeking to lure foreign manufacturing investment by touting India as a low-cost alternative to China.

The annual raise for Samsung Electronics employees in Chennai, announced in May 2024, was pegged at \$29.83 (Rs. 2500). This is, to say the least, a pittance compared to the huge profits created by the workers and has left them earning less than workers in nearby factories. In 2023, the annual increment was increased by \$41.76 (Rs. 3500).

Only a small number of the permanent workers, who are classified by factory management as "A," "B," and "C" grade employees, even received the full 2024 increment. "A" grade employees (about five to ten employees) are eligible for the annual \$29.83 (Rs. 2500) increase,

while B and C grade employees are to receive just \$11.93 (Rs. 1000) and \$10.74 (Rs. 900), respectively. The highest annual salary for employees ranges from \$596.58 (about Rs. 50,000) to \$656.23 (about Rs. 55,000), not including a provident fund of around \$35.79 (Rs.3000).

According to one worker who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, after 10 years at Samsung he now receives just Rs. 31,000 (about \$370) and takes home only Rs. 28,000 home (about \$335).

The plant has two nine-hour shifts, each with about 800 workers. The first runs from 8 am to 5 pm, and the second from 8 pm to 5 am. But these shifts exist largely in name only, as it is mandatory for all workers to work a minimum of 11 hours per day, four days a week. This is considered overtime.

Some employees spend their days alone in dimly lit areas, working to exhaustion, going four or five hours without a break. This is a flagrant violation of human rights, which the union has described as akin to torture.

Because of these abusive conditions and low pay, workers banded together to form a union to fight back against Samsung's violations of their basic rights.

The Samsung India Labour Welfare Union (SIWU) was established by Samsung employees in July 2023, with the workers seeking government accreditation and attempting to establish affiliation with the Stalinist-led Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which represents many workers in Sriperumbudur and the industrial belt of which it is part.

In order to hamper the SIWU's formation, company management then organized a "workers' committee" and encouraged employees to join it. Additionally, management used a variety of repressive tactics, including threats to fire elected union officials, and block internal transfers.

Even though the CITU is notorious for its treacherous, pro-management, role, Samsung India blocked the union from being officially registered with the Labour Commissioner in Irungattukottai, so as to maintain its unbridled dictatorship over the workers.

In response, the workers decided to stop production and go on an indefinite strike. In the meantime, management obtained a court-issued stay prohibiting strikers picketing within 500 metres of the company's premises. The CITU brazenly agreed to enforce this decision. In a reactionary move to isolate and crush the strike, CITU also demanded that the workers refrain from speaking with the media or YouTube channels. So fearful is the CITU of the Samsung workers winning broad support that the union has told workers not to speak to anyone about the strike, declaring, "outsiders should not intervene and

the CITU leadership would solve all the problems of the workers.”

Despite this anti-democratic gag order, WSWs reporters have continued to speak to workers about their struggle.

When more than 100 workers used their own vehicles and public transportation to travel to Kancheepuram on Sept. 16 to present their demands to the district collector, the police took them and CITU State Secretary and SIWU President E. Muthukumar, into “preventive arrest.” They were detained in a wedding hall until 9 pm. As an excuse for this brazen anti-democratic action, police claimed that the workers didn’t have the necessary permission to march in a busy area that contained schools and hospitals, and said the protest might cause a “disruption.”

On September 18, workers and officials from 12 unions were prevented by the DMK government from holding a protest to support the Samsung strike and protest the Sept. 16 police action in an area in Chennai designated for protests, Valluvar Kottam. In an attempt to cover their tracks, officials from the ruling DMK’s Labour Progressive Federation took part in the aborted protest.

The treacherous role of the CITU flows from the reactionary politics of the political parties with which it is affiliated. The parent parties of both the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), are India’s Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and Communist Party of India (CPI), respectively. By imprisoning workers in India’s pro-employer labour relations system and politically subordinating the working class to the DMK, the Congress Party and other supposedly “progressive” capitalist parties, the Stalinist and their union affiliates have for decades functioned as the principal social props of Indian bourgeois rule.

They claim that the Congress Party and regional bourgeois parties like the DMK are “secular” alternatives to the Hindu supremacist BJP, although they have a long record of conniving with communalism. At the same time, the Stalinist parties have consciously concealed the reactionary class character of the DMK and its anti-working class record and program.

Their treacherous roles are demonstrated by the defeats suffered in recent years by workers at Ford, Renault-Nissan, Yamaha Motors, Renault-Nissan, Foxconn and BYD plants.

For instance, in 2010, the CITU betrayed the strikes of 7,000 Foxconn and 3,000 BYD workers who fought for similar demands, including improved wages and working conditions, the regularization of contract workers and union recognition. Both strikes faced brutal police repression organized by Tamil Nadu’s DMK state government.

The CITU and CPM have consistently kept the struggles of the various workers in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam Special Economic Zones separated from one another and from the wider urban and rural workforce, leaving each group of workers to fight their government-backed transnational employers on their own.

In September 2022, when Ford announced that it would end its operations in India, closing the Chennai plant and eliminating 4,000 jobs, the DMK government, with which the Stalinist CPM is in political alliance, sided with the Ford management to implement the closure.

Further revealing its real class nature, DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin met with top management at Ford’s Michigan headquarters on September 10, 2024, and urged the company to resume its manufacturing operations. He touted the closed plant as a potential producer of cheap-labour vehicles for the global market. Agreements totaling Rs 7,016 crore (\$835 million) were signed during

this tour with sixteen of the world’s most prestigious corporations in San Francisco and Chicago.

Following in the footsteps of the national BJP government, the DMK-led Tamil Nadu government passed a Factories Amendment Act in April 2023, to lengthen the workday to 12 hours as a part of a push to woo global investors. Admitting that a longer workday would appeal to investors anxious to maximize their profits, Stalin said: “The bill was adopted with a view to attract huge investments to Tamil Nadu and create employment opportunities for thousands of youths.”

The DMK government ultimately decided to withdraw its Factories Amendment Act, 2023, in the face of massive resistance among industrial workers employed in the more than 40,000 factories across the state. The temporary withdrawal of the legislation is only a manoeuvre to diffuse opposition and buy time before reintroducing it or similar provisions at a more favourable juncture.

This is the role of nationalist, pro-capitalist trade unions in every country. In the strikes of Samsung electronics workers in South Korea this past summer, the National Samsung Electronics Union (NSEU) worked as the company’s police force to block workers’ struggles and prevented them from launching a broader fight.

The struggle for permanent jobs, decent wages, improved working conditions and basic democratic rights can be advanced only by challenging the capitalist system and all its political agencies. This requires a complete break from all the Stalinist-Maoist controlled, pro-capitalist unions and the formation of genuinely independent rank-and-file committees.

To fight transnational corporations like Samsung requires a global strategy linking up with auto workers and other workers, not just in Tamil Nadu, but across India, and worldwide, including critically, Samsung workers in South Korea.

Workers at Samsung India must follow the example of their class brothers in other industries and countries and build a rank-and-file committee as part of the 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.



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