

Striking Tamil Nadu auto workers face dismissal

By Moses Rajkumar and Nanda Kumar
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About 800 striking Yamaha Motor India workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu are facing the threat of termination by the company.

This was revealed when the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) submitted a petition to the Chennai High Court seeking its intervention to direct the state government's labour department to "restrain" the Yamaha company from taking any "unfair labour practices" against striking workers.

Yamaha workers are among thousands of auto employees who are on strike in the Oragadam-Sriperumbudur industrial zone, 55 kilometres from the state capital of Chennai. Other workers engaged in strikes are from the Royal Enfield and Myoung Shin Automotive (MSA) companies.

CITU is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. The union body also requested the court to "restrain the [Yamaha] company from recruiting new workers" and to direct the company to come to an "amicable solution" to the dispute.

The strike at Yamaha began on September 21 against the sacking of two workers who were engaged in organising a union affiliated to CITU—the Yamaha Thozhilalar Sangham or Yamaha Motor Workers Association. The Enfield and MSA struggles began on September 24 and September 5, respectively, also over victimisations for organising unions and higher pay.

The Stalinist CPM and its CITU affiliate have refused to mobilise the industrial strength of workers to defend workers at Yamaha, Enfield and MSA. Instead, they are appealing to the courts and the Tamil Nadu state government, thus sowing the illusion that the companies could be pressurised via these agencies to concede the demands of workers.

High Court judge, S. Vimala, has directed the

company to reply to the CITU petition in four weeks. However, this will not guarantee the employment of workers. Yamaha and other companies have declared the strikes to be illegal and demanded the police and courts break workers' occupations and protests.

The government has also declared the Yamaha strike was not legal. On October 3, the joint labour commissioner of Tamil Nadu, Mr Ponnuswamy, told the unions that to "go on strike without prior intimation was not correct."

Indian big business, the ruling elite and international investors are concerned about the growing struggles of auto workers in Chennai and other regions in the country. On Monday, the *Economic Times* published a lengthy article by *Reuters* entitled "Labour strife in India's manufacturing hubs may undermine Modi's jobs push."

The article referred to the strikes in two centres of India's auto industry—Chennai and Gurugram in the state of Haryana near New Delhi. In addition to the Chennai strikes, hundreds of workers from companies including Maruti Suzuki in Gurugram in northern India staged a one-day protest on October 7 demanding job security and higher wages.

The articles declared that these struggles underline "the problems Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government faces in creating new manufacturing jobs that are sustainable and pay attractive wages."

In reality, the Modi government and past administrations, including those led by Congress, opened up India to foreign investment and local big business, not to provide "sustainable jobs" and "attractive wages," but to create cheap labour zones to extract super profits.

When Maruti Suzuki workers rejected the company's stooge trade union and organised their own to fight for

their demands, the management staged a provocation in 2012 that led to a witch-hunt of militant workers. The company was backed by the Haryana state government, central government, police and judiciary. Thirteen activists were framed up and sentenced to life imprisonment under the Modi government to intimidate the working class.

Undoubtedly the private companies were emboldened by the right-wing Modi government's pro-business amendments to the labour laws. However, CITU and the CPM played a major role in isolating Maruti Suzuki workers when they faced the ruthless witch-hunt. They are engaged in the same practice in isolating the Yamaha, Enfield and MSA workers.

An article in *Peoples Democracy*, the newspaper of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), on October 14, encouraged Tamil Nadu auto workers to place their faith in the courts. "The Indian constitution," it declared, "guarantees to all its citizens [the right] to 'form associations and unions'."

Lamenting that Yamaha, Enfield and MSA have not heeded the constitution, the article claimed that the CPM had "provided a wave of supportive actions by all class and mass organisations throughout Tamil Nadu."

This is an outright lie. The CPM and its unions have not appealed to workers to defend the striking auto workers. The Stalinists are only appealing to the Tamil Nadu government, the courts and state institutions and thus politically disarming and isolating workers as companies intensify their attacks on jobs, pay and conditions.

Far from defending workers, labour legislation is undermining workers.

Satheesh Kumar, 24, worked as an apprentice for two years and as a trainee for a year at Royal Enfield and is now jobless. He told WSWS reporters that the company did not make him and other workers permanent, as they were demanding, but retrenched them.

"We were told since the Modi government has amended the labour law to stop the further recruitment of permanent workers in the public sector companies, the private companies like Royal Enfield also stopped recruiting permanent workers. The company has terminated workers of my group," he said.

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