

# “The state has to make a precedent that no worker will rise”: Interview with a defender of victimized workers in Noida, India

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More than four months after tens of thousands of workers in the industrial suburbs surrounding Delhi walked off the job demanding wage increases and basic dignity, the Uttar Pradesh government of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath continues its campaign of legal persecution against those who supported them. Adityanath, a Hindu-fascistic politician is a close ally of the Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.

Eight activists associated with the labour advocacy group Mazdoor Bigul (Workers’ Bugle) remain in jail, booked under 11 separate First Information Reports (FIRs) across five police stations. Two of them—Aakriti Chaudhry and Satyam Verma—have been subjected to the colonial-era National Security Act (NSA), which permits 12 months of detention without charge or trial.

The WSWs spoke to Keshav, a student and trade union activist in Delhi’s Bawana industrial area. Keshav is the brother of Aditya Anand, whom the police have falsely targeted as the “mastermind” of the violence that occurred on April 13. Keshav has been closely involved in the legal defence of the jailed workers and activists. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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**Sathish Simon:** Can you walk us through the sequence of events—how the protest began and the arrests that followed?

**Keshav:** The protest started on April 9, following the wage increase won by workers at Richa Global in Manesar, Haryana. Workers at the same company’s Noida branch began demanding a raise, because the LPG price hike had made it impossible to manage their expenses. Activists from Mazdoor Bigul joined the protest on April 10.

On April 11, the police arrested four activists—Rupesh, Akriti, Srishti and Manisha—from a metro station. There had been no violence. The three women were booked under Section 151, a preventive detention provision. But an executive magistrate sent them to 14-day judicial custody, which is illegal—Section 151 only permits 14 days total, and an executive magistrate lacks that authority. The lawyers were not even informed where they were being held. Rupesh was booked in a separate Aadhaar forgery

case—the police simply needed some charge to hold him.

On April 13, the protest turned violent after the police mounted a frontal assault on the workers. Around 2,500 people were arrested—2,000 men and 500 women, including minors. They were kept in preventive detention for four to five days without being produced before any magistrate, in clear violation of the 24-hour limit. By April 19, over 300 workers remained in jail, booked under 11 FIRs.

Critically, all the activists currently in jail were not present at the protest site on April 13—four of them were already in custody. Yet they have been charged with attempted murder and severe harm to on-duty police officers. The charge sheet itself acknowledges they were not present.

**Sathish:** What are the main allegations the state is using to justify the NSA detentions?

**Keshav:** There are four principal allegations, all baseless.

First, the state claims a conspiracy meeting took place on March 22, based on phone location data showing several activists together. What actually occurred that day was the inauguration of an open library for children. Over a thousand people attended. We have photographs.

Second, they allege Satyam Verma received 20 million rupees (\$208,825.60 USD) from foreign sources over 20 years, implying foreign funding for subversion. Satyam is a translator with an account on ProZ.com. We have invoices from various foreign companies that paid him in dollars and euros through PayPal—a common practice. Twenty million rupees over 20 years works out to roughly 80,000 rupees (\$835.30 USD) per month, an ordinary middle-class income. The state has not shown a single rupee used to instigate anything.

Third, they point to a Telegram group called Bigul Media Group, used to circulate Mazdoor Bigul’s videos and articles. The screenshots in the charge sheet show messages like “post this video on Instagram” and “correct this write-up.” The write-ups were critical of government laws, which is not illegal.

Fourth, there is a WhatsApp group called Richa Global Noida. The state claims the accused used it to instigate violence. In reality, the messages show Aditya and others repeatedly appealing to workers to remain peaceful. And when we examined the group, we discovered that the people posting messages to instigate violence were police personnel. We called the numbers and

recorded them—one was a sub-inspector, another a driver from the Home Ministry in Delhi. The driver was arrested in one FIR and released on bail in 15 days. Nothing happened to the sub-inspector.

Additionally, the eyewitness statements in the charge sheet are verbatim copies of each other. Out of 169 FIRs, I checked 37—roughly 15 had statements that were 95 to 100 percent identical from beginning to end.

