

Union limits Indian auto workers to “go-slow” campaign over wages

By Arun Kumar
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Over one thousand workers at Hero MotoCorp’s (HMCL) Gurgaon and Dharuhera plants—both in the northern Indian state of Haryana—carried out a “go-slow” campaign on January 23 to demand higher wages. HMCL, the country’s largest motorcycle or two-wheeler manufacturer, became a separate entity last August after Hero Group bought out Honda’s remaining shares in the 26-year-old joint operation.

Workers at the Gurgaon plant have been demanding a monthly wage increase of 15,000 rupees (US\$273) over the next three years. Management has only offered a 7,500 rupees (US\$136) increase. The same offer was given to workers at the Dharuhera plant last December. Gurgaon workers have pressed for a larger wage hike, citing the relatively higher cost of living in the area and their demand has been supported by the Dharuhera workers.

The “go-slow” campaign was called by the Hero MotoCorp Workers Union (HMCWU), which is affiliated to a so-called independent union, Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). The HMCWU was forced to call the limited job action after talks with management failed on January 21. The union tried to reach a compromise again with talks on January 25, which also collapsed. Surender Lal, the general secretary of the HMS Haryana State Council, told the WWS that the union will meet with management again on Monday.

The HMS official made it clear the union wanted no further action and is desperately seeking a compromise with management. “We will ask the Deputy Labour Commissioner to kindly resolve the matter. We are not for a fight. We want to resolve the issue amicably,” Lal told the WWS. On this basis, the HMCWU has organized various impotent protests, including calling on workers to wear black badges and refuse tea and snacks offered by the company.

As is increasingly common with private and public sector companies throughout India, the majority of Hero Motocorp’s workers at Gurgaon plant are casual workers and apprentices who are paid only a fraction of wages paid to full-time, regular workers. A casual worker is paid around 8,000 rupees (US\$149) per month and an apprentice 6,200 rupees (US\$115), compared to an average monthly wage of 28,000 rupees (US\$520) for a regular worker.

The HMCWU helps the company keep its workforce divided and it is oblivious to the plight of nearly 4,000 casual workers and 1,000 apprentices at the Gurgaon plant. “There is no job surety for us,” a casual worker told the local media. “We have a gate pass for three months. So, when it is not renewed, it means our job is over at the company... The union does not work for our betterment.”

The role of HMS at the Hero plant is consistent with its record of betrayals in the massive Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt outside of New Delhi. In October 2011, the stooge union aligned with HMS accepted a deal forcing workers at the Maruti Suzuki plant to submit to a company-dictated “good conduct bond”—designed to facilitate the disciplining and firing of militant workers—ending a month-long struggle of workers against management’s demand. Workers who formed a breakaway union, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), have faced savage reprisals by the company and the Congress-led state government, with 150 workers jailed and subjected to torture and another 546 permanent and 2,000 contract workers sacked. The HMS, along with the Stalinist AITUC (All India Trades Union Congress) and CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions), have isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers in order to prevent a broader struggle against the sweatshop conditions that Indian capitalism relies upon

to attract foreign investment.

The intransigence of Hero management reflects growing concern over the impact of the world economic crisis on the global auto industry and Indian exports in particular. The struggle for secure and good-paying jobs has placed Indian auto workers, like their brothers and sisters around the world, into a direct confrontation with the capitalist system and all of the political parties and trade unions that defend it.

It is not possible to defend and improve the conditions of permanent workers at Hero MotoCorp without uniting with casual workers and apprentices and fighting for a common struggle by Maruti Suzuki and other workers throughout the region. Only a broader struggle based on a socialist and internationalist program, including the mobilisation of the rural masses for the establishment of a workers and peasants government, can assure decent living and working conditions for the working class.

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