

The way forward for the Samsung India workers, after the Stalinist CITU's suppression of their militant 37-day strike

Yuvan Darwin, Kranti Kumara
24 November 2024

Bowing to pressure from the Tamil Nadu state government, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—the national trade union federation led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—abruptly terminated the militant 37-day strike of some 1,500 permanent workers at Samsung India's Tamil Nadu household-appliance manufacturing plant on 15 October 2024.

The workers were led to believe that they would return to work on October 17. But the South Korean-based transnational company has taken advantage of the CITU/CPM betrayal to intensify its anti-worker campaign. To date, only a fraction of the workers have been recalled. Those that have been, have been forced to undergo “training sessions” during which managers have browbeat them and sought to enlist them in a phony, management-created workers' committee.

The CITU completely surrendered to the fiercely pro-business DMK state government, without winning any of the workers' demands for reducing the work-day and onerous management oversight or increasing their miserable wages. It even abandoned the demand that it claimed was the central issue in the strike—formal registration of the SIWU (Samsung India Workers Union) by the Labour Ministry, which is supposedly a statutory right under Indian labour laws.

The Samsung workers are now at the mercy of a vindictive management. When the workers who participated in the strike showed up at the factory gate on October 17, they were told by the Samsung management that they will first have to go through mandatory week-long “training” sessions in batches of 150 workers at a time. So far, only around 450 workers have been allowed back into the factory.

The CITU scuttled the strike under conditions where it was becoming a major flashpoint for the class struggle in Tamil Nadu and across India. Under pressure from India's far-right, Narendra Modi-led central government and global investors, the DMK government was resorting to ever more brazen and violent police repression to break the strike. This risked provoking a broader worker mobilization.

An additional factor in the CITU's complete surrender was the DMK government making it clear to the CPM and the smaller Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), both of whom are in a long-time political alliance with the DMK, that their nominal criticisms of the police's action were not in the “interest” of the

alliance, and that the DMK could well sever its ties with them.

The CITU has celebrated its rotten betrayal to Samsung management and to the Tamil Nadu DMK government as an historic “victory.” A victory that, according to long-time CITU functionary and SIWU leader Muthukumar, “the world is looking at with wonder” and supposedly “made the workers happy.”

In contrast to the entirely phony picture of victory that Muthukumar has painted, Samsung workers have expressed their anger and bitterness at the CITU's backstabbing in discussions with WSWs reporters.

With the company doubling down post-strike on its refusal to recognize the SIWU, the Stalinists have cravenly appealed to management to recognize that they can be its best partner in containing worker unrest.

Thus, Muthukumar, who the CITU imposed as SIWU president without any rank-and-file vote, posted a statement on social media that combined vague, hollow threats of “consequences” if management didn't back away from its hard line with an obsequious plea for cooperation to boost production.

“CITU workers want peace,” wrote Muthukumar, “and we are guiding them to help them in production, so we hereby declare that it is the duty of Samsung management to preserve this industrial peace after long struggle without prejudice.”

This declaration is entirely in keeping with the utterly rotten role that the Stalinist-led CITU has played for decades. It has isolated and betrayed one militant workers' struggle after another, particularly in Tamil Nadu, which has become a major manufacturing hub in India. In 2010, for example, the CITU made the 7,000 workers at the Taiwanese-based Foxxcon and the 3,000 workers at the Chennai-area plant of the Chinese-owned BYD corporation completely surrender to management despite their having waged weeks-long strikes.

In the case of the Samsung strike, the CITU did nothing to mobilize support for it among workers in the massive Oragadam-Sriperumbudur industrial-belt in which it is located—let alone seek to make it the spearhead of a broader working-class mobilization against the poverty wages, precarious contract employment, and the brutal working conditions that prevail across India. Muthukumar and his fellow Stalinist functionaries didn't even organize a common meeting or action with the nearly 100 permanent workers at a nearby Samsung-supplier, SH Electronics,

who were in the midst of a months-long strike to protest the dismissal of 12 workers for forming a union affiliated to the CITU.