**Sathish:** What did the arrested activists endure in police custody?

**Keshav:** Aditya was arrested from Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, on April 17. A local magistrate initially refused to grant transit remand because the Uttar Pradesh police application was not in proper format. But by the evening, the police somehow obtained it and flew Aditya to Uttar Pradesh. As soon as he arrived, he was beaten by 15 to 20 police personnel for three hours at a police station.

On April 29 and 30, during police custody, Aditya was taken to an undisclosed location—some bushes—around 1:00 a.m. Police had already placed kerosene bottles and torch sticks there. They demanded he pick them up while they videotaped him, to fabricate evidence. When he refused, they beat him. When he was produced before the magistrate on April 30, he stated he had been brutally tortured, and the magistrate ordered a DCP inquiry.

We filed a petition in the Supreme Court on custodial torture. On May 15, Justices Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan acknowledged that “they are not terrorists” and ordered that any further police interrogation must take place inside the jail. The next hearing is on August 7, where we will press for a CBI investigation into the torture and fabrication of evidence.

**Sathish:** Why has the state responded so ruthlessly to this particular protest?

**Keshav:** Noida is an industrial hub. When workers came onto the streets demanding a wage increase, the state had to answer to the industrialists. The Modi government has brought in four labour codes under the slogan of “ease of doing business”—fashionable terminology for exploiting workers even more. The Yogi government has to make a precedent: if workers raise their voices for just demands, this is what will happen to them. That is why they have invoked the NSA and registered 11 FIRs.

Noida is the crown jewel for the Yogi government to present as a report card to investors. But the entire state demonstrates how fascist rulers deal with the working masses. For the last two years, the government has imposed the Essential Services Maintenance Act every six months on flimsy grounds to ensure workers in state-aligned services cannot protest or unionize. The Allahabad High Court itself remarked—in another case, but it is extremely pertinent—that Uttar Pradesh police officers do not work according to the law or the Constitution, but rather at the behest of trying to please their political superiors. They routinely file or suppress FIRs and invoke preventive detention purely to appease those superiors.

**Sathish:** What was the role of the trade unions?

**Keshav:** The central trade unions—the revisionist organizations—were completely absent. They were nowhere to be found. Only we were there.

**Sathish:** The Maruti Suzuki case from 2012 set a precedent for

this kind of frame-up. Do you see parallels?

**Keshav:** I know the case broadly. In that instance too, the HR manager who was sympathetic to the workers was killed by bouncers, and it was framed on the workers. Thirteen workers received life sentences. One of the workers said at the time that it was a class war—and it was.

The same template is being applied now: provocation, mass arrests, fabricated charges. The police infiltrated our WhatsApp group and themselves posted messages calling for violence. The workers’ only crime was demanding a wage they could survive on.

**Sathish:** What is the current state of the workers and the jailed activists?

**Keshav:** Around 50 workers remain in jail, though most have now secured bail from the High Court or sessions courts. Workers were booked under a maximum of four FIRs each, so their legal path has been somewhat less complicated—though still extremely difficult for people earning 11,000 rupees (\$114.85 USD) a month.

For the eight activists, we have approached lawyers from the Supreme Court down to session courts. They were initially booked under three FIRs, but as soon as we began moving bail applications, the police kept adding them to new FIRs—roughly one every 10 days through June. The last was FIR 172, registered on July 1. We are now applying for bail in each FIR, and hope to secure their release by the end of this month. But we do not know if more FIRs will be added.

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The WSWs will continue to follow the Noida workers’ struggle and the legal persecution of those who stood in solidarity with them. The criminalization of the Noida protests is an attack on the entire working class. The Modi government wants these most exploited workers to labour under brutal conditions without complaint.

As the Maruti Suzuki frame-up demonstrated, the Indian ruling class—whether under the BJP or the Congress Party—will stop at nothing to defend India’s status as a cheap-labour haven for transnational capital. The answer lies in building independent rank-and-file committees to rebel against the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies and fight for the international unity of the working class.



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