

Background to a labor frame-up:

# What the Maruti Suzuki workers were fighting for

By Jerry White  
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The life sentences an Indian judge meted out to 13 autoworkers last month were an act of class retribution for the leading role that workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant have played in resisting the sweatshop conditions that prevail in India's factories and special economic zones.

From June 2011 to July 2012, the workers engaged in a series of strikes and plant occupations, and defied a lockout, victimizations, and police and company-thug violence. This sent a shudder through the Indian ruling class, which has sought to market the country as a source of cheap and docile labor for transnational corporations.

Since the country's economic "liberalization" began in 1991, Suzuki Motors, Hyundai, Ford, Caterpillar and other transnational corporations have made vast profits from the exploitation of desperately poor workers who largely come from impoverished rural villages. The high-rise apartments, modern shopping complexes, supermarkets and banks that now dot the better-off neighborhoods of India's cities are out of reach for these workers. They live in cramped slums and shanties and send much of their earnings home to their families in rural India.

Maruti Suzuki has two assembly plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, just outside of India's national capital, New Delhi, where well over 200,000 workers are employed in auto and other manufacturing facilities.

When it opened in 2006, Maruti Suzuki's Manesar plant produced 250-300 cars a shift. Three years later this was raised to 550-600 per shift, with a target of one car rolling off the assembly line every 42 seconds. Workers labored on eight-and-a-half hour shifts, with only a half-hour lunch and two seven-minute tea breaks, leaving them scarcely any time to drink water or relieve themselves. A minute late returning from a break, let alone reporting to a shift, meant an immediate and devastating pay reduction.

According to company personnel records, the Maruti Suzuki Manesar plant employed 4,295 workers in 2012. Of these, 1,054, or less than a quarter, were "regular" or permanent full-time employees. These workers earned Rs 19,250 (US \$298) per month, but nearly half their pay (Rs. 8910) was tied to a "production performance reward." If workers took leave they would be deducted Rs. 1,500 (US \$23.22) for one day, Rs. 2,200 (US \$34.06) for two days, and Rs. 7,000 (US \$108.38), or well

over a third of their monthly salary, for four days.

Another 2,600 workers were supplied by labor contractors and employed on short-term contracts. They did the same work as the regular workers, but wore different uniforms, earned less than half the pay (Rs. 9,000 or US \$139.69) and could be terminated at will. Another 641 workers were designated as "apprentices" and "trainees," trapped on a low-paid treadmill to become a contract or regular worker if a supervisor deemed they weren't "troublemakers."

To make matters worse, workers estimated that between the overtime work required during shift changes—it was mandatory for a worker to remain on the line until he was relieved—and the time for repairing defects, they performed an average of two hours of unpaid overtime per day.

These were the conditions that gave rise to the defiant resistance of the Maruti Suzuki workers. On June 4, 2011 workers launched a 13-day strike and occupation at the Manesar plant, demanding the recognition of a new, independent union, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU) and the abolishing of the hated contract-labor system. Even though the MSEU applied to represent only the permanent workers, all workers, including the contract workers, apprentices and trainees joined the struggle.

The workers rebelled against the company-controlled and state-sanctioned Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU), which enforced management's dictates. The "puppet" or "stooge" union, as workers called it, was associated with the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) or Workers Assembly of India, which was a founding member, along with the American Federation of Labor and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), of the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949.

The day before the walkout, workers applied to the Haryana Labor Commissioner to register the MSEU. The commissioner apparently tipped off management and the next day the company tried to force workers to sign an affidavit saying they were satisfied with the MUKU. After the workers launched the strike, management fired all 11 workers whose names were on the form submitted to the labor commissioner. They demanded these workers leave the premises, threatening to bring in police to "break up" the strike if they did not.

As some 100,000 workers throughout the Manesar-Gurgaon

industrial belt threatened to call a two-hour sympathy strike, the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which is affiliated with the Communist Party India (CPI), prevailed upon the MSEU to end the struggle on June 16. Two dozen militant workers were then fired or suspended.

