

Sri Lankan free trade workers express solidarity with framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India

By our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality supporters in Sri Lanka have won significant support from Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers for the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) campaign to free the jailed Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India. More than 25 workers signed the petition demanding the immediate release of framed-up Indian workers last week.

Four months ago, 13 workers at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar, in the northern Indian state of Haryana, were sentenced to life imprisonment on trumped-up murder charges. The decision was aimed at crushing all working-class opposition to low wages and sweatshop working conditions the Indian ruling elites have employed to attract foreign investors to the country. The state persecution of these workers was the outcome of a joint witch-hunt involving the Congress party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the company, police and judiciary.

The Katunayake FTZ, the oldest and largest free trade zone in Sri Lanka, currently employs about 40,000 workers who face similar working conditions to those in India's Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt where Maruti Suzuki is located. Over the past decade, the number of permanent jobs in the trade zone has been reduced progressively and replaced by contract labor to secure super-profits for investors. The companies are driving up exploitation rates to match their global competitors.

In mid-2011, FTZ workers fought against state repression, which resulted in the police murder of 21-year-old worker Roshen Chanaka and the injury of

more than 200 workers. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse unleashed the police against the workers who struck and demonstrated to demand the withdrawal of the IMF-dictated pension "reform." The results of an inquiry into the violence, prepared by a commission appointed by Rajapakse to contain anger and whitewash the role of the government, has just been made public after being suppressed by both Rajapakse government and current Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

SEP/IYSSE campaigners discussed the Maruti Suzuki frame-up and the significance of the ICFI campaign and the experience of FTZ workers struggle against state repression. Many workers responded enthusiastically, relating their own experiences of sweatshop working conditions.

Chamara, who works for a polytene bags factory, said, "Exploitation is the same here. We have to work on Sunday also. Now very limited numbers of permanent workers are recruited. We [contract workers] are paid a totally insufficient wage after the 'man power' company [labor contractor] deducts its payment from our checks. We are not allowed to form unions in our factory. But as you say I think we need to build a movement to fight for our rights. Maruti Suzuki workers also fought for that."

Explaining why rural youth come to work in free trade zones near Colombo, he said, "I came from Galle [in southern Sri Lanka]. We were involved in paddy cultivation there and after the southern expressway was built our paddy fields were hit by frequent floods and it became difficult to continue cultivating them. Many rural youth like me had to give up their traditional occupations like farming and fishing and move to

Colombo to find better jobs.”

Jessy, a female Tamil worker from Batticaloa on the eastern coast of the island, explained, “My husband went abroad seeking a better job opportunity a few months after we got married. After we had a baby I had to find a job at Katunayake FTZ to find more money for our needs. I had to leave my child with my parents and I am only able to visit them once a month. Our family has fallen apart because we have to struggle so hard to make a living. I know this is the situation of many workers all over the world. I’m signing this petition because we should oppose this crime against poor workers like us.”

Ruwan, from Rathnapura, about 100 km away from Katunayake, said, “I came to FTZ just eight months ago with my wife. Before coming here I was doing odd jobs. Because our income was not enough we decided to come here.”

He was very interested in signing the online petition demanding the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers. “I’m very happy to hear that the workers in India and all over the world see that workers from Sri Lanka support the fight to release Maruti Suzuki workers through your website. It will strengthen the unity of the workers. I have read about Lenin and how workers won power in Russia with his leadership. I agreed with your point that these kinds of campaigns will provide the start to such a movement.”

Many Tamil workers, both from Hill Country plantation areas and war-torn northern and eastern provinces where successive governments waged a nearly three-decade long civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have recently moved to Katunayake FTZ. Working conditions on plantations have deteriorated badly, wages have stagnated or fallen and it is difficult to find traditional work after the devastation of war.

One young Tamil worker from a war-affected village in the east said, “We were doing fishing before we ran away from our villages to save our lives during the war. But when we returned after the end of the war we realized we could no longer continue our jobs, as all our belongings had been destroyed.”

Workers in the FTZ face hazardous conditions and many have been injured. Nadeesha, who was working in a glove manufacturing factory, got her hand stuck in a machine and was severely injured. “The machine I

was operating was damaged and I was not told about it. My hand was sandwiched between two hot plates for six seconds and was burnt badly. I wasn’t paid a single rupee even though the company told us we were covered by insurance. I resigned and found another job.”

She was very interested in the petition, saying, “We must do something to create a better world for the workers. No authority or government will do that. We should help each other as workers. There must be more campaigns like this.”

Another young female worker from Nikaweratiya, a remote area located 120 km away from Colombo, was severely injured when her hair was entangled in a washing machine at a textile factory. She said, “My hair was pulled out by the roots with most of the skin on my skull and I was hospitalized for months. I have an occasional pain in my neck and head now but I have to keep working.” She said the company tried to avoid paying her compensation because, they claimed, she wasn’t wearing proper safety protection. “Actually, we hadn’t even been provided anything to protect us. Finally, I had to go to the court to get my compensation.

“As you said, workers lead very bad lives. Whatever government rules the country it is not going to change. This campaign should be spread among thousands of workers,” she said, as she signed the petition.

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