

Indian protest marks seven years of legal vendetta against jailed Maruti Suzuki workers

By Kranti Kumara and Keith Jones
31 July 2019

More than a thousand workers joined a demonstration called by the Provisional Committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) to demand freedom for the 13 auto workers who have been jailed for life as the result of a monstrous frame-up mounted by the Indian state and the Japanese-based transnational Suzuki Motor Corp.

The demonstrators included other victimized and previously jailed Maruti Suzuki workers, workers from other factories in the giant Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, and other supporters. They carried placards demanding the release of the 13 and the immediate reinstatement of all the victimized Maruti Suzuki workers. A leaflet for the rally specifically condemned India's Supreme Court for callously denying the workers bail, pending the outcome of the appeal of their convictions on bogus murder charges, and pointedly asked: "Why this injustice?"

The sole "crime" of the 13 is to have challenged the poverty-wages, sweatshop conditions and precarious contract jobs that prevail at Maruti Suzuki, the country's largest automaker, and throughout India's new globally-integrated manufacturing industries.

The thirteen include all twelve members of the Working Committee or executive of the MSWU, which was established through a rank-and-file rebellion against a government-sanctioned, company-backed stooge union at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant.

The protest was held on July 18. This was seven years to the day after the management-provoked factory floor altercation and fire that served as the pretext for the legal vendetta against the Maruti-Suzuki workers.

Within hours of the July 18, 2012 events, police were arresting workers en masse, based on lists supplied by Maruti Suzuki management. Hundreds were detained and subjected to abuse, including, in the case of many of the MSWU leaders, torture.

The Congress Party-led Haryana state government, which during the workers' year-long struggle to found the MSWU had repeatedly unleashed police violence against them, endorsed and encouraged the police witch-hunt. It also backed Maruti Suzuki to the hilt in purging 2,300 permanent and contract workers—virtually the entire workforce—prior to the plant's reopening in late August 2012.

The trial of the 13 was a legal travesty. As part of the

International Committee of the Fourth International's campaign to mobilize workers around the world and all those who uphold democratic rights in defence of the Maruti Suzuki workers, the *World Socialist Web Site* has investigated and extensively documented how the police, prosecution, and judiciary connived with Maruti Suzuki management and the political establishment to railroad the 13 into prison-for-life (see: "The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers—Part 1: A travesty of justice").

The police—as even the court had to concede—repeatedly manufactured evidence and coached witnesses. The state failed to conduct rudimentary forensic tests on what the police and prosecution claimed were vital pieces of evidence.

The crux of the prosecution case was the fire that mysteriously erupted amid the factory-floor altercation and that, in a seemingly bizarre coincidence, claimed, due to smoke inhalation, the life of the one company official sympathetic to the workers.

The trial judge dismissed or explained away glaring holes and inconsistencies in the prosecution's case, and willfully mangled the law. He excluded any and all testimony from workers who had observed the events of July 18, 2012 and against whom no charges had been laid, on the blanket assertion that they would either be biased in favor of the MSWU or intimidated by it. And in flagrant contravention of the law, he shifted the burden of proof onto the workers, declaring that if the workers couldn't conclusively demonstrate that someone else had lit the fire this constituted proof they had done so.

From the get-go, the legal vendetta against the Maruti Suzuki workers has enjoyed the full support of the principal parties of Indian big business. It was initiated under the Congress Party, which in 2012 headed both India's national and Haryana state governments, and rolled on seamlessly after the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in New Delhi and Haryana in 2014.

India's ruling elite is determined to subject the Maruti Suzuki workers to exemplary punishment, so as to reassure investors that any challenge to cheap-labor exploitation will be met with the full force of the state, and to intimidate the working class.

Indeed, state officials and politicians have themselves blurted this out. In urging the court to condemn the 13 to death by hanging, special prosecutor declared, Anurag Hooda declared, "Our industrial growth has dipped, FDI [Foreign Direct

Investment] has dried up. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is calling for ‘Make in India,’ but such incidents are a stain on our image.”

Following the July 18 protest, Jitender Dhankhar, a victimized Maruti Suzuki worker and MSWU Provisional Committee member, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Because of the way in which the Maruti Suzuki workers, both permanent and on contract, rose-up in a united way displaying great strength and energy, the capitalists got frightened. That is why they concocted the July 18 incident and got life imprisonment handed out to the 13 workers. They wanted to send a message that the capitalists will go to any extent, including using the courts and jail, to keep workers from exercising their democratic rights.”

In a ruling that once again demonstrates the venomous hostility of India’s state institutions to the Maruti Suzuki workers, the Supreme Court earlier this month summarily dismissed an application from one of the jailed MSWU leaders, Dhanraj Bhambi, that he be released on bail pending the outcome of the workers’ appeal of their frame-up convictions. The two-member panel of India’s highest court refused to allow Bhambi’s lawyers to even present their arguments, taunting them for several minutes with police-management slanders of the workers before declaring Bhambi’s request denied.

Referring to the Supreme Court’s July 2 ruling against Bhambi’s bail request, MSWU Provisional Committee member Jitender Dhankhar said: “From this it is clear that along with the government of this country the court is also completely devoted to the side of the capitalists.”

Meanwhile, the Haryana BJP state government is baying for the workers’ blood. At the company’s urging, it is appealing the March 2017 verdict, demanding the life-sentences imposed on the 13 be replaced by death by hanging. It is also seeking to overturn the vacating of all charges against 117 other Maruti Suzuki workers, against whom the police were shown to have forged evidence or whom not a single prosecution witnesses could identify

The July 18 protest was supported by unions from all four nearby Suzuki-owned plants, the Honda Hero motorcycle manufacturing facility in Gurgaon, and at least half-a-dozen auto parts plants in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt—a major manufacturing centre that has emerged during the past three decades on the outskirts of India’s capital, Delhi.

Speaking to the rally held in Gurgaon at the conclusion of the July 18 demonstration, MSWU Provisional Committee member Ramnivas vowed that the struggle would continue until the 13 workers are released and all the victimized workers reinstated.

Also addressing the rally was Satbir Singh, a leader of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union affiliate of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. Singh decried the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers as an “atrocious,” then cynically declared, “There is a massive conspiracy to suppress and silence the working-class struggles, working-class morale and the unity of the working class.”

The reality is the CITU, the other major trade union federations, and the CPM and its close ally and fellow Stalinist parliamentary party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), have systematically isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers. This has included censoring

any mention of the plight of the framed-up and victimized workers from their press, rallies and other public events.

The Stalinists fear the militant example of the Maruti Suzuki workers, who forged the MSWU by repeatedly defying the courts and police to mount sit-down strikes and walkouts. Above all, they recognize that any serious campaign to mobilize support for the Maruti Suzuki workers—and such a campaign would necessarily require linking the struggle to win the freedom of the 13 to the fight to mobilize the working class against the cheap-labor and precarious jobs they have been framed up for challenging—would disrupt their cozy relations with the employers, the Congress Party and the rest of the political establishment.

Exposure of the frame-up would also put the lie to the Stalinists’ claim that the courts and other institutions of the Indian Republic constitute a “democratic” bulwark against the arch-communist Narendra Modi and his BJP.

The mounting upsurge of the international working class—from the Sri Lankan plantation workers who struck last December in defiance of the unions, to the wildcat strike of the Mexican Matamoros workers, the “yellow vest” protests in France, and the mass anti-government protests in Algeria—points to the force that can and must be mobilized in defence of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers.

At the same time, the fight to free these class-war prisoners, which must include as a pivotal element the exposure of the role of the capitalist courts and state, can serve as a lever for educating and mobilizing the working class. Under conditions where the world’s automakers, from GM and Ford to Nissan and Maruti Suzuki, are involved in a massive restructuring of the global industry with the aim of boosting investor profit and intensifying exploitation, the struggle to mobilize support for the Maruti Suzuki workers can play a key role in the forging of the unity of autoworkers around the world and developing an international counteroffensive.

The authors also recommend:

One year since India’s courts condemned framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers to jail for life
[17 March 2018]

Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!
[20 March 2017]

The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers—Part 1: A travesty of justice
[5 April 2017]

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>