

Maruti Suzuki workers hold protest demanding release of 13 framed-up colleagues

By Saman Gunadasa
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Workers from the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt near New Delhi demonstrated and held a meeting at the Kamla Nehru Park on March 18, demanding the release of 13 framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers, sentenced to life in prison one year ago.

Workers carried placards declaring, “Long live the Maruti workers’ struggle!” and “Release the 13 Maruti workers, the Pricol, Graziano workers and all political prisoners of class war!” Two Pricol workers and four Graziano workers in India’s auto industry also have been sentenced to life imprisonment on politically-motivated charges.

The provisional working committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) called the demonstration. The event indicated growing opposition among workers to state persecution and the onslaught of the corporate elite. The protest was followed by a picket on March 19 at Haryana Bhavan in New Delhi.

One year ago, 13 workers’ leaders at the Maruti Suzuki plant in the Gurgaon–Manesar industrial belt were sentenced to life imprisonment. The ruling was the culmination of a frame-up organised by the company, along with the state and national government, aimed at suppressing a developing movement of the working class.

In March 2012, the Maruti Suzuki workers rejected the company-managed union and established the MSWU. Workers put forward a series of demands, including permanency for contract workers, wage increases and management recognition of the new union.

After four months of struggle, company management initiated a violent clash with workers on July 18, 2012. The only manager sympathetic to the workers, Avinash Dev, died as a result of smoke inhalation after a fire began in suspicious circumstances.

Without any evidence, police accused the workers of lighting the fire and of responsibility for Dev’s death. Police arrested the workers, including the MSWU leadership, based on a list provided by Maruti Suzuki management. They were subjected to police torture and humiliation in a bid to extract false confessions.

In March 2017, in a travesty of justice, 13 of the workers, including the entire 12-member MSWU executive were sentenced to life imprisonment for “culpable homicide.” Another 18 workers were convicted of lesser trumped-up charges. The ruling was a signal from the ruling elite that any workers’ struggles would be met with brutal state repression.

The persecution of the Maruti Suzuki workers is being escalated. Last month, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reported that Haryana state’s advocate-general is preparing to urge a High Court to change the 13 workers’ sentences to death. There are also attempts to revive the cases against another 117 workers, previously acquitted by the courts.

Addressing the March 18 meeting, Khushiram, a member of the MSWU provincial working committee, reviewed the protracted struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers. He denounced the “anti-worker role of both Congress and BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] governments and the anti-worker attitude of the judiciary.”

Kuldeep Jhanghu, general secretary of the Maruti Suzuki Kamgaar Union, called for united action by all unions operating in the Gurugram-Manesar belt. Nayanjyoti, from the Maoist Krantikari Naujawan Sabha (KNS), spoke about the issues facing contract workers.

One of the main demands raised during the 2012 Maruti Suzuki struggle was a doubling of the wages of contract workers, to achieve parity with permanent pay

rates.

Other speakers included a leader of the MSWU, along with representatives of the Maruti Suzuki Powertrain union, the Suzuki motorcycle union, the Honda workers union, the Daikin union, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Workers Cooperation Centre.

The protesting unions submitted a memorandum to Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, demanding that he intervene to release the workers immediately. The bitter experiences of workers make clear, however, that the entire political establishment backs repressive measures aimed at driving down wages and conditions and attracting international investment.

The government has extended red-carpet treatment to Maruti Suzuki, which controls almost half the Indian car market. Just six months after the sentencing of the framed-up workers, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally inaugurated a new Maruti Suzuki plant in Gujarat.

Last December, Osamu Suzuki, chairman of the Japanese automaker, met with Modi to discuss further investment.

Though two leaders of the AITUC and the CITU spoke at the March 18 protest, both unions, and the Stalinist parties with which they are affiliated, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), have maintained a complete silence on the Maruti Suzuki frame-up for almost a year.

Last April, they called a token protest, to defuse widespread anger. After the demonstration, both the AITUC and the CITU abandoned the jailed workers.

This confirmed a warning made by the WSWS in April, 2017, that: “The Stalinist unions have absolutely no intention of taking any serious action in support of the Maruti Suzuki workers and will shut down any protests just as soon as they are confident that they have defused and dampened the spirit of militancy and class solidarity among Indian workers.”

The CPM has issued a 50-page resolution for its forthcoming April congress that does not mention the Maruti Suzuki workers. The CPM is well aware that exposing the frame-up would jeopardise its close relations with sections of the ruling elite.

In contrast to the silence of the Stalinist parties, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the WSWS initiated an international campaign in defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

The WSWS has posted dozens of articles exposing every aspect of the frame-up, and last year launched an online petition demanding the workers’ release, which has received widespread support from around the world. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and ICFI supporters in India have held picketing campaigns and public meetings, bringing the plight of the Maruti Suzuki workers to thousands throughout the Indian subcontinent.

A Maruti Suzuki worker recently sent a note to the WSWS paying tribute to its coverage. “What you wrote is very good,” he commented. “It is necessary to unite workers from different areas in India, South Asia and the whole world. We are very thankful to you for your initiative.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>