This would soon become a repeated pattern. The CPI and the other major Stalinist party, the Communist Party India (Marxist) or CPM, and their affiliated unions—the AITUC and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—are not socialist. They have long collaborated with the Congress Party, the traditional party of the Indian ruling class, and have been complicit in its policy of attracting foreign investment with cheap labor. This has included pursuing what the CPI and CPM themselves call “pro-investor” policies in states, like West Bengal, where they have formed the government.

Exploiting the shutdown of the strike, the company and Congress-led Haryana state government went on the offensive. First the labor commissioner rejected the MSEU’s bid for recognition, although workers had deserted the MUKU en masse. Then, two weeks later, on August 29, 2011, the company locked out the workers, with the state government dispatching 500 police to expel them from the plant.

As a condition for their return, Muruti Suzuki demanded that workers sign a “good conduct bond,” pledging that they would carry out no work stoppages, sit-ins or protests of any sort that could adversely impact production. Workers defiantly rejected this blackmail.

On the picket lines workers spoke passionately about their struggle to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The company says workers are entitled to 42 days’ leave annually. But in practice we are penalized for taking even a single day. If I inform management in advance that I want a day’s leave, 1,500 rupees will be cut from my salary. If, for some unavoidable reason, I take leave without informing management, double that amount is cut as a punitive measure.

“How can we visit our parents if they are sick?” the worker asked. “When we may need more money for medical expenses during these times, our salary is cut!” He added, “During the seven-minute tea break we have to rush to get a cup of tea and then rush to the bathroom with a cup of tea in hand. The limited number of toilets available makes the problem worse.

“We can’t speak boldly against these inhuman acts by management because we will immediately face disciplinary action. We wanted to establish our own union to fight for our rights. Unless our union is recognized, we cannot take on the management legally. Everybody knows we are suppressed. Why is the government not doing something for us?”

Once again, the Stalinist unions isolated the embattled workers. As a result, Maruti Suzuki was able to prevail. After 33 days, the lockout was ended after the MUKU signed an agreement, brokered by state labor officials, that accepted the good conduct bond, along with the suspension of 44 militant workers.

The deal broke down, however, when management refused to hire back 1,000 contract workers. On October 7, 2011, permanent and contract workers started a sit-in demanding the re-hiring of the contract workers as well as the 44 victimized workers, and the

dropping of management’s plans to dock workers two days’ pay for each day of the lockout.

This led to a wave of sympathy strikes involving as many as 12,000 workers across the Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt. The state government responded by deploying 1,500 police to force an end to the eight-day occupation, but the strike continued.

With the workers once again isolated by the major unions, the MSEU leadership suddenly ended the walkout on October 21, 2011, without convening a meeting or vote. The leaders had accepted management’s worthless promises to hire back the contract workers at their discretion and to carry out an “inquiry” into the suspensions against 30 workers, including Sonu Gujjar and Shiv Kumar, respectively the MSEU president and secretary.

Soon after, it was revealed that Gujjar and Kumar had been paid off for resigning from their jobs. While the amount—estimated to be about 1.6 million rupees or about \$32,500—was a pittance for management, it was unheard of for young industrial workers to receive such “large” severance payments. The deal, backed by the Haryana government, allowed management to rid itself of many of the workers who had led the struggle over the past six months, while simultaneously discrediting and undermining the MSEU, and, it hoped, the very idea of workers’ solidarity and struggle.

However, workers quickly regrouped and soon formed a new organization, the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) to continue their struggle. It would still take more than six months, for the MSWU to gain recognition from the state and the company, which finally relented on March 1, 2012.

This was clearly a temporary and tactical retreat before the growing militancy of the Indian working class, which the next day, on March 2, 2012, engaged in a one-day general strike, involving some 100 million workers, to oppose the economic policies of the national Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government.

In April 2012, the MSWU issued its Charter of Demands, including the abolition of the contract-labor system, and the regularization of all workers. Over the next several months, management stonewalled the MSWU, and prepared a counter-offensive to smash the new union and re-impose its unilateral dictatorship on the shop floor.

This is the background to the company provocation on July 18, 2012, that was used as the pretext to round up, arrest and torture hundreds of workers, summarily fire 546 permanent workers and 1,800 contract workers from the Manesar plant, and frame-up the entire leadership of the MSWU on bogus murder charges.

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