

Indian court to hear sentencing arguments against framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

By Shannon Jones
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An Indian court is set to hear sentencing arguments today, Friday, March 17, for 31 Maruti Suzuki India workers convicted on frame-up charges in relation to an incident at the company's Manesar car assembly plant in 2012. The prosecution has indicated it will be asking for the death penalty for some or all of the 13 workers convicted of "culpable homicide" (murder).

The workers have been held criminally responsible for a management-instigated altercation and fire at the auto factory in July 2012. The fire destroyed a portion of the plant and killed a human resource manager. Those facing a possible death sentence include the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), an independent organization formed in opposition to a pro-company stooge union. Eighteen other workers were convicted of charges of rioting and other serious criminal offences.

The workers are the victims of a blatant frame-up by management in collaboration with the police and government authorities, including India's two major political parties, the Congress Party and the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The incident for which the workers were convicted last week was a company provocation, which it subsequently used to witch hunt 150 of the most militant workers and purge its workforce. The incident resulted in the death of Human Resources General Manager Awanish Kumar Dev, the only company official sympathetic to the workers.

The workers at the Manesar plant are being targeted because they have been a center of opposition to the brutal, low-wage regime facing workers in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, a huge auto manufacturing center located in Haryana state on the outskirts of Delhi, India's capital and largest city.

Maruti Suzuki India is majority owned by the

Japanese parent company and is the largest auto manufacturer in India, with a 50 percent share in the country's car market.

The Manesar workers staged a series of protests and sit-down strikes in 2011 in defiance of the company dominated stooge union at the plant and the major trade union federations. In finding the 31 guilty, the court discounted its own findings of collusion between the prosecution and management and the fabrication of evidence. Indeed, the court last week was forced to concede that 117 other workers who had been arrested and charged along with the 31 were innocent of all charges.

The defense demonstrated that police carried out no serious independent investigation of the altercation and fire. The prosecution based its case on a management supplied list of "suspects" and testimony provided by coached "eye-witnesses." The fabricated nature of the "evidence" emerged when the defense demonstrated, for example, that four prosecution witnesses saw the alleged crimes in "alphabetical order." The first of them allegedly saw those with names beginning with the letter A to G commit offenses in one section of the factory, the second saw those whose names starting with H to P, etc.

The prosecution failed to demonstrate how the fire at the plant started, let alone who started the blaze, even though the allegation that workers started the fire was central to the whole case and especially the charges of "culpable homicide." Prosecution witnesses were repeatedly unable to identify those they testified against.

Throughout the frame-up the prosecution operated in a blatantly vindictive manner. For years it opposed granting bail to any of the 148 workers and both it and the court ignored damning evidence of abuse and

torture of the detained workers. Workers were subjected to severe leg stretching, electric shocks and water immersion. Despite the lack of credible evidence none of the arrested workers were granted bail until March of 2015.

Workers at the Manesar plant were subjugated to a massive purge when the facility re-opened after the fire. Some 2,300 workers were fired and replaced. Conditions at the plant remain brutal, with workers only allowed a seven minute break in the morning, 30 minutes for lunch and a seven minute tea-break. Many are contract employees. According to a recent report, much of the workforce is earning a base monthly salary of 8,000 rupees (less than \$US125) with the possibility of earning a further 8,000 rupees in various incentive bonuses.

Indian state authorities were so fearful of an angry response to the March 10 court verdict that they invoked emergency powers outlawing any gathering of more than five people in the Gurgaon District and mobilized some 2,500 police at so called “sensitive” spots. Hundreds of police surrounded the Manesar plant.

In a show of solidarity with the victimized workers some 30,000 workers in Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt boycotted lunch in advance of the verdict. Many also joined plant gate meetings.

The previous Congress Party state government in Haryana collaborated closely with Maruti Suzuki, including ordering police to suppress worker solidarity rallies protesting the frame-up. When a group of workers confronted Haryana Congress Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, he threatened to “arrest them on the spot” if they did not desist. The vendetta against the workers continued when a BJP government took office in Haryana state. Meanwhile, the official Stalinist-dominated unions kept the workers isolated, organizing no significant solidarity actions, while advising them to rely on the “justice” of the courts.

The victimized Maruti Suzuki India workers deserve the support of all autoworkers and workers internationally. The attempt to railroad these workers is part of a global assault on wages, working conditions, and jobs by the transnational auto companies that are seeking to roll back gains won by workers in decades of struggle. In particular Maruti Suzuki and the Indian government are determined to make an example of

these courageous workers as a message to investors that it will brook no opposition to the maintenance of a brutal low wage regime in the interests of increasing profits and protecting “shareholder value.”

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