

Indian Samsung workers strike against multinational giant's campaign of arbitrary suspensions

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Around 500 permanent workers at Samsung India's Tamil Nadu household-appliance manufacturing plant have been on a sit-down protest strike since February 5 to demand the reinstatement of three workers management has arbitrarily suspended. The suspended workers are office holders in the newly formed Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU), which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—the national trade union federation led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM.

The suspensions came just days after the state Labour Department on January 27 officially registered the union, whose formation Samsung, with the connivance of Tamil Nadu's DMK government and the far-right BJP-led central government, has bitterly resisted.

On February 20, Samsung management suspended 14 more workers. Provocatively, it announced it was doing so at talks held under the Labour Department's auspices to end the dispute.

Following these new suspensions, tensions intensified at the factory and the striking workers succeeded in convincing some of the contract workers who have continued to work during the strike to stop work.

There are about 1,800 workers in the factory, divided into various categories. The SIWU only represents the permanent workers, and Samsung has been able to use this division to keep some production going amid the now three-week-long strike.

On the evening of February 21, workers from various industries in the Oragadam-Kancheepuram industrial belt, which lies on the outskirts of Chennai, held a protest to support the striking Samsung workers. Under pressure from the striking workers, the leadership of the CITU has threatened to organize a sympathy strike in Kancheepuram on March 8, 2025.

Earlier, on February 17, around 200 workers and their families gathered near the Samsung plant.

Official Labour Department recognition of the SIWU came only after a prolonged struggle by workers against Samsung's management and the DMK-led Tamil Nadu government. The workers mounted a 37-day strike in September-October of last

year to demand registration of the SIWU.

Although union recognition is supposed to be a statutory right under Indian labour laws, it ultimately took more than 200 days of worker protests and legal wrangling for the SIWU to be registered.

As Samsung's campaign of suspensions makes clear, the South Korean-based company is determined to thwart any and all attempts of the workers to press for better wages and working conditions. It continues to refuse any genuine negotiations over these issues, and is trying to intimidate workers into spurning the SIWU in favour of a bogus company-organized "workers' committee."

In the face of the company's intransigence, the CPM-led CITU has at every point sought to constrain the workers within the narrowest collective bargaining framework so as not to jeopardize the Stalinists' cozy relations with the right-wing DMK government. The CPM is in a political alliance with the DMK at both the state and national levels.

Under pressure from the DMK government, the CITU leaders abruptly ended the Samsung workers' strike last October 15, claiming that an agreement to register the union had been reached. But this agreement, such as it was, quickly proved to be a fraud.

Management continued to refuse to negotiate with the union, and used "training sessions" to browbeat the workers into joining the phony "workers' committee." As the intimidation campaign succeeded in only getting a few workers to do so, management resorted to trying to bribe workers by offering them interest-free loans of 300,000 rupees (\$US3,455) if they joined the bogus committee.

Last November, the WSWS wrote:

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.

On January 31, during their lunch break, three SIWU officials—Mohanraj, Gunasekaran, and Devanesan—requested permission from the HR department to meet with Samsung's Managing Director to address issues of employee mistreatment. HR denied their request, resulting in an hour-long confrontation. Later, on February 4 and 5, Samsung issued suspension orders to the three, accusing them of having halted production for half an hour on January 31, when they attempted to meet with the Managing Director. In response, the suspended workers initiated a sit-down protest, which rapidly gained support from other permanent employees.

In retaliation, Samsung management closed restrooms and turned off the electricity. Despite this, the workers continued to demand their rights, forcing management to reopen the restrooms. Thereafter, the protest continued, with union supporters staging a sit-in strike during their regular shifts, but not disrupting management's efforts to continue production using non-permanent workers.

Meanwhile, the protest of 93 suspended permanent workers at SH Electronics, a Samsung supplier, continues. They were suspended months ago, after advocating for the formation of a CITU-affiliated union.

Speaking at the Samsung workers' February 17 protest, CITU leader Muthukumar criticized Samsung and SH Electronics in nationalist terms for disrespecting Indian labour laws, claiming that these foreign corporations prioritize profit over workers' rights. Muthukumar said nothing about the rapacious role of the Indian bourgeoisie, including the Tamil capitalist elite. Nor did he mention that the BJP government is now moving to implement new labour codes that will allow companies to use contract labour in all industries and enable employers to lay off workers at will without government approval.

Workers need to understand the real role of the CITU and the Stalinist CPM, which for decades have functioned as part of the political establishment, suppressing the class struggle and channeling workers behind right-wing capitalist parties like the DMK and the Congress Party. In those states where the CPM has led the state-government, such as West Bengal and Kerala, it has implemented what it itself calls "pro-investor" policies.

The CITU has repeatedly appealed to Samsung management to recognize that the union can be a "partner" of the profit-hungry multi-national, and that by addressing workers' grievances the union can help it boost production.

That the CITU set a date for a one-day strike across industrial units in Kancheepuram only two weeks hence is typical of the manner in which it maneuvers between the workers, the

employers and government, trying to ensure that workers' anger does not boil over.

The CITU continuously advises workers to appeal to the DMK-led Labor Ministry and the capitalist courts to intervene on their behalf. At the same time, CITU leaders have ordered workers not to speak to "outsiders" such as the WSWS reporters, promising that "the CITU leadership would solve all the problems of the workers."

Emboldened by the CITU's inaction, Samsung management is doubling down on its threats against the workers. It issued a threatening statement on the same day it suspended the 14 additional workers, saying, "We have a zero-tolerance policy for any illegal activities by workers that disrupt industrial stability and peace at the workplace." In other words, it will seek to ruthlessly repress any workers who challenge its brutal work regimen and sweatshop wages.

The actions taken by Samsung and SH Electronics underscore again the urgency of a struggle to unite permanent and contract workers in a common struggle for secure, good-paying jobs for all. India's unions have failed to mount any serious challenge to the spread of contract labour, which is now entrenched throughout the private and public sectors, because that would demand systematic defiance of antiworker laws and court injunctions, and the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

Samsung workers must take their struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee, independent of the CITU apparatus. This committee should unite permanent, contract, and temporary workers in a common cause. They should also seek solidarity from workers at Samsung's other plants in Noida, in northern India, South Korea, and internationally, building a global network of workers' independent rank-and-file committees fighting for their rights.

Such a movement, based on the principles of class struggle and socialist internationalism, can effectively challenge the brutal exploitation of workers by global corporations like Samsung. It would be part of the broader struggle to unite workers against the capitalist system and the prioritizing of investor profit over social needs.



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