Instead, the CITU leaders urged workers to make appeals to the DMK-led Labour Ministry and courts, claiming they could be pressured to intervene on their behalf.

In fact, the strike demonstrated the exact opposite. The government, courts and police were in cahoots with Samsung.

As the Samsung workers strike erupted on September 9, the management obtained a court-order prohibiting strikers from picketing within 500 metres of the company's premises. The CITU obediently agreed to this and erected a "protest-tent" far away from the plant. CITU leaders also ordered the workers not to speak to "outsiders" such as the WWSW reporters, promising that the "the CITU leadership would solve all the problems of the workers."

As the strike persisted, the DMK and central BJP governments became increasingly agitated, with various officials issuing strident warnings that it was "damaging" India and Tamil Nadu's reputation among investors. Police were increasingly set upon the strikers, to intimidate and harass them.

All the while, the CITU, CPM and CPI leaders sat on their hands. They issued no more than the most timid criticisms of the police and even more importantly their DMK allies, whom they urged to be "reasonable."

Adding insult to injury, having bowed to the DMK government and called off the strike without winning any of the workers' demands, the state leaders of the CPM, CPI, and the Tamil nationalist VCK met with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on October 26 to "thank him" for his intervention to resolve the Samsung Electronics workers' strike "amicably."

The treacherous role of the CITU flows from the reactionary Stalinist politics of the CPM and the CPI. Despite their claims to be parties of the working class striving for socialism, they have functioned as an integral part of the capitalist political establishment for decades. They have provided crucial support to the Indian bourgeoisie in its drive to transform India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and in its attempts to advance its predatory interests through a "strategic partnership" with Washington aimed at China.

While isolating and suppressing militant worker struggles, the CPM, CPI and their Left Front work to tie the working class to the parties of big business—including the Congress Party, long the bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government. They have participated in and supported one right-wing, anti-worker government after another, nationally and in the states. This includes backing both DMK and AIADMK-led governments in Tamil Nadu.

They try to justify their alliances with the Congress Party and regional bourgeois parties like the DMK on the grounds that they are "secular" alternatives to the Hindu supremacist BJP. Yet these parties all have a long record of conniving with communalism.

In those states where the CPM-led Left Front forms the government, previously in West Bengal and now in Kerala, it has pursued pro-investor policies, including banning strikes in the IT sector and in Special Economic Zones.

What the Stalinist politicians and trade union bureaucrats

vehemently oppose is workers breaking from capitalist politics and the state-regulated, pro-employer "collective bargaining system," and mounting a counteroffensive against poverty wages, contract employment and brutal working conditions based on the methods of class struggle. The inevitable intervention of the state on the side of the employers must be met with the systematic mobilization of workers' power, uniting workers' disparate struggles across Tamil Nadu, India and internationally.

Such a movement can only develop if it is animated by a socialist-internationalist perspective—the fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class, rallying the rural toilers behind it against the Indian bourgeoisie, its state apparatus and all its political representatives and for socialism.

The CITU has proven itself to be an instrument not for asserting the class interests of the Samsung workers, but for demobilizing them and for upholding brutal worker-exploitation on behalf of the DMK government and the transnational Samsung.

That is why Samsung workers should take matters into their own hands by establishing an independent rank-and-file committee. Such a committee, in contradistinction to the CITU-led SIWU, should strive to unite permanent, contract and temporary workers at the plant in a common struggle. This must be coupled with a strategy to mobilize the social power of the working class against Samsung management and the Indian state, political establishment and ruling class which stand behind them, and against the brutal exploitation and economic insecurity that confronts all workers.

Rank-and-file committees must be built across Tamil Nadu and India, and special appeals made to Samsung workers in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, in South Korea and around the world.

Such a network of rank and file Committees should become a part of the IWA-RFC (International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees), a new organization of working class-struggle, that unites workers in North America, Europe, Asia and around the world against the global corporations, imperialist war and the capitalist system.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact