

India: Maruti Suzuki launches witch-hunt against workers

By Arun Kumar
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After a major altercation between the workers and the management at the Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) car assembly plant in Manesar, around 40 km south of New Delhi, the company and Congress-led Haryana state government have launched a massive witch-hunt against over 3,000 workers. Already more than 90 workers have been arrested and the police are hunting other workers who have fled the area in fear of a witch-hunt.

On Saturday, MSI declared a lockout at the plant, citing the “safety” of its officials. Company Chairman R.C. Bhargava said in a press conference that the production will not resume until an investigation is completed into the incident in which a plant executive was killed, and corrective steps are taken.

What these steps are become clear by his reply to a question whether some workers involved in the incident can be taken back. He said: “If guys are no risks they can be taken back. If they are the cause of trouble, they cannot come back.” This means militant workers will be sacked.

The labor and employment minister of Haryana state, Shiv Charan Sharma, backed the lockout as “appropriate.”

On Wednesday seizing on a conflict provoked by a supervisor’s arrogant casteist remarks against a worker, plant management suspended the worker. That led to a workers’ agitation demanding action against the supervisor rather than the worker. When the workers with the leaders of their union, the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), were discussing the issue with management, several hundred goons began to brutally attack the workers.

Factory premises were set on fire, leading to considerable damage. Thousands of police, called by management, went ahead with arresting workers. Several workers and members of management staff were injured and hospitalised. One body was found burned beyond

recognition and later identified as Awanish Kumar Dev, the general manager of human resources.

MSI management blamed the workers for the altercation and fire and filed affidavits against union officials. It is trying to transform the incident into a witch-hunt against workers and the union. It claimed that workers attacked management staff without provocation and set fire to the factory.

However, it is clear that the MSI management deliberately provoked the altercation to intimidate workers and suppress the development of any opposition to the slave-labour conditions imposed by the company.

Disputing management’s claims, MSWU President Ram Meher said in a statement: “[I]n a pre-planned manner, yesterday, the afternoon of 18th July, a supervisor in the shop floor abused and made casteist comments against a dalit [so-called untouchables according to the Hindu caste system] worker of the permanent category, which was legitimately protested by the worker.

“Instead of taking action against the said supervisor, the management immediately suspended the worker concerned without any investigation as was demanded by the workers. When the workers along with union representatives went to meet the HR [human resources officials] to demand the company act against the supervisor and revoke the unjust suspension of the worker, the HR officials flatly refused to hear our arguments, and were in no mood to resolve the issue amicably.

“When the negotiation was going on with the leaders of the union inside the office, management called in hundreds of bouncers on its payroll to attack the workers... The gates were closed by security on behest of the management and the bouncers brutally attacked the workers with sharp weapons and arms. They, joined by some of the managerial staff and later the police, beat up

a number of workers, who have had to be hospitalised with serious injuries. The bouncers, who are anti-social elements on hire, also destroyed company property and set fire to a portion of the factory. The gates were later opened to oust the workers and enforce a lockout by the company...”

Speaking to the WSWS, a Maruti Suzuki worker confirmed Meher’s version: “It was a supervisor who provoked a worker with casteist remarks and later his suspension that was objected to by all other workers. The outraged workers demanded immediate revocation of the suspension order. But management arrogantly refused and called the police and thugs to attack the workers. Today [Thursday] the police started hunting fleeing workers with a loudspeaker announcement that those who help to catch a Maruti Suzuki worker will be awarded 500 rupees” (\$US9).

While MSI management has targeted the MSWU as a part of its campaign to intimidate workers into submission, the union has no independent perspective to fight management’s plans. The union has sought to win workers’ demands through a compromise with management. According to Meher’s statement, in April the MSWU “submitted our Charter of Demands to the management of Maruti Suzuki, and the process of negotiation for wages and other demands was under way.”

While blaming management for its provocations to “derail the process and break the back of the spirit of unity of the workers and the legitimacy of the union,” he stated that the union is keen to sit down to talks with the company and government officials to resolve the dispute.

Confirming his administration’s role in launching police witch-hunt against MSI workers, on behalf of the company, Haryana industry minister Randeep Singh Surjewala said of the arrested workers: “They have been arrested for various charges including murder, attempt to murder and destruction of property.” He accused the workers of acting in accordance with “certain type of political thoughts that have cropped up to derail development as these elements are envious of progress.”

Last year MSI workers waged a four-month-long determined struggle against the sweatshop conditions—meager wages, contract labor, authoritarian work rules and victimization of militant workers—with repeated strikes and two factory occupations, facing a month-long lockout, police repression and goon violence. Finally in October, without their basic demands being met, the workers were sent back to work by the unions,

including the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), the union which majority of Manesar workers had joined at that time. The unions asked them to sign the company’s dictatorial “good conduct” bond.

The principal role in strangling the Manesar MSI workers’ militant struggle was played by the trade union federations active in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—especially the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the union federation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. They joined with the other union federations to contain and suppress support for the Manesar MSI workers’ struggle, while pressuring the MSEU to reach a “compromise” with the company.

Amidst repeated indications of a broader movement of workers in support of the Manesar workers, expressed through sympathy strikes by about 12,000 workers in other Suzuki plants in the area, the Stalinist unions asked Manesar workers to put their faith not in the working class but in the Congress-led state government, its labor officials and courts. They appealed to the Congress state government to intervene on behalf of workers, while it was working hand-in-glove with MSI management.

Moves by MSI to launch a witch-hunt against workers to subject them to sweatshop conditions are bound up with attempts by the Indian bourgeoisie to increase productivity and slash wages as the capitalists face an economic crisis under the impact of a growing global recession. India’s growth rate has fallen to a nine-year low of 6.5 percent in 2011-12. After registering robust yearly growth of nearly 30 percent in 2010-11, car sales in India grew by just 2.19 percent in 2011-12. After expanding at a brisk pace in March, sales of most car makers either declined or rose only marginally in April. MSI, the largest car maker, reported a 1.3 percent decline in passenger car sales in April.

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