

India: Victimized Foxconn and BYD workers speak out

By a WSWWS Reporting Team
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Militant strikes involving ten thousand workers at Foxconn's and BYD Electronics' plants in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu were abruptly terminated last month by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

The CITU claimed that the strikes could not be successfully prosecuted in the face of opposition from the state's DMK government, police repression, and the companies' use of poor villagers as "blacklegs" or scabs. It instructed the Foxconn and BYD workers to return to work even though the companies had conceded none of their major demands—a significant wage rise, the "regularization" of contract workers, and union recognition—and had fired 41 rank-and-file strike leaders—24 at Foxconn and 17 at BYD. (See: India: Lessons of the Stalinist CITU's betrayal of the Foxconn and BYD strikes)

The CITU is the trade union federation allied with the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner of the Left Front, a parliamentary bloc that until July 2008 was propping up India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The DMK is one of the UPA's major component parties.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with several of the victimized Foxconn and BYD strikers, as well as other workers employed by these transnationals in Tamil Nadu.

Victimized BYD worker Munusamy told the WSWWS: "I have been working in BYD for three years. I am a regular [not a contract] worker. I am from Madurai down south of Tamil Nadu but I stay in a room in Poonamalee. It takes 45 minutes for me to get to work. I get a monthly wage of Rs.4,800 (US \$106). I can send home only Rs.1,500 (\$33) as I have to pay room rent of Rs.500 and nearly Rs.3,000 (\$ 66) goes on my food and

other expenses.

"I used to send home only a very little money. After my dismissal from the company we are very badly affected economically.

"The state government acts in favour of BYD management. The government says only now have they come to know that BYD workers have been working 12-hour shifts! When the government officials visited the company to check whether the company could be awarded ISO status the officials never bothered to find out whether workers were doing 8- hour shifts or more. We could somewhat manage if we were paid Rs.10,000 (\$222) for eight hours.

"This government has suppressed Foxconn workers and filed trumped up charges against them. All workers should fight against this. The government offers companies like BYD export tax reduction and other concessions, but workers get an annual wage hike of just Rs.200 (\$4).

We have four members in our family. All of us used to be involved in agricultural work. But the onset of drought since 2002 killed our hopes in agriculture. Subsequently my three brothers and I left the village seeking jobs in the industrial cities of Karur, Coimbatore, Madurai and Chennai. Only my father has been left doing the farm work.

"The government boasts that they provide free electricity to farmers. But farmers have been compelled to pay Rs.50,000 (\$1,111) to get a power supply connection. Even then there have been frequent power cuts.

"The BYD management recognizes only the ruling [DMK] party's Labour Progressive Front (LPF) in the company because the LPF functions hand-in-glove with the management.

Another BYD worker told the WSWWS, "We might

strike again for a wage hike and for reinstatement of the 17 dismissed workers. We used to get Rs.6,500 (\$144) when we were doing 12 hour shifts. Now since we returned to work after the strike, the shifts have been reduced to 8 hours and now there are three shifts. A regular worker now gets a monthly salary of Rs.4,000 (\$88) whereas a contract worker gets Rs.3,800 (\$84). They have cut down on canteen facilities too. As a result, many workers having travelled long distances do their jobs with empty stomachs.”

Another BYD worker, who like his workmate requested anonymity due to the threat of company reprisals, said, “Since the end of the strike, BYD is taking action against workers even for minor lapses. Earlier the management agreed to the formation of a committee in the plant. But now management insists only those workers without a ‘black mark’ are allowed to be members of the committee.”

Victimized BYD worker Silambarasan, said: “I have been working at the company for three and a half years. When we first joined the company we were told we would get wage hikes every six months. But for two years we have got only Rs.200 (\$4) wage hike per year. When we worked 12 hour shifts, many workers would only manage a few hours of sleep per day since they come from the villages and travelling up and down to work takes 5 or 6 hours per day.

“BYD had first employed us as Nokia contract employees. They recruited workers from outer district villages. To have a job they extorted sums of between Rs.25,000 (\$555) to Rs.50,000 (\$1,111) from each of us.”

A Foxconn worker told the WSWS, “The CITU leaders told us if we go to the courts to fight against the company’s undemocratic actions it will drag on for a long time. Workers also suffered from economic hardship as a result of nearly two months on strike. We had no choice except to accept the conditions imposed on us by the management. We hope for better changes when there is a new government after the state assembly elections early next year.

“After we returned to work management put up a notice on its notice board which stated that the company was happy to announce that an agreement had been signed with the (DMK’s) LPF. Regular [non-contract] workers who have worked at the company for two to three years would get a salary hike

of Rs.7, 000 (\$155) and those with three or four years service would get Rs.9, 000 (\$ 200). In addition workers will be paid festival bonus of Rs.3, 000 (\$66). Workers getting married will be given an advance sum of Rs.25, 000 (\$ 555) that will be deducted monthly from their salaries.

“However we could become eligible for these benefits only after signing up to join the LPF. Most of the workers have already signed up for the LPF under this compulsion. The remaining few hundred will also sign up for the LPF soon.

“Some victimized workers visited state Labour Minister (T.M.) Anbarasan to request him to use his influence to exert pressure on the Foxconn management to reinstate them. He told them he might consider recommending to the management reinstating 15 of the dismissed workers. But the other nine he called ‘extremists’ who should not be reinstated, at least immediately. Of the nine Anbarasan angrily remarked, ‘Have they done small things?’”

Victimized Foxconn worker Ramraj said, “The state government has been acting harshly against workers. In the face of this management and police offensive many workers have been raising the question why didn’t the CITU make efforts to unify the workers broadly to protect the rights of all workers.”

This author also recommends:

India: Lessons of the Stalinist CITU’s betrayal of the Foxconn and BYD strikes
[10 December 2010]

India: BYD Electronics fires most of its workforce, after police break up sit-in
[4 November 2010]

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