

India: BYD Electronics fires most of its workforce, after police break up sit-in

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The Indian subsidiary of the giant Chinese-based BYD Electronics has fired most of the workforce at its plant in Oragadam in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, after the workers staged a sit-in to press their demands for increased wages, an 8-hour work day, the regularization of contract employees, and recognition of their newly-formed union.

More than 3,000 of BYD's 3,350 production workers participated in the plant occupation, which began on the night of October 28 and lasted for almost two days. The workers chose to end their sit-in on the evening of Saturday, October 30, after baton-wielding state police surrounded the plant and vowed to storm it if workers didn't vacate the premises in 30 minutes.

Tamil Nadu's DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) state government has responded to a wave of militant strike struggles, many of them for union recognition, with repression, including repeated mass arrests of picketers. Last month, the deputy head of the Tamil Nadu police told a business security conference that the authorities have "gear[ed] up our intelligence machinery" to counter "left wing extremism" in the labour force. (See "India: Police Chief vows to step up spying on workers")

When the BYD workers returned to the plant on Monday, November 1, they found the gates shut, a heavy police presence, and a letter on the company notice board. The letter said BYD is dismissing all its "contract" workers—that is, 2,500 workers the company has hired through recruitment agencies so that it can pay them even less than its 850 "regular" workers.

The BYD notice also announced the firing of 60 regular workers and said 437 others will be required to sign a letter of apology for "misconduct," i.e., for their participation in the occupation.

The three-and-a-half-year-old plant is now closed,

ostensibly for a snap week-long "holiday." Management is using this time to plot with the state government to resume operations using other poor villagers, recruited through various labor contractors, as scabs.

Workers at the plant, which produces parts for Nokia cell phones, are forced to work 12-hour shifts. A majority of them are young women. Those with four years' experience earn just 5,400 rupees (about US \$120) per month.

Workers approached the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, to form a union on October 9, after BYD announced the layoff of a hundred workers. The vast majority of the workers—regular and contract—soon joined.

With the company refusing to negotiate, the workers staged an initial sit-in on October 21. Faced with this militant action, one moreover that united contract and regular workers, the company agreed to hold negotiations with 68 of the workers.

But within a week the negotiations broke down because the company insisted that it would not discuss the grievances of the contract workers.

Subsequently, management reneged on a promise not to victimize workers involved in the union recognition struggle. Two contract workers were suspended on October 27 for handing out leaflets. Meanwhile, representatives of the labour recruitment agencies visited the houses of contract workers and warned parents that if their sons and daughters continued to engage in union activities, they will be dismissed and a police complaint will be launched against them.

Such was the bullying management meted out to one regular worker, PremKumar, he attempted to commit suicide on October 27 by drinking isopropyl alcohol.

It was these provocative actions that caused the workers to occupy the plant for a second time on October 28.

The Stalinist CITU has sent a legal notice to the BYD management protesting the lock out and the mass suspensions and dismissals. It has proposed no other course of action, because, according to one report, CITU leaders are “busy engaged in talks for resolving [the] Foxconn workers strike.”

Some 7,000 Foxconn workers at a plant in Sriperumbudur, a city less than 8 kilometers from Oragadam, have been on strike since September 21. Like the BYD workers, they have been threatened and abused by the police on orders of the DMK government, which is anxious to demonstrate to investors that it can supply them with a cheap labor workforce.

But for the Stalinists there is no question of uniting these militant struggles, let alone making them a spearhead for a working class political offensive against the bourgeoisie’s drive to transform India into a sweatshop for world capitalism.

Instead the CPM is continuing its reactionary and widely discredited maneuvers with various rightwing capitalist parties. Recently the CPM approached the DMK’s arch-rival, the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), to mount “joint struggles” on “people’s issues,” in the hopes of forming an electoral bloc with the AIADMK for the 2011 state assembly elections. When it last held office in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK sacked tens of thousands of state employees after they struck to demand higher pay and benefits.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with BYD workers earlier this week. For fear of reprisals, they asked that their full names not be used.

Pandiraj said management had tried to humiliate the workers when they demanded a wage hike: “We are paid Rs.4,000 (about \$90 US) per month. We are also provided with food, but it is low quality. We don’t like the meals given to us in the company canteen, but we have no choice but to eat it. When we raised the demand for a wage hike the management said, ‘You wouldn’t even get three meals a day in your home. Here we provide you 3 meals and Rs.4,000 salary. What we provide you is more than enough for you!’ ”

Mani, who is 23, told the WSWS, “Many of us are

brought to work by company coaches from villages a long distance away. For me, up and down, it takes five hours traveling.

“For our 12 hour shift, we get paid two hours of overtime but for the other two hours of extra work we are not paid. They seem to deduct it from our pay for providing canteen meals and coach travel to work. But we are not told about that. They also deduct money from our salary for Provident Fund (PF) and medical benefit (ESI), but the deductions are not notified in our pay slips.

“The management is sending its staff to the houses of workers in the villages to intimidate them with the threat of losing their jobs if they do not return to work. PremKumar, a worker under tremendous psychological pressure from management consumed poison to commit suicide. We are demanding at least Rs.50,000 should be paid to PremKumar as compensation. We also denounce abusive language employed against female workers. We are also opposed to the use of the police to terrorize workers.”

Naven, who comes from Venkatapuram village, said, “I spend five hours every day coming to and from work. I have to look after my two younger brothers and my mother with my monthly wage of Rs.4,000. My mother goes for poorly paid odd jobs.”

Suriyadevi, a young woman worker, told the WSWS, “We don’t get proper food in the company canteen. That’s also run by contractors. During our occupation the management cut off the water supply so that we couldn’t even use the bathroom. There was no canteen facility. All of them were deliberately stopped to exert pressure on the workers to return to work. Now we have been locked out and are standing under the burning sun.”

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